

THE MIDNIGHT HUNTRESS ANNOTATED CHAPTERS



I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT THE FIRST BOOK IN THE CAPTRIX CHRONICLES SERIES IS FOUR YEARS OLD (IN 2025)! I HAD NO IDEA WHEN I WROTE THIS BOOK WHAT KIND OF JOURNEY I WOULD END UP ON, I WAS JUST PROUD I HAD SOMETHING I WANTED TO SHARE WITH THE WORLD. THIS STORY IS NOW TURNING INTO A FOUR BOOK SERIES AND HAS TWO SPIN OFF SHORT STORIES SET IN THE SAME WORLD. THESE CHARACTERS OCCUPY SO MUCH OF MY BRAIN SPACE SINCE WE'VE BEEN HANGING OUT TOGETHER FOR FIVE YEARS NOW!

I WILL NOT LIE, READING THROUGH THESE CHAPTERS FELT CRINGY SINCE I'VE GROWN SO MUCH AS A WRITER, BUT THEN I REMEMBER SO MANY PEOPLE LOVE THIS BOOK AND ATALANTA'S STORY. I'M GLAD THIS IS WHERE IT ALL BEGAN AND HOPE YOU ENJOY HEARING SOME OF MY JOURNEY WRITING THIS BOOK IN THE ANNOTATIONS AHEAD.

HAPPY READING! - SHELBY

CHAPTER ONE

SHE PULLED THE BLOODY, silver knife from her chest and grinned.

"Was that supposed to hurt?" The creature stood in front of me examining the useless blade.

Little spots of blood dribbled onto the floor from the knife. The witch creature stood in front of me with red blood oozing onto her white flour-sack dress. The blood spread through the fabric like a dye, giving it a sickly brown-red starburst like a morbid tie-dye. I wasn't sure where to place this dress. It didn't feel like it was a part of any particular time period, but it didn't belong here, either. Why did she choose this outfit? Maybe for the way it allowed her to move? But I also didn't know enough about witch creatures to judge their wardrobe choices. However, I knew her choice to wear white made this encounter even more terrifying.

Her thick, black, wavy hair was a tangled heap framing her pale face. Without a few more brushes, this witch would have a head of nothing but filthy knots she could never get through. I had a feeling her haircare wasn't a top priority by the way she was looking at me. Her black eyes stared deep into my soul as if they were judging its contents. Even though she had no visible pupils or irises, it still felt like she was smiling at me with hungry eyes. The fear I squashed down upon entering the warehouse to face her for my first hunt crept up to the surface.

"You have got to be kidding me," I groaned, realizing I had made a life-threatening mistake. This broad wasn't the witch creature I thought she was, and now, I was about to end up as some type of weird human soup in an abandoned warehouse for my mother to find.

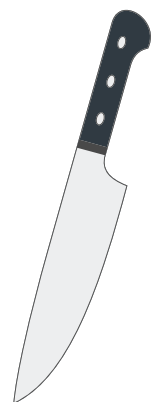
"I mean, silver was a great choice if I was a Brujadan." Her grin grew larger, showing yellowed teeth, as she dangled the silver chef knife in front of her.

More blood dripped off the tip of the knife, making splatters on the concrete. As it dried on the floor, the red blood faded into a mucky brown color. It appeared so human, but I knew this creature in front of me was not human. She was a predator, and I was her prey, even though I was meant to be hunting her down.

Only four feet separated me from her, and I was running out of options. My brain rushed through my limited knowledge, trying to remember all the various witch creature derivatives I

THE ENTIRE CAPTRIX CHRONICLES SERIES STARTED WITH THIS SENTENCE PROMPT I FOUND ON PINTEREST ONE DAY. THE ENTIRE NOVEL WAS WRITTEN WITHOUT AN OUTLINE, SO I FIGURED EVERYTHING OUT FROM HERE.

I BELIEVE ON THE FIRST DRAFT SHE "CACKLED" HERE TO SHOW HER TEETH, BUT DURING REVISIONS I TOOK THAT OUT BECAUSE IT SEEMED TOO CLICHE.



studied earlier today. There wasn't much to ponder since I had only skimmed the book entries until I decided what she was. I could have sworn she was a Brujadan. She had the cackle and a taste for babies according to the research I read out of my mother's hunt notes. This description fit what I saw in Mom's encyclopedia perfectly. Obviously, in this case, I was wrong.

Otherwise, when I stabbed her with a silver knife, she would have screamed from the metal burning her skin and died after a few more jabs. On my way to the warehouse, I imagined her death being like when Dorothy poured the bucket of water over the wicked witch and the witch dissolved into a puddle. Not like this.

She dropped the knife causing it to land on the floor with a loud clang and glide across the concrete further away from me. I backed up a few steps, patting myself down to see if I remembered any other types of weapons. She sauntered toward me, licking her lips, knowing this would be fun. Her confidence oozed out of her skin so much that it began to turn the ends of her black hair white.

Oh no. There was only one type of witch creature whose hair turned when they were preparing to slaughter their prey. I clearly remembered this from my quick skim. This broad was a Venefica, way older than a Brujadan and way harder to kill. The worst part was I barely read the entry before I moved on. I had no idea how to actually stop her.

"Enough playing with my food. I'll suck your soul out quickly, so it won't hurt," said the Venefica.

The Venefica ran at me, chanting Latin words I didn't understand. It seemed like the Latin words hung in the air, casting a spell. I looked around, trying to see if her words affected anything, but noticed nothing. Then, I saw my veins pulse beneath my skin and bubble. The heat in my entire body was overwhelming, and I felt like my blood was going to boil out of my skin. Red blotches appeared all over my arms, and I knew I had to be right. The pain was excruciating, and it was getting harder for me to focus. My blood leaked out of the pores on my body and began making its own bright crimson red droplets on the floor. I didn't have much time.

I reached into my pocket and found my copper 1943 dated penny my grandfather gave to me before he died. I kept it around for good luck, but it did me no favors tonight. I knew certain metals harmed witches in different ways, so I could only hope the Venefica was sensitive to copper since she didn't react to silver.

The Venefica continued advancing as more red blood leaked out of my facial pores, staining my medium-length blonde hair. My entire face felt sticky and tugged with an uncomfortable crust made from blood. It felt like I was doing a clay mask, but not as relaxing and a thousand times more painful. The Venefica finally reached me, her yellow teeth fully exposed with her grin. She opened her mouth and attempted to remove my soul.

I had no idea if this would work, but I had nothing else with me to try. I said a quick goodbye in my head to my penny and shoved it in her mouth, forcing her to swallow it. The Venefica chomped down on my wrist, causing more searing pain and rehydrating the small bit of dried blood. I pulled my hand out of her mouth and glanced down at the half-moon teeth marks that now lined my bloody right wrist. I got woozy as more blood forced its way out of my skin. The Venefica blurred in front of me.



VENEFICA INSPO

I HAD TO DO RESEARCH HERE TO FIGURE OUT WHEN PENNIES WERE 100% COPPER FOR THIS TO WORK. TODAY PENNIES ARE ACTUALLY 97.5% ZINC WITH A LITTLE BIT OF COPPER. ATALANTA'S PENNY HERE HAS 95% COPPER WITH 5% ZINC.

THE FIRST PERSON TO EVER READ THE MIDNIGHT HUNTRESS WAS MY SISTER MELANIE. I WROTE THE FIRST CHAPTER AND SENT IT TO HER BASICALLY SAYING DO YOU THINK THIS IS COOL? LUCKY FOR ME SHE TOLD ME IT SOUNDED INTERESTING SO I KEPT GOING. IF YOU LOVE ANYTHING ABOUT THIS NOVEL, THE CHARACTERS, ETC, THANK MELANIE!

"Really? A penny? That won't actually kill—" The Venefica fell to her knees, vomiting red bile with black swirls onto the concrete.

"It won't kill you, but it's a start," I said, feeling hot blood running down my arms. If I didn't stop her soon, I would pass out.

The Venefica vomited again, sending my lucky penny into the pile of blood and previously digested soul. I looked around the room for another weapon and saw nothing in my blurred vision except the outline of the useless silver knife. I decided that if I was going to die, I wanted to die fighting. She grabbed my ankle as I ran for the knife and yanked me back. I fell to the ground, hitting my head on the concrete. A throbbing pain invaded the side of my head, already forming a swollen bump. My blurry vision began turning red as my eyes filled with blood. I kicked my leg, attempting to break her grip, but she only clasped my ankle tighter. She dragged me toward her, smearing crimson on the concrete. I thrashed, still trying to break free, but she flipped me over and pinned me down. The Venefica made me look at her and take in her black, hungry eyes.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered to my ancestors and my mother, who weren't there. I prayed they would forgive me for my ignorance when I reached the other side, wherever that was.

She forced my jaw open and inhaled deeply through her mouth. I tried to not stare at the saliva strings coming off of the roof of her mouth, but I didn't want to watch her eyes anymore. The Venefica took another deep breath. This time, I felt something come alive inside myself and begin stirring, adding to my discomfort. Turning my bloody eyes away from her face, I watched a piece of my soul float out of my mouth into the air.

My soul took the form of a small rabbit, resembling the rabbit featured on my family crest. This rabbit wasn't opaque, like the way I had seen it my entire life on the crest. Instead, the rabbit was a transparent white that looked similar to a wisp. The soul rabbit peered around the room, panicked at its arrival. Its eyes bulged, recognizing it didn't belong out in the open. Then, it jumped through the air, trying to escape the warehouse, not knowing where it needed to run. Every time the rabbit tried to scamper away, a gravity coming from the Venefica's mouth pulled it to her.

When the translucent rabbit was close enough, the Venefica let go of my shoulders and bit at the air, devouring the rabbit as it struggled to hop away. I felt a deep pain in my heart, as if it had been stabbed and crumbled into a ball to ease it. Another wispy rabbit exited my mouth as I closed my eyes. My soul rabbit's terrified face as it endured its last moments was too much for me to bear. I couldn't watch her eat my entire soul.

The Venefica let out a chilling scream, and the rabbit ran back into my mouth. I gasped as the fragment resettled itself back into my soul. I forced open my sticky blood eyes and saw the witch laying on her side with a copper spear run through her, writhing in agony. Through blurred eyes, I noticed a tall woman with cropped blonde hair standing behind the witch. She wore a look of disapproval, as if she knew me. The Venefica stopped twitching, and the copper spear caused her to dissolve as I had originally imagined. She became a sizzling heap of dust next to her pile of vomit and rivers of my blood. As the dust settled, the blood stopped dripping out of my skin and the pain in my chest eased.

"Mom," I said in disbelief, realizing who the woman was.

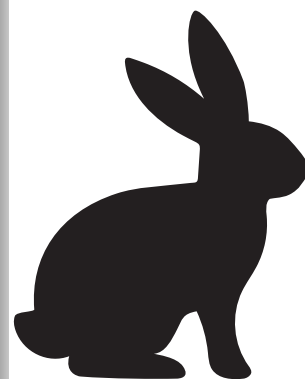


FROM THE COVER

THIS INSPIRED ADDING THE RABBIT WISP ON THE COVER. I SPECIFICALLY ASKED MY COVER DESIGNER TO ADD IT IN AS AN EASTER EGG FOR READERS. YOU MAY NOT KNOW WHAT IT MEANS WHEN YOU PICK THE BOOK UP, BUT IT'S A BIG DEAL!



ONE OF MY CREST INSPO



Mom walked over to me, content with the Venefica's demise, and started pulling me up to my feet. I felt faint, and the entire concrete floor was slick, so it wasn't a simple task. Finally, after a moment of struggle, I stood up and commanded myself to stay upright. I observed the ground, realizing it looked similar to a murder scene. My smeared blood created an abstract painting on the floor I never wanted to see again. The useless knife remained in the corner, a few feet away from the witch's vomit. My stomach turned, as I considered adding to her pile.

My entire body felt bruised and exhausted. Wounds of defeat covered me, and I seemed to belong in a crypt rather than standing before my overachieving mother. She observed me, noting all the wounds that encompassed me. Most mothers would shower their daughters with kisses, thanking a higher power that their child was safe. Mine was immune to those feelings, as far as I could tell. All she saw when she looked at me was a blood-crusted disappointment.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

Her arrival annoyed me, but my gratitude for being alive overshadowed it, even if I didn't reveal it. If she hadn't shown up, I would be soulless and probably dead. I had no idea how she realized I was here unless she followed me to the hunt. Maybe she went off of her Captrix intuition? All I knew was that she was here now and I would never recover from this mistake.

"Atalanta! The better question is why you're here," said Mom, not having my tone. I pissed her off, and I dreaded the consequences of living through this.

Mom let go of me and I fought to stay vertical, rather than laying back down. She reached down to grab the copper spear from the pile of witch dust. Mom pressed a button on the side of the spear, and it retracted into a smaller spear the length of her forearm. With the spear in one hand, she wrapped her arm around me to help me stagger out of the warehouse.

"Wait! My penny!" I turned around to see my penny shining bright even though puke covered it.

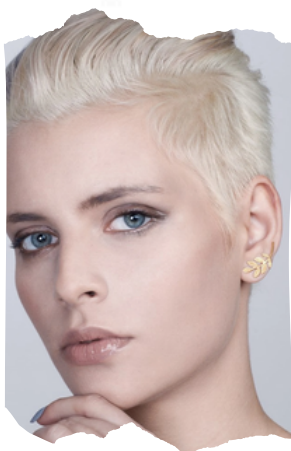
I let go of Mom and went back for my lucky penny. It took everything in me, but I reached down into the witch's vomit to pull out my penny. I wiped the black substance off it on my blood-soaked pants and slipped it back into my pocket. The penny wasn't really clean, but a dirty penny was better than having soul on it.

With Mom's help, I hobbled my way out of the warehouse. As I got into her truck, I winced as I realized my blood would stain the leather seats. It was another thing to add to the list of transgressions I committed this evening. I looked back at the warehouse one last time, remembering how I failed. I, Atalanta Capp, the daughter of the greatest witch creature huntress ever, had just failed my first witch hunt and almost died. Now, I would be trapped forever in my mother's house.



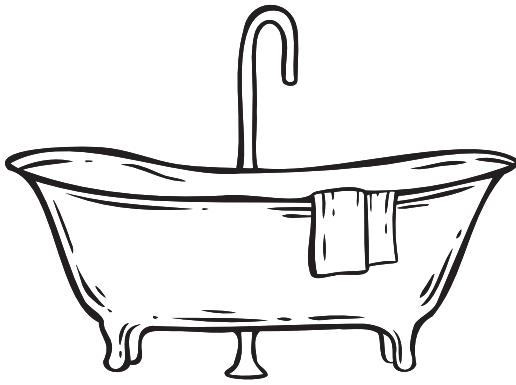
IT STILL CRACKS ME UP THAT EVEN AFTER ALMOST DYING, ATALANTA IS STILL CONCERNED ABOUT HER PENNY. SHOWS WHAT SHE TRULY VALUES (AND IT ISN'T HER LIFE) LOL

THE FIRST NAME DROP EVER! THERE'S A REASON WHY IT TOOK ME THIS LONG BECAUSE I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT ATALANTA'S NAME WAS GOING TO BE, BUT I KNEW I WANTED IT TO HAVE SPECIAL MEANING.



ARTEMIS'S INSPO





CHAPTER TWO

MY BATHWATER RESEMBLED A murder scene when I exited the tub. It had taken me over an hour to scrub off all the dried blood that encompassed my entire body. Every time I loaded my rag up with antibacterial soap and scrubbed, it never seemed like I was getting any cleaner. I could never view my skin or bathwater the same again without seeing the crimson blood making a disgusting pool. My skin ached from expelling blood out of its pores and felt raw from my scrubbing. The goose egg at the side of my head continued to throb and requested an ice pack. I sighed. My body felt weaker than a healthy eighteen-year-old's should. I didn't know how much blood the witch had boiled out of my skin, but I knew it wasn't good.

After drying off, I walked to the medicine cabinet with my towel wrapped around me to find some ointment for my wrist. The plan was to treat it like a rabid dog bite rather than acknowledging the half moon, human teeth marks that remained. Before opening the cabinet, I caught a glimpse of myself in the cabinet's mirror and shuddered at my appearance.

I looked like a reanimated corpse. Popped blood vessels appeared in both of my blue eyes, creating a spotted display on the whites of my eyeballs. The ocean blue color of my irises seemed clouded, as if something had diluted the color. My dark under-eye circles and snow-white face completed the look. I shook my head, trying to bounce the image from my mind, and opened the cabinet. On the middle shelf, I found a triple antibiotic ointment and bandage wrap. I went to work treating my "rabid dog bite" and wrapped the injury.

My clothes laid in a pile in the corner of the bathroom, creating a stain on the tile, but I was too faint to worry about them. I would have to throw them away anyway, since there was no way those stains were coming out. It saddened me to lose those jeans, though. They were the only ones that looked good on my slender, athletic frame. They gave me the curves I desperately wanted. But I was built to kill witch creatures, not attract male attention, so those curves had eluded me my entire life. I exited the bathroom and put on some pajamas from my bedroom before descending the stairs to the kitchen.

CALLING THIS A DOG BITE IS INSPIRED BY THE DOG BITE SCAR I HAVE ON THE UNDERSIDE OF MY WRIST.

I GOT FEEDBACK FROM EARLY BETA READERS WHO DIDN'T LIKE THE WAY ATALANTA DESCRIBES HERSELF, BUT I DECIDED TO KEEP IT ANYWAY BECAUSE IT WAS IMPORTANT TO ME THAT SHE HAD TEENAGE INSECURITIES.

The smell of steak overwhelmed me. Mom must have been making me her typical “you lost too much blood” meal of steak and orange juice. She created this meal for herself after her witch hunts to bring herself back up to strength. Most of the time she didn’t need it. I couldn’t remember the last time she came back injured like I was. Personally, I thought she enjoyed the meal instead of consuming it for the health benefits. It wasn’t the worst meal to eat after almost dying, but the idea of red meat juices mixed with orange juice caused me to gag. A large meal also didn’t sound appetizing to me, but it was something I needed to endure to get an ice pack for my head.

I walked down the stairs carefully, counting each step as I went. The last thing I wanted was a fall in my condition. When I reached the kitchen, my steak and orange juice was already waiting for me at the dinner table, along with a disapproving mother. I considered going to the freezer first to search for an ice pack, but angry brows and a tense jaw on Mom’s face told me that was a bad idea.

“I can explain,” I said, sliding my chair out from the table. I sat down and inhaled the scent of cooked steak.

“I sure hope so.” Mom took the seat across from me, putting us on opposite sides of the table.

I recognized it was a power move, but it was still intimidating all the same. If there was one thing Artemis Capp knew how to do, it was how to scare people into submission. She sat there like a regal queen, looking down upon an unloyal subject. Mom pulled off her blonde pixie cut and slender frame with grace I didn’t possess. Her blue eyes revealed the huntress beneath the grace. If you peered at them too long, you could see her calculated mind weigh the best options to kill creatures. Evidently, I stared too long because she raised her eyebrows, looked down at my plate, and back up to me.

Understanding the message, I cut the steak into tiny bites and took a sip of orange juice. I gave a sigh of relief when I saw she cooked the steak well-done so I wouldn’t have to see or taste any more blood. I pushed a few bites around on my plate to postpone the inevitable. The orange juice was supposed to help with iron absorption from the steak, but the tangy flavor made my nose wrinkle. Mom cleared her throat and looked down at my plate. To my dismay, I took a few bites of the steak to satisfy her. The tension in the room thickened as I realized Mom was waiting for an explanation.

“I found your finished notes. I thought I would save you some time and take care of my first hunt,” I said, mentally preparing myself for the yelling response to come.

To determine if they were ready to face the world alone, at eighteen, a rising Captrix would complete their first hunt. Before then, they were forced to live in their mother’s home, hidden from the world, until they completed this hunt. It was customary for the first hunt of a Captrix to be observed so their mother could acknowledge they were ready to fight alone. The fact that I did it by myself and failed was a spit in the face of tradition. But I was so tired of being trapped in this house.

“Apparently, you didn’t read them well, otherwise you wouldn’t have brought this!” Mom slammed the chef knife on the table.

She had cleaned it after the hunt, but it still had a faint murky brown spot she hadn’t gotten out. I struggled to remember when she went back to get it and drew a blank. I must have been really out of it when we got to the truck. My body tensed, but I tried to keep up a confident facade.

I RESEARCHED GOOD FOODS FOR IRON ABSORPTION AND CAME UP WITH THIS COMBO. I THINK IT COULD BE FUN TO IT BRING BACK IN BOOK FOUR AS A DINNER FOR ATALANTA TO HONOR ARTEMIS .

ARTEMIS COMES OFF COLD TO ATALANTA, BUT I ENJOY SHOWING HER THROUGH DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES. FOR EXAMPLE, IN BRIDGETTE’S STORY “A WITCH’S LOVE” I TRIED TO MAKE ARTEMIS COME OFF AS SOFT, SO SHE WOULD BE A KALEIDOSCOPE OF A CHARACTER RATHER THAN ONE SIDED LIKE HOW ATALANTA SEES HER.

SHELBY MCCRALEY



A WITCH'S LOVE
A CAPTRIX CHRONICLES STORY

"I made a mistake." I gulped down a swallow of orange juice.

I drank more to lengthen the silence between us. The fewer words I said, the quicker this lecture could be over. My mind returned to the aching bump on my head, and I begged it to hold on a little longer. A few more gulps of orange juice passed until I almost finished the glass. I gazed at Mom's face, wishing she would say something. Her face was a mixture of fury and worry. I had seen these emotions on her separately before, but now that they were together, I wasn't sure how to react.

"A deadly one!" Mom banged her fist on the table, causing it to shake.

Her fury was winning over her worry. Every ounce of concern on her face drained, replaced only with anger. I slid my chair back a bit from the dinner table as my orange juice sloshed to create some distance. The closer I was to the table, the harder it would be for me to leave when I needed to. I took another bite of steak, trying to think of what to say.

"I just wanted to complete my first hunt," I said, breaking eye contact.

I couldn't look into her eyes anymore as they were seething in anger. I hadn't seen her this angry since I told her I didn't want to be a Captrix.

"If you were ready to complete your first hunt, then you would have realized that it was a Venefica, not a Brujadan quickly." Mom slid me her notes I didn't read closely before.

I moved my plate and glass to the side to see. There was still half a steak there, but I figured her proving I was inadequate was more important than my iron levels. I studied her note, searching for what I missed before.

Babies are dying in the hospital unexpectedly. Hearts are always missing. The rest of innards remain. No medical diagnosis can be given. Definitely a witch creature present.

I looked up from the note, still confused. Studying it again, I read the sentences for the third time. I came to the same conclusion as earlier.

"She should have been a Brujadan. She was eating babies. Venefica don't eat babies like that," I said.

I was desperate to be right, so I could go upstairs to get some rest. I gave up on getting an ice pack. My lack of energy was becoming a problem, and I was ready for this conversation to be over.

"The babies' innards were still there. Brujadan always eats all the organs. Venefica eat hearts when they suck your soul out of your body," said Mom matter-of-factly, like we were having an angry science lesson. "You would have known that if you actually cared about this."

"Well, I'm sorry I got it wrong. Big deal." I rolled my eyes and stood up from the table.

I didn't want to be a witch huntress and didn't care what witch ate hearts versus organs. I just wanted to be done with my first hunt, so I could live a life out of these four walls.

Mom's nostrils flared. I knew I said the wrong thing, but she didn't understand how closed off I was. I was never allowed to go outside and leave this house. Instead, I spent the last eighteen years stuck in this prison, forced to live by her rules. She expected me to rise and be the next greatest Captrix to ever live, but I didn't want that for myself. I wanted to be free to live my own life and make my own choices.

"It is a big freaking deal, Atalanta! That Venefica almost killed you! You were almost soulless!"



EVEN THOUGH THEY ARE IN THE DIGITAL AGE, I LIKE THE FACT THEY KEEP ALL THEIR NOTES ON PAPER. THE KEEPING OF THE CAPTRIX ENCYCLOPEDIA AND HANDWRITING NOTES IS INSPIRED BY THE TV SHOW CHARMED, BOOK OF SHADOWS.



BOOK OF SHADOWS

"Well, maybe if you spent the time teaching me different witch creatures before I was eighteen, I would know the difference. Or hell, if you would spend any time with me at all that didn't involve talking about witches, I would want this."

I needed to escape her now. If only I could distract her like a Venefica by putting a penny down her throat.

"I was out there saving innocents from these creatures! I'm sorry I didn't have time to baby you into doing your Captrix readings." Mom moved in front of me, blocking my path.

"I'm getting better. I just need to take more time to study. Then, I can do my hunt again."

"Exactly. Which is why you're not going on any other hunts until I think you're ready."

"But that's not fair! I'm eighteen. You can't keep me here anymore!"

"I can keep you here until I believe you are ready." Mom stepped to the side calmly, trying to simmer down her fury, and pointed upstairs. "Now, go get some rest."

I had waited for years to go on my first hunt for freedom, and I blew it for not reading enough.

"You're refusing me the right to my heritage, so you can keep me here." The anger left my body, turning into sadness. "It's a stupid tradition. I want to see the world. Maybe even go to college."

"Being a Captrix is a responsibility, not a choice. We don't leave our posts because we feel like it. People need us." Mom's lip quivered. "You understand nothing."

"I didn't choose this. Why am I not allowed to have a life?"

"Because you are a Captrix. Your life is to protect humanity from witch creatures." Mom motioned upstairs again. "Go to bed. We will ramp up your training tomorrow."

"I don't want to train any—"

"Atalanta, go to bed."

I wanted to fight her some more, but ever since I left the warehouse, I felt awful. Apart from the blood loss and random battle wounds, something inside me felt empty. I thought about the soul rabbit again and wondered if the Venefica did something to me. Blood I could regenerate, but it seemed like a piece of me was missing in a way steak could never fix.

I walked upstairs back to the bathroom to deal with my clothes before going to bed. The clothes remained in a gross heap in the corner of the bathroom. I reached down to check the pockets and the smell of iron and stomach acid smacked me in the face. Gagging, I continued my mission. I fiddled through the pocket to find my lucky penny. Vomit stained the penny, so I took it over to the sink to wash it clean.

This penny was too special to stay covered in blood and witch bile. My grandfather, who had lived with us, gave me it as a gift before he passed away. He knew that copper was a powerful tool against certain witch creatures from my grandmother, who was also a Captrix. When he found a 1943 penny, he kept the penny for me. The penny had a high concentration of copper at 95%. It was more useful than today's zinc pennies, which did nothing against witches. I cherished the penny, not only because it kept me safe, but because of the sentimentality.

After cleaning the penny, I rested it on the sink, so I could put my clothes in a black trash bag. Mom kept contractor trash bags under the sink for these instances. I held my breath, placed the

AND SPENDING TIME WITH BRIDGETTE IF YOU READ "A WITCH'S LOVE"

✨ **A MAJOR THEME MOMENT** ✨

A LOT OF FORESHADOWING HERE.



GRANDFATHER INSPO

clothes in the sack, and shoved them back in the bathroom's corner. Normally, Mom would have forced me to take it to the backyard and burn it, in order to make sure the surroundings were clear of Venefica magic. I was so physically exhausted that the idea of taking these clothes back down the stairs felt impossible. Mom hadn't mentioned it before she sent me up here, so I assumed the clothes would be fine until the morning.

I walked to my bedroom and plopped down on my bed. Reaching over the nightstand, I flicked on the string lights behind my bed to fill the room with a soft yellow glow. I knew I should go to bed, but I wanted to look at my secret scrapbook, so I would dream about something else other than the Venefica's black eyes.

I reached in the tiny gap between my bed and the nightstand and pulled out a purple hardcover scrapbook. When I bought the scrapbook, I tore out all the contents and filled it with beige cardstock coated in magazine clippings and photos from the internet. I ran my fingers over the decoupaged pictures, taking in the beautiful pictures of California. I loved looking at the beaches and seeing the thick redwood forests. If I tired of nature, I could flip the page and look at images of lofts in downtown Los Angeles. Everything seemed like it was a fantastical dream, and I wanted to be in it more than anything. I dreamed of being able to go to college and actually make friends. Hell, I would live in a van down by the river if that meant I could get out of New Meadows, Georgia.

A Capp family member hadn't escaped New Meadows in at least three generations as far as I knew. It wasn't normal for Captrix to have roots in a territory for too long. We were supposed to be nomads, but this area had been a hotspot for witch creatures since it was founded after the inquisition when the witches fled Europe.

We always ended up here, one way or another. The witch creatures liked it when all the elements were close together, and New Meadows was a perfect landscape for that. We had a swamp, plenty of trees, and the earth was hot, yet damp at the same time. Especially now, during the summer where humidity hung in the atmosphere like a steamy blanket.

I hated it. I wanted somewhere where I would have a temperature or season that wasn't never-ending wet heat. California might not be the answer, but I thought it may be a start. Flipping the page, I touched a picture of people gathering in an outdoor mall. It could be an opportunity to at least make friends. I turned to another page to view a collage of emo boys and girls holding hands with cliché love sayings on them. I smiled, trying to imagine what that would feel like. Maybe California would be a chance to find romance too.

In the very back of the scrapbook, I created a flap envelope. I opened the worn cardstock and pulled out the cash I had stuck in it. The random bills equaled two hundred dollars. I saved the ones, fives, and twenties from various birthdays and tucked them away into this envelope. The money was just enough to buy me one bus ticket to Los Angeles, and I was determined to purchase it after I successfully completed my hunt.

I inserted the money back into the pocket and closed the scrapbook. A giant yawn overtook my body, letting me know it was time to rest. I put the scrapbook back into its hiding place and turned off the string lights. Tomorrow had to be a better day.

I CHOSE THE CALIFORNIA BECAUSE IT'S ONE OF THE FARTHEST ATALANTA COULD IMAGINE GOING BUT ALSO BECAUSE I WAS INSPIRED BY THE SONG "CALIFORNIA" BY CHAPPELL ROAN. I WAS LISTENING TO THIS AND "PINK PONY CLUB" WAY EARLY.



YOU CAN LISTEN TO THIS SONG AND OTHERS BY GOING TO THE OFFICIAL THE MIDNIGHT HUNTRESS PLAYLIST ON THE MEMBERS AREA OF MY WEBSITE. OTHER INSPIRING TRACKS INCLUDE:

- "BIGCITYDREAMS" BY NEVER SHOUT NEVER**
- "PERFECT" BY SIMPLE PLAN**
- "MOTHER" BY KACEY MUSGRAVES**
- "PLAYING GOD" BY PARAMORE**
- "ALL SIGNS POINT TO LAUDERDALE" BY A DAY TO REMEMBER**

CHAPTER THREE

THE SOUND OF WATER woke me from my deep sleep. Grogginess overwhelmed me at first, but annoyance quickly replaced it. I managed to avoid any nightmares, but now I didn't want to risk going back to sleep. The Venefica's grin and black eyes were drilled into my brain. Sometimes when I closed my eyes, I would see her there, opening her mouth to suck out my soul. It was only a matter of time before my subconscious betrayed me and I dreamed about her since my exhaustion had passed.

I looked toward the window and noticed the subtle glow of the streetlamp shining into my window. What time was it? Rolling away from the window, I felt around on my nightstand and picked up my cell phone. I clicked the power button to show the time. With squinted eyes, I saw three AM glowing on the screen. I had woken up right at the beginning of the witching hour. I thought it was a weird coincidence, but I set my phone back on the nightstand and contemplated going back to sleep.

A crash echoed through the house. The sound of water overran my ears again, and I realized the noise that woke me wasn't a sleepy hallucination. I threw off my covers, ignoring the chill bumps on my legs that appeared from wearing only an oversized t-shirt to bed. I grabbed the doorknob, ready to check and determine what was going on, but stepped backwards as the sound of water came closer.

The water sounded like crashing ocean waves as the noise came closer to my door. Something in my mind gave me the feeling of danger as if it already knew what was going on. I wondered if it was my Captrix instincts kicking in. I knew we all had them, and they were never wrong, but I had never felt or heard mine until now. If they were showing up now, it may be a good time to listen. I tiptoed to my accordion style slatted closet door and opened it. With my fingers in the slats, I pulled it closed. Through the slatted door, I saw a distorted view of my room. The noise grew louder until it stopped at my bedroom.

Water leaked under my bedroom door as the door creaked open. A woman with long turquoise

IT STILL AMAZES ME HOW THE FLOW OF ATALANTA'S LIFE REVOLVES AROUND SLEEP. ESPECIALLY COMING OFF OF FINISHING THE RISEN HUNTRESS AND DRAFTING BOOK FOUR WHERE SLEEP STILLS PLAYS A MAJOR ROLE.

THE FIRST APPEARANCE OF ATALANTA'S CAPTRIX INTUITION! I LOVED WRITING THE CONCEPT OF HOW YOUR INNER VOICE CAN BE USED FOR GOOD SINCE SO MANY PEOPLE EXPERIENCE NEGATIVE SELF TALK.

hair walked into the room. Her feet were bare as far as I could tell, but were covered in tiny, shiny scales to her ankles. She was sort of beautiful as her scales shimmered in the light pouring through the window, but her beauty paled in comparison to the pit forming in my stomach. This feeling inside my head was terrified of her and the water being in this room. I kept trying to shut the sense off by pressing my hand against my temples, but it refused to be silenced.

She stepped in further, motioning with her hands, causing water to rush through my entire room as if it was searching for something. I looked behind me for something to stand on before the water could touch my feet. I wasn't sure what I was dealing with, but I knew her water couldn't be great news for me based on my current mental response. Looking around the closet, I found a cardboard shoebox and reached for it. The water continued coming closer to my closet, seeking me. I had seconds before it would flow under the closet door and cover my feet.

I stepped onto the shoebox. This wouldn't hold me for long, so I tried to think light thoughts like it would somehow help. I distributed my weight onto the edges, trying to prevent the box from collapsing, and held my breath. Water flowed under the doorway and surrounded my shoebox. As if it sensed my presence, the water began forming small white-capped waves that licked the top of the box. I released panicked air. It was going to find me. Another tall wave crashed near my big toe, and I felt the mist coming off of it. I swore the water touched me, but I wasn't sure.

A crash sounded from the other side of the house and all the water drew away back to the scaled woman. My cardboard shoebox collapsed under my weight, and I balled my fists, preparing for the worst. As I was waiting for the scaled witch to burst into the closet, I heard stomping coming up the staircase.

"What are you doing in here?" The voice sounded female, but it cracked through every word.

When the voice arrived at my door, my room filled with warmth like a fire had been roaring in here for hours. The room became unbearably hot, and I stifled the urge to fan my face. I couldn't make out the new woman through the door. All I saw was red.

"I'm looking for the girl," said the scaled witch, each word falling beautifully out of her mouth like a flowing stream.

"She's not important right now."

Had I ever been important? None of these witch creatures were supposed to know that I existed. To keep me safe was the entire purpose of being trapped in this house.

"She murdered one of us."

"That Venefica is none of our concern. Let's go," said the red blob that I assumed was a witch.

The distorted red body began walking out of the door. I didn't know how they thought I killed the Venefica. The news of my botched hunt couldn't have spread that fast.

"What about Artemis?" The figure of the scaled witch creature shifted and pulsed with energy. Drops of water dripped off her fingers as she stopped focusing on keeping her powers contained.













I flinched at the sound of my mother's name. I had to warn her about the witches in the house, but my phone was still on my nightstand. It was impossible to reach as long as the two witch creatures were in here. But I also had a feeling that would do nothing. Knowing my mom,



MARE INPO

WHEN COMING UP WITH THE CONCEPT FOR THE MARE I WANTED TO IMAGINE A SIREN WHO HAS BEEN OVERTAKEN BY HER POWERS, THEY CORRUPT HER. ALL OF THE WITCH CREATURES ARE BORN OF THIS IDEA.

I HAD THE STORY QUESTION, "WHAT IF WITCHES WERE CORRUPTED BY THEIR MAGIC?" I LEANED TOWARDS THE ELEMENTS BECAUSE THE BASIS OF ANYTHING IS EARTH, WIND, AND FIRE, BUT I'VE CONTINUED TO EXPAND WITCH CREATURES FROM THERE. HERE'S A SNIP OF THE DIFFERENT CREATURES I'VE CREATED.

-  [Beastia](#)
-  [Brujadan](#)
-  [Domum](#)
-  [Ignis](#)
-  [Lux](#)
-  [Mare](#)
-  [Mortia](#)
-  [Necromancer](#)
-  [Radix](#)
-  [Venefica](#)
-  [Ventus](#)
-  [Vitrum](#)

she already realized they were here. If they made it to my bedroom, something was clearly wrong.

"I've secured her. Now let's go." The red witch exited the room, and the air cooled.

The scaled woman took one more look into the room and stared at my closet door. Then, she shook her head and followed behind the other woman. I heard them move down the stairs and exited my closet. Immediately, I grabbed my phone from the nightstand and ran toward my mother's bedroom to find her. Her bedroom door hung open, and black ash covered the entry. I entered the room to see everything singed, like a fire exploded and disappeared. How had a witch set this place on fire without a smoke detector going off? I was way out of my league.

"Mom," I whispered, already knowing she wasn't here, but I was holding on to what small shard of hope I had.

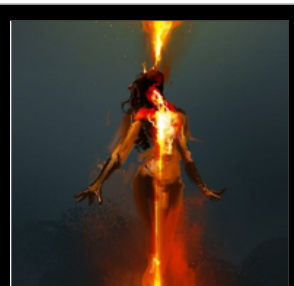
Her metal dagger sat on the floor, untainted by black ash. I couldn't believe she had left it. The dagger was special because the forger swirled the blade with six types of metal—gold, silver, copper, iron, tin, and lead. This made it incredibly lethal to all different types of witches, so Mom never left it behind. I picked the dagger up, held it in my hand, and examined it. No blood dotted the blade. She didn't use it against the creatures, or Mom didn't have the chance. I hunted for the sheath of the dagger, but I didn't find it. I assumed the sheath was still on Mom's side since she wore the dagger to bed sometimes in case of emergencies. Then, I scanned the room for any signs of a struggle, finding nothing but the black ash coating everything.

I tightened my grip on the knife, preparing to stab anything that caught me by surprise. The house was quiet now, but I had to find Mom before the witch creatures changed their minds and came back for me. I rushed down the stairs, and my eyes widened. They tore the kitchen and living room to shreds. Damp saltwater and burn marks covered the rooms, showing a visible struggle. I peered into the rooms, but Mom was nowhere to be found.

No, no, no. Panic rose in my chest. I fought the urge to run around the house screaming for her. I checked the kitchen, but saw nothing but flipped over furniture and burned spots. Giving up, I walked into the damp living room and scanned it for signs of witch creatures or Mom. They broke nothing except for the side lamp laying on the floor. Surprisingly, everything in this room wasn't scorched, just soaked.

The bookcase in the living room was soaking wet, like a gigantic ocean wave hit it. The witches failed to get into Mom's study. This explained why she left her dagger behind in her bedroom. You needed it to pry open the secret bookcase door to enter the study. Nothing else would work because there was a special place between the bookcase and the wall that the dagger fit into. She didn't want them to get inside. How did the witches know the entrance to the study was there? My mind rolled with unanswered questions.

A truck door slammed outside, separating me from my thoughts. I ran to the window and stared outside. In the back of our family truck, wrapped in chains with a mouth gag on, was my mother. She wore her pajamas, but fire singed the fabric on the edges. On her leg, I saw the missing holster halfway hanging off like someone had pulled it. Her hair looked soggy, but she was still thrashing in the truck bed, trying to free herself. Mom glanced at the window and found my eyes. Before I made a plan to go save her, a giant ball of fire burst through the window. I ducked and



IGNIS INSPO

I LOVED THE IDEA OF THIS DAGGER SINCE THE WITCHES I WROTE IN THE BEGINNING HAVE METAL WEAKNESSES. I WANTED THEIR TO BE AT LEAST ONE MULTIPURPOSE WEAPON, SO THINGS WOULDN'T CONSTANTLY BE SWITCHED OUT.



DAGGER INSPO

the fireball narrowly missed my head. It landed in the corner of the room and began burning even though everything was damp. There shouldn't have been anything to catch fire, but the inferno roared on anyway, burning up the walls and spreading across the floor.

I heard the truck door slam again and tires screeched away on the pavement.

"You need to leave," said a clear voice in my mind.

My eyes bulged out of my head at the sound of my intuition. I wasn't sure what it was meant to sound like, but mine sounded like a mixture of a robot and my grandmother's voice. Her voice was soothing and melodic with a cheery ring to it. Based on her career as a huntress, it made no sense for her to have such a pleasant voice. However, in my mind, it now sounded mechanical, taking away the cheer I grew up with.

I didn't like it, but I didn't know how to force it to change, either. This was all becoming too much. My intuition coming in, my mother being kidnapped, witches trying to kill me. I could feel a mental breakdown coming on as my intuition tried to tell me what to do, but I couldn't listen to what it had to say with all the noise in my mind.

The fire spread from the room's corner into a perfect trail toward me. Smoke filled my lungs as the fire circled around, trying to trap me. Coughing, I ran to the bookshelf and slipped the dagger into the special place and pried. The flames touched my ankles, making me wince in pain. I pried at the door again, but it wouldn't come loose. The flames climbed up my legs, and I screamed in agony. Adrenaline took over my body, and I used all my strength to pry at the door again. Finally, it popped open as the flames reached the tail of my oversized t-shirt.

I ran into the concrete hallway and pulled the bookcase closed behind me. An ordinary fire wouldn't be able to go past the secret door. This entire study was witch proof, including fire prevention, but I had a feeling this wasn't a typical fire since it came sailing through the living room window. I limped down the hall with my burned legs to the study and patted out the small flame, trying to ignite on my t-shirt. I had to find the book and get out of here.

Since the Roman empire, when Captrixes became necessary to control witch activity, Captrixes have kept a hand-written encyclopedia that detailed every witch creature they came across. Adding to the book was the job of every Captrix generation. It was their duty to detail new species and mixed-creatures, but to also add in new tactics on hunting them. I couldn't leave the house without this book. Even if I didn't want to partake in adding to it, it would be a disservice to all of my ancestors to let all of their hard work go to waste. It had to be in here since the witches didn't make it into the study before escaping.

Tons of books sat in bookcases that lined the walls of the office. Colored spines and bound leather peeked out the most with embossed titles about the written history of the famous Captrixes, individual guidebooks on each witch creature, and potion books to help Captrixes prep their weapons for battle. This was all meant to be mine if I chose this lifestyle, and now I had to leave behind this wealth of knowledge. Finding the encyclopedia was all that mattered at this point.

I limped over to Mom's desk where all of her recent hunt notes laid waiting, ready for filing or transcription into the appropriate book. Sitting in the middle of the desk was the brown leather encyclopedia, tied shut with a cord for protection. On top of the encyclopedia was a note written

THE SOUND OF THE INTUITION'S VOICE CHANGES OVER THE COURSE OF THE SERIES AND BECOMES A MAJOR CONFLICT IN BOOK THREE OF THE SERIES. SINCE FINISHING THAT BOOK, IT INTERESTING TO SEE HOW ATALANTA "VOICE" CHANGES. TO GIVE YOU A SNEAK PEEK, SHE ACTUALLY HAS THE ABILITY TO CONTROL WHAT THE VOICE SOUNDS LIKE, BUT DOESN'T FIND THAT OUT UNTIL THE END OF THE RISEN HUNTRESS. :)



in Mom's sloppy handwriting, as if she didn't have enough time to make it look elegant. I read the note and tried not to dwell on the "how did she know to write this" questions that filled my mind.

Put the book in the backpack and find Bridgette. 250 BeeBrush Drive.

I had no idea who Bridgette was or where BeeBrush Drive was, but I felt like I had no other choice if my mom wanted me to do this. She hadn't told me this was coming, but she evidently set up a contingency plan. It was my responsibility to follow it if I wanted to have any chance to find her. I tried to weigh my options, but the sound of crackling fire echoed in the hallway.

The warmth of the growing fire came to me from the hallway. The flames broke through the bookcase door, and it was following me as if there wasn't an entire house to burn instead. Smoke filled the ceiling, so I knew it was time to go. I searched around the desk until I found the black backpack left for me. Inside there was water, a few snacks, and pain medicine. I shoved the encyclopedia and dagger into the main compartment and placed my cell phone in the front pocket. Clutching the note in my hand, I put the bag on my back.

The fire roared, building a wall at the opening of the study. There was no way I was going to be able to go back into the main house. I hobbled my way to the exit door in the back of the study and opened my escape. Then, I stepped into the night air and shut the door behind me as the siren of a firetruck got closer to the house. Staggering my way through the backyard, I found the back street, so I could avoid the first responders before they saw me. I turned around to look at the house one more time, only to regret it. Orange and yellow-white flames covered the entire structure. All of my bus ticket money was being burnt up now, along with the tactile memories of my grandparents and my mother. I now had nowhere else to go and no idea where Mom was. So, with a black backpack, wearing an oversized t-shirt and burnt legs, I began my journey to BeeBrush Drive to find the mysterious Bridgette.

SINCE I'VE BEEN ASKED, I WANT TO SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT AND SAY I DIDN'T PICK OUT BEEBRUSH FOR A PARTICULAR REASON. IT WAS THE BEST STREET NAME I GOT FROM A RANDOM GENERATOR AND IT FELT RIGHT.



THESE ARE SOME MOCK UP CHARCTER ART OF ATALANTA AND ARTEMIS I MADE BACK IN 2021 USING A DND CHARACTER GENERATOR. NOT EXACTLY RIGHT, BUT HAS THE VIBES.



CHAPTER FOUR

I LIMPED DOWN THE street for thirty minutes before my phone GPS found BeeBrush Drive. As I walked down the sidewalks, I felt naked in the evening light. It was pitch-black dark except when I ran across a streetlight. For the first time in my life, I didn't want to be seen, yet I was visible, and not for the right reason. I was a teenager with severe burns and half of her butt hanging out of a t-shirt. How would I explain my wounds or outfit choice? Even though no one crossed my path, I still couldn't shake the devastating thought of being hunted. I constantly looked over my shoulder, expecting some sort of witch creature to be there. They released me into the world with little protection and absolutely no idea what I was doing. It only made sense for them to take advantage of me while I was vulnerable.

A dirt road was not what I was picturing when I found BeeBrush Drive, but I wasn't sure what I was expecting. Then again, I didn't have much of a reference since I had never been on this side of town. Goosebumps covered my body along with the throbbing of my legs, so the idea of hobbling down a dirt road with no end in sight didn't appeal to me. My burns had blistered, and the exhaustion of losing blood and being severely burned took its toll. I had never had so many attempts on my life, but these witches tried to make up for lost time.

These years of hiding kept me safe from personal witch attacks, but also kept me from being captured and used against Mom. The fact Mom had been kidnapped instead of me was irony not wasted. It seemed ridiculous. Of course, I worried, but the best Caprix known to be alive was in the back of a vehicle to who knew where. It should have been me inside that truck according to everything I learned. Not her.

I hobbled down the dirt road for another ten minutes, and the pain along with the emotions became too much. I wanted to give up and throw myself into the ditch on the side. Chanting some witch hating language would cause at least one of them to find me. Especially since I was the new V.I.P. it seemed. It would be over quickly. Maybe a Venefica would come and suck out the rest of my soul, so I could die in peace. Burning would suck, but that would be okay too. At this moment,



ONE OF THE COTTAGE
INSPO PICTURES. THIS
IS A FRENCH COTTAGE



MORE INSPO. I WANT
BRIDGETTE'S HOUSE
TO FEEL LIKE A LOG
CABIN CROSSED WITH
A COTTAGE

I just wanted to die or for things to return to what they were before my hunt.

Tears crowded my eyes and escaped down my face. Mom was depending on me, though. I'm not sure why because I barely knew any witch creature lore. I had proven myself incompetent on my first hunt. Not to mention, she anticipated a crazy witch creature plot to come to the house, since she left me the dagger and note, but didn't tell me. To add to my list of inadequacies, I never did my reading out of spite, figuring I would have sand between my toes by now, but also because the threat of witch creatures seemed too far away. I was a useless Captrix, and I didn't even want to be one. I laughed maniacally through my tears at how ridiculous this whole situation seemed.

In the middle of my mental breakdown, a gold glitter-like substance rained down from the trees on the right side of the road. The glitter was so beautiful that I stood there mesmerized until the last flake fell to the ground. I wiped the tears off my face and turned to study an ornate sign reading 250 BeeBrush Drive. Behind the sign was a short stone path leading to a cottage. The path had green grass peeking through the cobblestones. A gravel driveway was to the left of the cottage, but the ending of it faded into the trees. I looked down the road again to see if I could find the end of a driveway, but it was too dark. I glanced back at the cottage and took in its quaint appearance.

It was a small cottage with a light grey stone on the outside and a brown-colored roof. Accenting the windows were brown wooden shutters with flower boxes underneath them. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought that Snow White lived here with the seven dwarfs. It was lovely and unlike anything I had ever seen. I needed to learn what the inside looked like.

I dismissed the glitter as a side-effect of my mental breakdown and ambled down the cobblestone path. Glancing down at my phone, I read the time. Five AM. I hoped I wouldn't be disturbing the Bridgette written on the note, but I didn't see any other way around it. I couldn't wait outside for the time to become appropriate. It amazed me I hadn't been spotted thus far. I reached the door, drew in a deep breath, and gave a soft knock.

Immediately, I picked up movement within the cottage. A light came on inside and shone a sliver of white onto the grass beside me. I could make out more flowers, but some plants in the flower beds appeared to be cooking herbs as well. It interested me that they weren't contained in a particular garden. They grew and roamed as they pleased. I heard footsteps inside the cottage and returned my focus to the door. It only took a few seconds for the brown wooden door to crack open. Barely half of a face revealed itself in the dark.

"Can I help you," said the female voice behind the door. Her voice was as smooth as honey, but concerned. It had a tinge of sleepiness, and she was stifling a yawn.

"Umm, my mom left me a note to find Bridgette. She wrote this address under her name," I said.

She reached her hand through the opening, not allowing the door to crack anymore. Her fingers were long, and her nails were a natural almond shape, left bare. I handed her Mom's note, and the hand slipped back behind the door. A moment passed while I assumed she scanned the note.

"Artemis," she whispered, clutching the note harder. The paper crinkled in her hand.

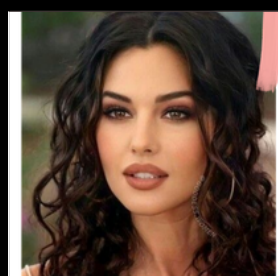
"My mom." Relief flooded my body. She knew who Mom was.

**NOPE, THAT CAN'T HAPPEN
BECAUSE IF YOU GO BACK TO
WHO YOU WERE YOU WILL
CONTINUE TO STASIS = DEATH.**

**STASIS = DEATH MEANS
INITIAL STATE OF BEING STUCK
IN A STAGNANT LIFE THAT IS
ULTIMATELY MISERABLE OR
UNFULFILLING (A WRITING
THING!)**

**I'VE ACTUALLY BUILT
BRIDGETTE'S COTTAGE
ON THE SIMS 4 AND
FURNISHED MOST OF THE
ROOMS TO HELP ME GET
A VIEW OF WHAT THINGS
LOOK LIKE. IT'S
ACTUALLY A GOOD TOOL
WHEN COMING UP WITH
DESCRIPTIONS!**

**BUT I DIDN'T DO THIS
UNTIL MY AUTHOR GROUP
ASKED ME TO. I WISH I
DID IT EARLIER!**



BRIDGETTE INspo

"And you are?"

My excitement drained. I remembered no one would recognize me. This would actually be one of the first people I had met apart from my mom and grandparents, unless you counted random cashiers at the shoppes in town.

"Atalanta."

"Bridgette."

Bridgette opened the door, and I got a good look at her in the hallway light. She was taller than me. I estimated around 5'7 and lanky, since I was around 5'5. Bridgette's long wavy brown hair was lined with a few grey strands that glimmered in the light. Her eyes were brown pools of honey with small silver flecks in them. They were unlike anything I had ever seen. Beautiful, even though sleep crust crowded in the corners. The beginning of lines on her pale forehead and around the eyes creased her face, but her glowy skin overshadowed them. If my skin looked like that, I would never want to cover it in the long-sleeved blue satin pajama set she was wearing. Based on her appearance, I assumed Bridgette was close to Mom's age, early forties. I wondered how long they had known each other. Mom had never spoken about her before.

Bridgette gasped when she took in my appearance. I realized how awful I must appear and immediately crossed my arms in front of my chest. Her eyes looked me up and down in shock. I was so embarrassed I probably could have died right there. I stared at my feet, not wanting to make any more eye contact, but avoiding eye contact forced me to look at my legs, which also looked horrific. Blisters and pus pockets covered my aching legs. A few of the blisters had busted when I was walking here and grew more painful. I was on a road straight to an infection if I didn't get those treated. Looking back at Bridgette, I tried to hold back tears. I wanted to appear strong, but I felt so weak.

Bridgette looked at me with pity that I wasn't sure that I wanted, but needed. Her nervous demeanor dissolved into caring and motherly. She gave me a soft smile that I took as everything would be okay. In her presence, I encountered calm, something that eluded me the past few hours.

"Let's see if I can fix you up." Bridgette motioned me to follow her down the hallway.

She led me to her living room and forced me to sit on a huge brown leather couch while she went to gather supplies. I laid my backpack on the ground, sank into the comfy sofa, and took the room in. The room was smaller than my living room at home, but it made up for it with coziness. All the furniture was dark wood with little knick-knacks and books lining the built-ins around the stone fireplace. A large window sat to one side of the den where a leather recliner faced the outdoors. A basket next to the recliner held quilting fabric, knitting needles, yarn, and various embroidery hoops. There wasn't a TV anywhere, but it seemed Bridgette had plenty of crafts to keep her occupied. I assumed she lived alone without many guests.

I found a homemade quilt at the end of the leather couch and pulled it close to me. I intended to cover my legs with it to hide their ugliness, but once the fabric touched my blisters, I winced. These burns were going to make grotesque scars. I feared I would never look the same again.

Bridgette returned with gauze in hand and a homemade salve in a mason jar. The purple color was unlike any other salve I have ever seen. Little pieces of flowers and herbs swirled throughout

THIS IS THE FIRST TIME BRIDGETTE HEARS ATALANTA'S NAME. EVEN THOUGH SHE WAS CLOSE WITH ARTEMIS, ARTEMIS KEPT ATALANTA'S NAME A SECRET. YOU CAN SEE THIS IS BRIDGETTE'S SHORT STORIES.



**BRIDGETTE'S
CHARACTER ART
FROM THE
GENERATOR**

the purple balm. I thought it'd make a lovely candle, but something to put on burn wounds? I wasn't really sure.

"What is in the jar," I said. The strange color and texture made me nervous, but my new intuition wasn't alarmed.

"It's a homemade burn salve. Some different herbs mixed with butters and aloe vera. The butters and aloe vera will keep everything moist, so you don't dry out while the herbs will make sure you don't get an infection," said Bridgette.

Bridgette unscrewed the lid of the purple salve and a woodsy floral scent smacked me in the face. There was nothing medicinal about this salve at all. I had no hope that this concoction was going to help my burnt legs or prevent scarring. If I didn't end up with an infection from it, I would be lucky. Bridgette seemed confident about it, though, and I didn't want to hurt her feelings after her kindness to me.

"Now I'm warning you, this is going to hurt. Just try to remain as still as possible," Bridgette scooped the salve onto her fingers. It shined in the low living room light.

I raised my eyebrows. A herbal salve was going to hurt me? I shrugged it off and peered around the room, not paying attention. When she touched me with the balm, I screamed. Thousands of tiny needles ripped my skin apart on top of the burns. The cooling sensation from the aloe vera didn't make it any better. My legs twitched away from Bridgette's hands, but she grabbed them to hold them steady.

"I'm so sorry. I promise it will be better in the morning." Sadness filled her eyes like she hated putting me in such pain.

I struggled to believe a woman I barely knew was invested in my well-being, even though she just met me. It touched me. I started to realize why Mom sent me here, but questions plagued my mind. Why did Mom never tell me about Bridgette? Why would she want to keep such a kind woman from me?

Bridgette continued spreading the salve on my legs, and I endured the pain. When she finished distributing the salve, she wrapped my legs tightly in gauze. I kicked my legs to determine if I could still move them. The wound dressing constricted my legs, but moving my knees was still possible. I tried not to compare myself to a mummy, but the longer I glanced at the bandages, the more I felt like one. However, I preferred being a mummy over having this gauze peel off before it needed to.

"I'll see if I have some pajamas you can wear. I don't have a spare bedroom, so you'll need to sleep on the couch," said Bridgette.

I patted the leather sofa and delighted in the fact it was soft. It was long, so I figured I would fit on it perfectly. This option beat sleeping on the street, so I nodded. Then, I realized how stupid I was. Focusing on something other than my leg burns, I remembered the reason I had come here.

"Wait, I need to tell you about Mom," I said.

"It can wait until after you've had some rest." Concerned passed over Bridgette's face, but melted away like she had her own suspicion about what happened.

"But you don't understand. Witches kidnapped her. Our house is burning to the ground!"



AND MAGIC :)



I STILL WONDER HOW MUCH THINGS WOULD BE DIFFERENT IF ARTEMIS INTRODUCED ATALANTA TO BRIDGETTE EARLIER. WOULD THEY HAVE BEEN ABLE TO HAVE A HAPPILY EVER AFTER? GUESS WE WILL NEVER KNOW!

"I know." Bridgette placed her hand over mine. "She wouldn't have sent you here unless something bad happened."

It was meant to be a calming gesture, but being calm right now was insane.

"We have to do something." My voice came out frantic, and I snatched my hand away.

"Atalanta, what time is it?"

The motherly tone Bridgette let out caught me off guard. She sounded like my mom during my last lecture.

"It's after five."

"Exactly. Witch creatures don't move in the daylight very often. The sun is rising. What do you want us to do?" Bridgette gave me a serious look, waiting on my response, but it seemed like nothing I said would be right.

"I don't know," I said.

"The best thing we can do for Artemis right now is to get some rest and to take care of you. We can work out saving details in a few hours. Okay?"

I felt she wouldn't take no for an answer, so I stayed silent. Bridgette took this as her cue to get up.

She rose from the couch and went to her bedroom. From the room, she returned with a cotton tank top and pajama pant set with a black cat and moon pattern on them and an unopened packet of underwear. I decided not to question why she had underwear laying around like this and took the clothing with no protest. Bridgette pointed me toward her small bathroom, so I could change. It took a minute to change my clothes because I was avoiding messing up the gauze and my legs felt sore. Getting out of my old ratty t-shirt made me appear more human and less mummy, since I didn't realize how strong the smell of smoke and sweat had become until it was off of my body. I looked around the room for a black trash bag to put my clothes in like home, but I didn't find one. I thought about calling out to Bridgette and asking, but I threw the t-shirt and my underwear in the trash can next to the toilet. Clasp the leftover underwear in their plastic package, I brought the rest of the intimates back with me to put into my backpack.

When I returned to the living room, Bridgette laid me out a pillow and fixed the quilt into a small bed. She also left me a medium-sized decorative box that was empty for my things. I decided to put the rest of the clean underwear in this box, so it wouldn't be so close to the encyclopedia in my backpack. Something about sitting underwear on top of it seemed dishonorable.

It had to be close to six AM, but I was too exhausted to care about sleeping through the morning. I hoped wherever Mom was that she was okay until I could get to her. Stretching the quilt delicately over my legs, I sank into the couch. Under the quilt, the final wave of sleep hit me, and I fell into a deep sleep.

**ONE OF THE ORIGINAL
BETA READERS FOR TMH
LOVED THIS SMALL
MOMENT AND SAID IT
MADE THE CHARACTERS
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LIKE IT TOO BECAUSE I
FEEL LIKE LOTS OF BOOKS
DON'T EVEN TAKE
CLOTHES INTO ACCOUNT.**

I SOUND LIKE A BROKEN RECORD, BUT IF YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT BRIDGETTE WAS GETTING UP TO WHILE ATALANTA WAS ASLEEP, READ "A WITCH'S LOVE". IF YOU WANT TO KNOW HOW ARTEMIS & BRIDGETTE MEET IN THE FIRST PLACE AND SEE THEM GO ON A HUNT TOGETHER, READ "A WITCH'S POISON".

CHAPTER FIVE

INSTEAD OF WATER, THIS time, I woke to blinding sunshine coming through the window in the cottage living room. I squinted at the light coming in as my eyes attempted to adjust to the new light. After falling asleep, I sank into a deep, dreamless sleep. My exhaustion once again saved me from any nightmares. There was a slight pain in my back from sleeping on the couch, but it was nothing I couldn't rub out in a moment. I blinked my eyes a few times until I could stand the light and looked out the window. The sun was high, so I estimated it had to be early afternoon. I pulled my cell phone out of my backpack and clicked the power button to power the screen, but it remained black. My phone was now useless without the charger from my bedroom—the one I didn't have anymore. All the problems that led me to Bridgette's cottage came rushing back in.

My mother. Was she alive? Was she dead? Where was she sleeping? Had the witches taken her soul? The thoughts poured into my mind like a burst pipe. I tried to take deep breaths, but the questions overwhelmed me. My heartbeat quickened, and I knew if I didn't make myself calm down, I would have a panic attack. I searched my mind through all the questions for a solution.

My grandpa told me once that Captrixes always knew when someone close to them died. He said grandma claimed it had something to do with the deep intuition we possessed. Grandma told him we could ask our intuition questions, but I had never tried to ask my intuition anything. Now, with it coming in full force, I hoped I could use it for something useful other than an alarm system. I relied on general feelings since my intuition started making itself known, but now, if ever, was the perfect time to ask my intuition questions. I wasn't sure if I needed to have a ceremony or what, so I decided to take a simple approach.

I leaned up on the couch and crossed my legs to enter a meditative stance. I flipped my palms up to accept information and closed my eyes. Before now, my intuition hadn't required such pomp and circumstance, but this time, I wanted to control it. If I was forced to have an all-knowing voice in my head, I desired it to work with me, not against me. I sat in silence for a moment, staring into a black abyss until I got the courage to ask.



Is Mom alive, I thought.

I continued to sit in the quiet, staring into the black. It felt like hours had passed with no response. Was I doing this right? I begged my intuition for an answer. Ages passed until I heard the voice in my head.

"Yes," whispered my intuition.

The clang of china in the kitchen scared me and broke my trance. My eyes snapped open, and I found myself in awe. I did something where my intuition responded like I meant it to. Maybe I was getting the hang of it after all. Another clang sounded from the kitchen, so I stood up to follow the sound.

I stumbled along the hallway, trying to keep my gauze wrap secure. Luckily, Bridgette's cottage was small, so it didn't take me long to find my destination. When I reached the kitchen, Bridgette sizzled bacon on a white stove. The bacon smelled delightful, and my stomach rumbled in response. I'd ignored my hunger until now, but with fresh bacon cooking on the stove, there was no denying it anymore. Bridgette laid bread, lettuce, and tomatoes on the counter. I watched her work for a moment in the doorway and wondered why she wore long sleeves in the Georgia heat. She was wearing a thin, long sleeve navy t-shirt tucked into a long cream-colored maxi skirt. It looked suffocating to me, even though I wore long pajama pants.

I took a seat at the round wooden table in one of the four chairs. The kitchen was smaller than the living room, but somehow the window over the sink made it feel spacious. Bridgette had herb bunches hanging in the window along with some rainbow sun catchers. The sun catchers made beautiful rainbow designs on the plank flooring. On the opposite side of the kitchen, away from the appliances, a large open shelving unit sat full of potted herbs, salves, and liquids in vials. It was like Bridgette had her own apothecary shop in her kitchen.

Bridgette continued cooking at the stove and flipped the bacon when it was perfectly cooked—not too crunchy, but also not too chewy. Her long sleeve shirt pulled up on the sleeves as she removed the bacon from the pan, and I could see her forearms. They seemed to sparkle in the light like she covered them in fine glitter. I stared at them for a moment longer, but figured it was light coming off of the sun catcher, making her skin shine.

"Oh, good. You're awake," said Bridgette, turning to face me. "Is BLTs okay?"

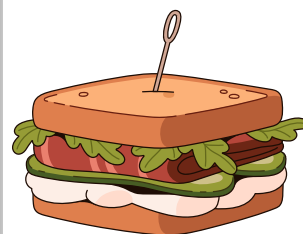
I nodded in reply. She sliced the tomato into thick slices. Reaching across the counter, she opened the bread and took out a few slices, then she spread something white onto the bread that I guessed was mayonnaise.

"You need to check your gauze to see if it needs to be changed." Bridgette looked over her shoulder at me.

I raised my eyebrows at her. There was no way with how bad my burns were that the gauze would be ready to be changed. My burns were second-degree burns for crying out loud. A purple salve couldn't heal them in a few hours. Bridgette hadn't been wrong yet and helped me the night before, so I felt like I owed it to her to follow her medical advice. I unwrapped the gauze with no pain at all. Miraculously, when I finished unwrapping the bandages, my legs had healed except for a few small scars. Both legs looked moisturized and healthy, as if I had just shaved them and

I LOVE COMING UP WITH ALL THE THINGS BRIDGETTE COOKS. IT ONE OF THE WAYS SHE SHOWS LOVE AND AFTER BEING ALONE, SHE ENJOYS HAVING SOMEONE ELSE TO COOK FOR. THIS IS INSPIRED BY KITCHEN WITCHCRAFT.

IF YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF KITCHEN WITCHCRAFT, HERE IS THE DEFINITION: "KITCHEN WITCHCRAFT, OR KITCHEN WITCHERY, IS A PRACTICE THAT INFUSES EVERYDAY COOKING AND HOUSEHOLD TASKS WITH MAGICAL INTENTION AND SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE. IT FOCUSES ON USING THE KITCHEN AS A SACRED SPACE FOR NURTURING, HEALING, AND MANIFESTING INTENTIONS THROUGH FOOD AND DOMESTIC MAGIC."



applied a thick lotion. This was impossible. I looked at Bridgette with my jaw dropped. My eyes kept glancing from my legs to her.

"I was afraid they wouldn't heal up this soon. They were pretty nasty burns," Bridgette said, amazed at her own skill.

"But how?" I said, completely perplexed.

Bridgette placed a BLT in front of me and sat in the chair across from me. She ate bites of her sandwich, ignoring my question.

I ate a few bites of my sandwich, wondering if Bridgette was going to ask me about what happened last night. I didn't know if she wasn't curious or if she was being gentle with my feelings. I wondered if she grasped everything about Captrixes or if she didn't realize the gravity of this situation. I didn't understand how she could be so calm with her friend kidnapped by witch creatures. Bridgette ate half of her sandwich and took a deep breath.

"Okay. Start from the beginning. What happened yesterday?" Bridgette reached for a notebook and pen on the far side of the table and opened a fresh page to take notes.

"How much do you really know about Captrixes?"

"Everything. I thought that was obvious."

"I just don't understand how you can be so calm about this," I set down the last fourth of my sandwich on the plate.

"It's a part of my nature. I have to stay calm. Please tell me what happened yesterday."

I thought Bridgette was sweet and kind. She had been a blessing to me, but the longer I stayed with her, the more mysterious she became.

"I had my first hunt yesterday. I guessed I was hunting a Brujadan, but it turned out to be a Venefica." I searched for disappointment in her eyes.

Bridgette raised her brows at me as if she was surprised that I mixed those two creatures up. I wondered if it disappointed her that Artemis's daughter would make such a dumb mistake. She remained silent and nodded at me to continue.

"I obviously wasn't prepared, so Mom came in at the last minute and saved me." I wasn't ready to mention the fact that my soul left my body and I almost died.

Bridgette scribbled down a few words in her notebook. She chewed on the edge of the pen clip, deep in thought.

"Did the Venefica curse you in any way?" Bridgette looked up from her notepad.

"Some sort of blood spell, maybe? I'm new at this, so I don't recognize a lot of Latin like I should. But whatever she said made my blood boil out of my skin," I said, trying not to conjure the image of blood coming out of my pores again.

Bridgette's eyes widened. Whatever the Venefica did to me must have been a nasty curse. She wrote down a few more notes.

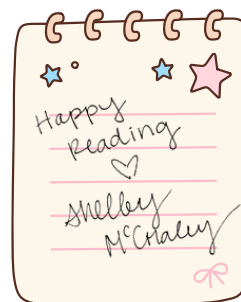
"After that, Mom and I went home. We had dinner and went to bed. Around three AM, a strange noise woke me up."

I relayed the information about the sea witch creature searching for me in my bedroom and the red witch creature telling her to leave me for another time.

"By the time I got downstairs, I saw they had Mom tied up in the truck. She was fighting



**SOME OF THE
ORIGINAL MARKETING
PHOTOS FEATURING
TILLY**



them. But when the red witch caught me looking, she started the fire that burned my legs."

I continued the story about my journey to BeeBrush Drive to find Bridgette and concluded the events of last night. Bridgette reread her notes and tried to make sense of it all. She reminded me of how Mom would always pour over her notes when she was hunting. Definitely a skill I needed to pick up on if I was going to moonlight as a Captrix until I got Mom back.

"That's not a normal bunch of witch creatures to be working together." Bridgette chewed on the end of her pen again.

"What makes you think the Venefica was involved?"

"They wanted to avenge her, one. Second, a Mare and Ignis don't work together normally. They are opposite elements. But, also, the curse could have allowed them to track you."

I mulled the terms Mare and Ignis around in my mind. These terms must be the official names of the witches I saw in the house. I tried to remember seeing them in the encyclopedia, but nothing came to me.

"What did you do with your clothes that night," said Bridgette.

"I put them in a trash bag to burn the next day."

"Bingo. They could track the Venefica's magic through your clothes."

"That still doesn't explain why they wanted Mom, rather than kill her."

"I'm not sure about that one, either. Nothing about this makes sense."

Bridgette closed her notebook and looked lost in thought. She rose from the table and cleared the lunch plates. It was obvious we wouldn't be finishing our sandwiches.

I wondered how Bridgette knew so much about witch creatures. She didn't look like any Captrix I had ever seen in the books. We all tended to have straight blonde hair and blue eyes. It was a part of the whole family lineage thing.

"Are you a Captrix too?"

"Not exactly," said Bridgette.

As soon as the words left her mouth, Bridgette knocked a glass off of the counter. Instead of it crashing on the floor, she held her hands out and the glass suspended in the air. Her eyes widened as she realized what she revealed.

"No, no, no. You're a witch."

I began looking for exit points. It all made sense now. The glitter before I found the house must have been a hidden protection spell. The special burn salve that magically cured my legs in six hours. The unlimited witch knowledge. The fact that her arms glittered in the sunlight. Mom wouldn't lead me here. She would never put me in danger with a witch creature. It must have been a trap set by one of last night's witch creatures to capture me. The line of thinking made little sense, but I was so confused.

I stood up from my chair and broke out into a run. I asked my intuition for answers, but it only kept saying 'safe.' This made no sense to me, either, unless it was referring to the book I left in the living room. I knew now that I had to make it to the living room to grab my bag before I could leave. The encyclopedia couldn't be left for a witch creature to steal. I ran to the living room and reached for my backpack.

Bridgette let the glass crash and chased after me.

SOMETIMES I WISH I DIDN'T LEAN INTO THE APPEARANCE AS MUCH, BUT I WANTED A WAY TO IDENTIFY A CAPTRIX FOR ATALANTA AND ALSO HAVE A WAY TO SURROUND HER WITH DIFFERENT PEOPLE UNTIL SHE MEETS ANOTHER CAPTRIX.

IF I WAS TOLD MY ENTIRE LIFE WITCHES WERE BAD AND SAW TWO KIDNAP MY MOTHER AND TRY TO KILL ME, I'M PRETTY SURE THIS WOULD BE MY REACTION AS WELL. I DON'T BLAME ATALANTA FOR FREAKING OUT.