



A Well-Seasoned Brew

By Wendy Wright

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Prologue

Some people have seen them. Most haven't. They could—if they wanted to. And should you be a courageous, adventurous human who wishes to encounter these creatures, there are a few things you must do:

- First, detangle yourself of worry; get to a state of calmness; clear your mind of anything negative.
- Secondly, fill your heart with a love of nature: trees—specifically the knobby and gnarly, clouds—particularly those that are dark or wispy, flowers—especially the overlooked, wild and thorny.
- Thirdly, invite rather than demand. Witnessing a magical creature is a privilege, not a right.

Do these things and you just might—it's unlikely, but there's a tiny sliver of a chance—you can possibly, but only maybe, encounter a witch.

It's terrible, I know, to mention the witch. I'm certain some parents are gasping; they're huffing and puffing at the thought. But before you wad this paper and toss it in the trash, let me explain. A real witch, the type of creature I plan to discuss, is not the creature you're imagining—not an evil being that works against the good in this world—no way, no how, and not a chance we honor this group. I'm talking about the original group W.I.T.C.H., otherwise known as Wilderness Integrators and True Collaborators of Harmony. I'm talking about the group of gals that are the go-between for humans who are yet earthbound.

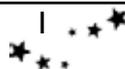
You see, in the space between the heavens and Earth there is a place where these wily witches abide. Their home is a fourth dimension that exists somewhere behind the clouds. When these gals check in each day at the office, they receive their orders from above. Sometimes they are asked to paint the clouds. Other times they must leave messages in the sky. (Ever hear of an upside down rainbow? That's the work of the W.I.T.C.H.) Blue moons, harvest moons, lunar haloes—all designed by the W.I.T.C.H. And every once in a while—especially in October for some odd reason, the gals are given tasks that require a visit to Earth. Whatever the assignment, each order is designed to lift the chins of humans. From brew to bristle, these festive creatures and their hearty laughs strive to remind us humans of bigger things—things existing beyond our world.

I should forewarn, however: These gals are not yet perfect themselves; a few brooms are still over-polished, a few cauldrons are yet unseasoned.

So here's hoping you get the chance to meet one of these cunning cacklers—and hopefully it'll be one of the nicer ones—just keep a few bottles of wart remover handy, you know—just in case. I really don't think there's much to worry about. I'm nearly convinced all should be fine. But stay prepared. You never know when it'll happen, and you never know which witch it'll be. Could be you'll meet a newbie witch who's still fumbling with broom control and has blown into human territory—could be you'll meet a more experienced witch of the brew. (You'll know the skilled witch when you see her—just look for a bunch of warts and a number of long, black chin hairs.)

Therefore, my dear fellow humans, I close with one request: Should you ever be so lucky as to encounter a true-to-spirit witch, please—let me know. Please. And details matter.

Now readers: It is time to take flight—chins up. Let's sprinkle our day with a little magic and brew a bit of trouble.





Chapter One

Banter and Rip

Aurora swirls her cape around her in the same way she has seen her aunt and grandmother do a hundred times before. At least she tries to do it their way, but its black satin folds do not billow as they twirl; she does not hear that wonderful snap of the material before it swishes around her shoulders; the cape does not flow to the floor in inky waves the way theirs always do.

“Come, Aurora. We are nearly ready,” Cinnabar, Aurora’s aunt, calls from the other room. “You must hurry if you wish to watch.” Her voice dances out the door.

Watch? Not this time. The moon’s too plump; the clouds are too wispy, the leaves are too crackly—and she—she feels too grownup just to watch. Aurora hurries to tuck her blond curls into her hat. She ironed its point just this morning, making the tip perfectly vertical. There will be no excuse tonight. Yes, yes—you need not remind her; she’s aware she’s young, just 72 years. But she has studied and practiced more than any 100-year-old; she has more spirit than any of her big-shot, I-don’t-have-time-for-you cousins. I guess graduation makes you too important for a game of Broom Womp, too sophisticated for a session of tarantula tag, no time anymore to even twist a few clouds into fun shapes. Whatever. Doesn’t matter. They can stick their lumpy noses in their books all night long for all she cares. She doesn’t have time for silly games any more than they do. She’ll show them. While they’ve been busy reading potion books, she’s been making potions. While they’ve been learning about the various broom types, she’s been riding hers—just don’t tell her auntie. That would ruin everything. She has plans. Plans that begin tonight.

“Aurora?” her grandmother’s froggy voice sounds extra jumpy this evening. “Hurry outside,” she says as she exits. Aurora hears her grandmother’s bones creak and rattle out the back door.

“Coming!” Aurora grits her teeth while struggling to tuck her blond curls under her hat’s rim; her fingers feel stiff and uncooperative. She grunts and haphazardly shoves the last lock of hair beneath her hat. Immediately, another lock pops out. Aurora huffs and stares into the mirror; her eyebrows furrow. Suddenly, a spotlight beams downward on Aurora. She jumps. Colorful bubbles are swirling around her, and carnival music is playing. A disco light swirls and shimmers.

“Ready for some fun?” a deep, unfamiliar voice echoes.

Aurora flings her head upward toward the voice, straining to see through the light’s glare. Her hat falls to the floor.

“Who’s there?”

Instantly, the bubbles dissolve; the music and lights snap off. Aurora is blinded by the sudden darkness. She hurriedly feels the top of her dresser, searching for her wand. Objects crash to the floor. Finally snatching it, she spins around, holding her wand outward.

“I’m warning you,” she says, turning right then left, blindly jabbing the darkness with her wand.

She fails to see the green gnarly hand and its rubbery arm that is emerging from the ceiling above. The arm stretches downward, lower, lower.

“What?!” Aurora screeches when the hand is directly in front of her face. She whacks it with her wand. A few measly sparks shoot outward and pop. The monstrous hand continues to plunge downward. It scoops up Aurora’s hat and plops it on her head—each golden strand of hair now securely hidden beneath its blackness. Immediately, the hand and arm are sucked upward and out of



sight.

Holding her hat in place, Aurora looks up again. “I said, who’s there?” She struggles to make her squeaky voice sound threatening.

By now her eyes have readjusted. Looking up, she sees two watery eyes stretched across the surface of her ceiling light. A black bell-shaped mole sits beneath the right eye.

“Grandma!”

Below the mole, two thin warty lips open into a perfectly witchy smile. “Scare you?” Grandma Arabella says in her usual froggy voice.

“No!” Aurora’s eyes are still wide; her lips twist. She jams her wand into her cloak’s pocket, making the seam rip. She folds her arms in front of her.

“Oh, darn. Guess I’m out of practice,” says Arabella.

“Arabella, where are you—you old, warty crow?” Cortexia says, making sure her boots stomp firmly against the wooden floor as she enters the room.

“Ah, Cortexia—my dear honorary cousin,” Arabella says. “But if I’m the crow, why are you the only one squawking?”

“Unfortunately, Arabella, we are in need of a silly, old witch at the meeting. The potion won’t work without a wrinkly face staring into the brew.”

“How can this be, dear cousin? You are plenty old and have many more wrinkles than I,” Arabella smirks and looks at her granddaughter, hoping for a smile. There is no smile, but at least her arms are uncrossed. Grandma Arabella is encouraged.

“Hmmm...” Cortexia taps her lumpy chin; her eyes shine as she concocts her comeback. “Did the recipe call for wrinkles—no, no—forgive me. I am confused—transfixed by the roadmap on your face. The recipe specified hairy warts engulfed in swirls of wrinkles. Yes, that was it; that is why you are needed at tonight’s wortcunning* session.”

“Ah, my lovely cousin,” Arabella looks over at her granddaughter and sees a smile hatching. Arabella’s eyebrows jump with sudden verve. “How relaxed you must feel, Cousin Cortexia, to be so insignificant and unneeded on a wortcunning evening. Don’t worry. Another thousand years and you may be as warty-wise as I.”

Cortexia’s lips fold inward; she absentmindedly pulls on the long, black hair that protrudes from her chin. “Well, until then,” she says, “get your crusty old buns outside!”

Arabella absolutely glows at Cortexia’s comment. In fact, she glows golden. Wait—no. She’s transforming again. This time into a massive golden hamburger bun.

“These crusty, firm buns of mine—” Arabella begins flapping her buns but is cut short.

“Auntie Arabella!” Cinnabar stands in the bedroom doorway, glowering at her auntie’s nonsense. “Am I the only adult in this house?”

Arabella returns to her actual self.

“Why aren’t you outside? It is 45 minutes until midnight, and we still need to chop the herbs and add the clippings,” Cinnabar has that stern librarian, by-the-book expression. She takes a deep breath; her expression softens. “So, if you ladies will follow me to the brewing station—and stay there this time until we are done—I would appreciate it.”

* wortcunning: Knowledge of the medicinal uses of plants



“Of course. Of course,” Arabella and Cortexia say in unison, looking sideways at each other, the corners of their mouths slyly curled.

“Follow me,” Cinnabar directs.

Cortexia turns to Arabella and holds out her gnarly finger, giving her a devious grin. “Follow me,” she says, “you old cat,” she quickly adds and then prances outside behind Cinnabar, swinging her hips.

Arabella salutes her cousin, turns and gives a firm nod to Aurora, and then swivels back around to march out the door. And when she does, Aurora cannot stifle the giggle, for her Grandma Arabella has grown a long, long black tail. Thousands of fleas are jumping on and off it. As soon as the insects hit the floor, they pop and disintegrate into tiny puffs of smoke. As Arabella exits, her scruffy tail curls behind her, spelling out the words “Follow me, Aurora.”



Chapter Two

A Recipe Riddle and a Lot of Spittle

“Ahh,” Cortexia says, stepping outside, filling her lungs with the moist night air. The old witch then exhales with a groan. “How I love October evenings,” she says, gazing up at the knotted, black tree branches that twist and warp like her fingers. The dark, bare branches glint in the moonlight. “So beautiful.”

Arabella follows Cortexia’s lead. She inhales, absorbing the air’s sweet scent of fungus and decaying debris. She exhales with the same sigh of contentment. As usual, there’s a rustle in the dark foliage above them. Arabella smiles and lifts one finger, “Come,” she calls. Immediately, a grey-brown owl descends; it curls its golden claws around her knotted finger and flaps its wings excitedly. Arabella delights and places the bird on her shoulder.

“Come.” Cortexia tries to work her same magic on her three granddaughters. Unfortunately, her extended hand goes unnoticed. Her granddaughters—Deselda, Juniper, and Vervina—are too entangled with their teenage thoughts.

“Ladies, your wise and skilled grandmother is speaking to you.” Cortexia speaks of herself, trying to gain their attention.

“Just a minute,” Deselda says without looking up from the small cakes she has baked for tonight’s wortcunning event. She finds more and more ways to fuss them about.

“Be right with you,” Juniper says, adjusting her new tarantula brooch, making certain it is fastened properly to her robe.

Vervina doesn’t even answer; she is engulfed in her music. Spongy mushroom earbuds fill her ears. She stares at the enchanted technobox in her hand. Inside this latest witch-world contraption are various creatures—crickets, ants, fleas, termites. The song chosen determines the creatures that play. Currently, Vervina is listening to the termites play their warbling saw-like jaws. The enchanting music pulses through her young 100-year-old self.

Cortexia’s hand drops. One tiny flick of her wand and she could show them; they would know she is worth their attention. Instead she stretches her creaky, stiff fingers, opening and closing them until the bones snap into place. Oh well. What good is respect if it is forced?

“That field trip to the human world,” Arabella whispers to Cortexia, “seems to have left an undesirable residue.”

“Hmmm...” Cortexia says, sighing while examining a new wart on one finger. “Perhaps Cinnabar was right,” Cortexia finally says. “The girls were not quite ready for such powerful forces.”

“It’ll wear off,” Arabella says. She looks over at the three girls and pulls on the black hair that protrudes from her chin. She turns and pats Cortexia’s hand. “They’ll see through these knobs and warts of ours again.”

One of Cortexia’s crusty old warts breaks off from the back of her hand. “Arabella, that one was a favorite. Look what you have done,” she says, smiling. “Father always did say that you are a diamond in the rough. Problem is, you still are—rough.”

Immediately, Arabella transforms.

“Tempest be tamed, Arabella!” Cortexia steps back. “What are you doing? Put some clothes on!”



“You told me!”

“Auntie Arabella!” Cinnabar drops the firewood she is carrying.

Arabella’s smile gleams as the moon. “Did you not say, ‘I am in the buff’?”

“‘Rough,’ she said ‘rough,’ Grandmother.” Aurora is covering her eyes, smiling as she shrieks.

Deselda and Juniper are turned away gagging.

Vervina is still lost in her music.

“Enough,” Cinnabar says. She places the extra kindling twigs between the logs.

“I have already prepared the firewood,” Cinnabar huffs, “and filled the cauldron with the required pond water—and chopped the wild mugwort and stirred it into the brew the required 100 strokes, counter-clockwise.” She stoops over to examine her configuration of logs. “No thanks to you two,” she says, scolding Arabella and Cortexia.

“You are a fine daughter,” Cortexia says without a ruffle of emotion. She looks over at Arabella and smiles.

“We are gladly here to help you now, my dear.” Arabella tries to soothe Cinnabar’s wrinkled emotions.

Cinnabar reaches downward and pets the head of the scaly dragon that is stretched out beside the cauldron, waiting for the signal. “Good, Raptor,” she says, rubbing that hard-to-reach place between the dragon’s knobby horns. The scabrous creature thumps its tail and gives a gargling purr. The veins in its wings glow red. Cinnabar straightens, takes a step back, and points her wand at the dragon. “Now!”

The dragon obeys, shooting a gusty blow of fire beneath the pot. As always there’s a crackling whoosh, then sparks that dart into the blackness, and finally the ravenous flames that clamp down on the wood. The simmering glow alerts forest creatures that the wortcunning session has begun; crows, bats, owls, rabbits, foxes, possums—gather in the thicket to watch.

Cinnabar smiles. “Well done, Raptor,” she says, admiring the flames. “Now,” she says turning, “are our lovely graduates ready to—” She stops mid-sentence, staring at the three girls who remain fixated elsewhere. Cinnabar’s face becomes stone. A wind begins to swirl around her; her cloak billows; her eyes alight. “Enough!” She waves her wand, melting Juniper’s mirror and whisking the earbuds out of Vervina’s ears. Her precious earbuds are flung into the thicket—one earbud thrust into a fox’s ear, the other into a rabbit’s. Immediately, the fox and rabbit join paws and begin to dance. Cortexia, Arabella, and Aurora cover their mouths, stifling their cackle.

“It is past time to begin.” Cinnabar places her hands on her hips, smashing down the sides of her poofy black gown.

“Sorry, Mother,” Deselda tells Cinnabar, holding out the treats she has prepared for the session. “The yeasted cakes are ready.”

Her grandmother, Cortexia, nods approvingly at her granddaughter.

Cinnabar takes her hands from her hips. “Yes,” she says, “Well done.”

“But first we must drink,” Arabella says, snapping her fingers so that the wortcunning goblet appears in Cinnabar’s hand. She peers into the goblet’s mixture.

“You prepared the solution properly?” Cinnabar asks as she examines the mixture.

“My dear,” Arabella’s words slither to such a question, “Cortexia and I have been hosting



wortcunning sessions for a thousand years, hundreds of which were before your birth.” Arabella’s eyes dance; her lips curl like a charmed snake, happy for the chance to remind everyone.

Cortexia closes her purple eyelids; she is picturing the recipe card and its listed ingredients for the ceremonial drink, a recipe she’s followed for so many years. “The juice of one pumpkin,” she says, “mixed with the sap of a purple sow thistle.” She lifts her hairy chin while repeating the ingredients.

“Beet juice added for intensity,” Arabella adds, “and a bit of honey to comfort the taste buds of youthful witches.” She winks at Aurora.

“I see.” Cinnabar smiles. “Perhaps, we shall have a harvest moon tonight after all.”

“Gather ‘round,” Arabella holds out her hands to her family. The teenage graduates move in; the ladies encircle the steaming cauldron; the flame’s glow dances across each face. They look at Cinnabar, expectantly.

“Tonight we join as one.” Cinnabar speaks, her whisper thick and firm.

“We drink from one goblet,” Cortexia adds, “signifying our united effort to quench nature’s thirst for balance.” She swirls her wand and a silver bottle appears, hovering before her.

Aurora gazes at the shimmering bottle. “Stardust,” she says.

“Aurora, would you do the honors?” Cortexia looks down at Aurora, whose eyes have widened.

“But she’s not a graduate,” Deselda’s mouth opens with shock.

“Hush,” the adults all say. In this moment, there’s a knowing in the air between them—each picturing Aurora’s mother, each feeling the void she put in Aurora’s young life.

The three graduates look at each other; they pinch their lips shut, trying to hold back their complaints. Aurora takes the silver bottle from the air and sprinkles its contents into the goblet. The concoction bubbles and froths.

“Stardust—collected by our most experienced witches,” Cinnabar says, looking at Arabella and Cortexia.

“Most experienced and most knobbyest,” Juniper whispers, making her sisters snicker.

“Shh,” Cinnabar gives the three a warning look. Cortexia and Arabella just smile.

“To the earth,” Cinnabar then says, holding up her goblet.

“To the earth,” the witches say in unison.

Cinnabar then takes a sip and passes the goblet.

“Are we ready for the cakes?” Deselda asks, her face beaming with excitement as she holds out the platter of tiny yeasted cakes she has made, each placed on a lacy spiderweb napkin.

Arabella reaches out and clutches a cake with her long, yellowed nails. “Lovely, Deselda,” she says. “Someday you will be a great bakery bewitcher.” Deselda gleams. The statement is a powerful ingredient.

The ladies hold their cakes to the moon.

“This yeasted cake,” Cinnabar continues the ritual, “represents our collective hunger to help humans rise to greatness, to gain strength by looking upward.” Cinnabar salutes the moon and stars with her yeasted cake.

The others do likewise. “Indeed,” they say in unison and then bite into the treat.

“Gods beware!” Cinnabar turns from cauldron and folds over, groaning and spitting. Everyone, including the baker Deselda, has turned from the circle and is spitting.



“Horrible!”

“Disgusting!”

Their eyes are watering from the offensive taste. Cinnabar holds the remains of her cake in the moonlight. “What are these green and pink specks in the cake?” She does not want to; she cannot help it. She gags as she speaks.

Deselda’s gleam has turned to gloom. “They’re called sprinkles,” she frowns and shows them the bowl of waxen sugar bits. She brought it thinking everyone would be amazed with her daring twist of the cake’s recipe; she had thought they would want to examine such a novel substance. Instead they regurgitated. The tip of her hat droops.

Aurora struggles to hide her grin.

“From the human world?” Cinnabar asks, her voice somewhat loud and echoey.

Cortexia and Arabella cringe and look away.

Cinnabar flicks her wand and a goblet of pond water appears in each hand; everyone begins gulping. “You retrieved these waxed chemicals during your field trip, I suppose,” she says between gulps.

No one bothers answering.

Busy washing their mouths out, they do not notice Vervina holding out her wand toward the thicket; her technobox gliding through the air toward her. All she wants to do is escape the absurdity of her family. This time she will be more discreet; no one has to know she has it. Juniper is busy removing her tarantula brooch; she must make certain it was not damaged during all her retching.

“Nothing artificial, my dear,” Cortexia says, peering into Deselda’s sad eyes.

“Especially when brewing a potion,” says Cinnabar.

Aurora humphs. “I already know that.” Her little chin is lifted.

Deselda’s eyes narrow to slits; she looks down at her cousin.

“Throw those nasty things away,” Cinnabar says and then swishes the pond water in her mouth before spitting.

“I will—later,” Deselda responds, her mother still spitting. She places the bowl of sprinkles on the worktable—her lower lip protruding.

“Although I do love their bright colors,” Arabella examines the sprinkles she spit into her hand. “So tired of black—black, black, black—that’s all we get to wear anymore.”

“I agree. We used to wear such lovely, colorful clothing,” Cortexia says, reminiscing of the vibrant purples, oranges, and pinks she once wore.

“Well, if the two of you did not sleep all day when color is permitted,” Cinnabar says, “you could be wearing those hideously colorful outfits of yours—look like traffic lights in them if you ask me.”

“Shall we move on with the ceremony?” Cortexia offers; she reaches downward to pet the crow that has landed at her feet. It is pecking at the spittle-soaked sprinkles that lay on the forest floor. As she straightens upward, Cortexia flicks her wand, transforming the sprinkles to grubs. The crow flaps its wings and begins to gobble.

“Yes, let us move forward.” Cinnabar pauses to regain focus.

Aurora feels the power of Deselda’s glare that remains upon her. When she looks up at Deselda, she sees that her cousin’s eyelashes have turned into tiny slithery black eels; each tiny head squirming toward Aurora, hissing. Aurora looks away and puts her hands in her cloak’s pockets.

Maybe this isn’t the best night for my plan—maybe I’ll try next time. Aurora fiddles with the wand in her pocket, pushing it deeper into the pocket while twirling its tip right then left as she thinks.



Chapter Three

Ingredients for Trouble

Raptor is getting restless; he loves his role in the wortcunning process; he loves it when all eyes are on the cauldron. It would be difficult to sustain the perfect measure of bubbling and seething in the pot without him. So, when Cinnabar holds up the brew's first powdery ingredient, the scales on his spine lift, and he emits another flaming breath.

"Three bowlfuls of golden pollen from a sunflower," Cinnabar says, directing Juniper to add the ingredient to the cauldron.

But rather than slowly pouring the pollen, Juniper dumps the entire contents into the brew. A cloud of pollen rises and covers the witches; it's everywhere—in their eyes, noses, mouths. The witches turn toward the thicket and sneeze, sneeze, sneeze, and sneeze some more. A volley of sneezes are fired at the forest creatures in watch. They duck and cover.

"That's alright," Cortexia says, wiping the pollen from her smiling face.

"Yes," says Arabella, "We've dumped plenty of ingredients in our days." She smiles at Juniper through the yellow mist. Juniper inches back into her position within the circle.

"You're supposed to pour it slowly, aren't you?" Aurora asks her grandmother.

"Shh," her Grandmother Arabella says. "All is well."

Juniper scowls at Aurora, her lips becoming tiny snakes that rattle at her.

"And now, Vervina—the toenails." Cortexia turns and leans toward her granddaughter. No response. She leans further. "Vervina."

Vervina's face is blank; she stares into nowhere.

"Vervina!" says Cinnabar with such force that her cape billows and her hat jumps.

Arabella, who is standing closer to Vervina, reaches over and pulls the earbuds from her ears.

"Did I not cast that contraption into the thicket?" Cinnabar grits her fangy teeth, struggling to control her force. "Can I not then cast a twig as you?"

Vervina bites her scalloped lower lip; her gown is limp. "Sorry?" she says, not certain that she is.

"You're supposed to add the toenails." Aurora's head bobs this way and that as she speaks. Her voice is that of an enchanted dictionary soaked in syrup.

Vervina forces her eyes to stretch widely at Aurora; she then reaches into her pocket, pulls out the nails, thumps toward the cauldron, and stretches her hand over the bubbling concoction.

"Wait!" her elders cry.

"Let me see those," Cinnabar says, pulling open Vervina's clenched fist. "Vervina, nothing artificial can be added to a brew. Did you not hear this stated a moment before?"

Vervina shrugs. "What? They're toenails aren't they?"

"They're painted!" Everyone stares at the polished nail clippings, hot pink, neon green, fluorescent orange.

"Oh, that's why," Arabella says.

"Why what?" Cinnabar has about had it.

Cortexia speaks up. "Why she took so long in that human nail salon during the field trip."

"Fake is not allowed in a brew." Aurora whispers the re-explanation.



“Fine,” Vervina says, sticking her hand into her other pocket. “A hundred clippings of yellowed toenails gathered from elderly human men.” She holds out her palm, showing everyone the toenails, looking completely unamused.

“Yes, fine.” Cinnabar gives her approval; Cortexia and Arabella click the heels of their boots and nod in agreement. When Vervina dumps the lot into the cauldron, the brew swirls; two watery, clawish waves within the pot clasp the yellowed nails and pull them under.

As Vervina returns to the circle, Aurora huffs. “How can we keep the man in the moon without the proper nails?”

Vervina looks at her little cousin and shrugs. Juniper stares at Aurora. In fact, she eyes her up and down—her perfect hair, her perfectly round head, her glistening black cloak, her—wand that is slipping out the hole in her pocket... Hmm...not so perfect after all.

“Alright.” Cinnabar cues Arabella.

Arabella steps forward; her gown swishes; her long, gray hair streams behind her. She holds her wanted, gnarly hand high above the bubbling cauldron and waves her wand. Suddenly, a luminous cloud appears. She lifts her face to the glimmering cloud and breathes deeply, its amber-gold glow outlining the wrinkles on her face. And then, as if conducting a great symphony, Arabella holds her arms to the sky, wand in hand. “Honey,” she booms, “from a thousand honey-pot ants!” She taps her wand against the glowing cloud. Immediately, the cloud takes the shape of a water pitcher and pours itself into the cauldron’s mixture. Bits of glow jump into the air and pop. Having finished the task, Arabella then transforms into a firefly and flits back to her place within the circle.

“A bit dramatic don’t you think?” Cortexia whispers when Arabella returns to form.

“And the Oscar goes to—” Vervina smirks at Arabella and then rolls her eyes.

“What?” Arabella’s eyelids flutter as she responds. “Cortexia cannot get all the fun,” Cortexia’s eyebrow arches. Arabella continues, “Next time I get to tickle the honeyants’ antennae and collect their freshly regurgitated honey.”

“And next time you shall,” Cortexia nods in agreement.

“Time to stir the brew—Juniper?”

Juniper cringes. “Maybe someone else can do it this time.”

“You have been selected,” says Cinnabar. “Your broom?”

Juniper slowly turns back the edge of her cloak to reveal the broom—a glittery, plastic stick with plastic wisps at the end.

“We cannot stir the brew with this contraption.” Cinnabar sighs, too weary to snap.

“Sorry, I thought it was pretty, so I...” She doesn’t bother to finish.

“Oh, I’ll do it.” Vervina volunteers, sounding quite unenthusiased.

“No, I’ll...” Deselda is cut short.

Aurora steps forward with her wooden broom in hand. “I can do it,” she says. Her eyebrows are kneaded into a prayer-like configuration.

“Aurora,” Cinnabar says, “are you sure you are ready for such a task? You must actually ride the broom, you know.”

“I’ve been practicing!”

“Very well,” says Cinnabar.



“Wait, what?” Deselda’s mouth drops. “She’s not a graduate!”

“We shall let Aurora try.” Cinnabar has decided.

“She will try,” Cortexia and Arabella say in agreement.

Aurora feels taller; her fingertips tingle; her broom bristles twirl.

Before Aurora can even step toward the cauldron, Arabella shoves the warty palm of her hand in Aurora’s face. “Halt!” she says.

Aurora doesn’t breathe; has her grandmother changed her mind already?

“Your wand, for safe keeping.”

Aurora takes the wand from her pocket, gives it to Arabella, takes one step and—“Stop!”

Aurora freezes.

“Your cloak,” Arabella says, securing its hem to the girl’s belt. “Ok,” Arabella says while fussing a bit more with Aurora’s cloak. “Ok, you’re off. Be careful.”

“Don’t forget to write,” Deselda says, smirking.

“Be sure to buckle up,” Vervina says.

“Good idea!” Arabella waves her wand and a seat belt appears and snaps in place, fastening Aurora to the broom. The cousins giggle. Aurora just ignores them. She takes one step, stops, and looks at Arabella. Aurora’s eyebrows curl like question marks.

“Yes; yes—go ahead.” Arabella pats her on the head and then waves her wand at the cauldron. A stairway that reaches the pot’s rim appears.

Just as she steps forward with her broom, Juniper leans in. “A good luck charm,” she says dropping something into her cloak’s pocket, then wiping her hand against the side of her own cloak.

“Wow, thanks.” She looks up at Juniper, such gratefulness in her expression. “But I can’t take your special brooch; you just got it,” Aurora says, reaching toward her pocket to return the prized possession.

Juniper takes her hand in hers. “No, no—don’t worry; take it for tonight. I’ll use it the next equinox.” Juniper’s chest feels somewhat tight and hollow, but she manages to smile at her cousin.

As Aurora climbs on her broomstick, Cortexia turns to Juniper. “I think your act of kindness is a greater badge of honor than a mere tarantula brooch. Well done, Juniper.”

“Well done.” Arabella adds and nods in agreement.

Cinnabar beams at her daughter, Juniper. The pride that emanates from her expression is tangible—a purple and magenta glow emerges from Cinnabar’s being and swirls toward Juniper. When the glow reaches Juniper, it does not go through her but divides and streams around her and into the thicket. The purple and magenta essence engulfs the creatures there. And when they inhale this radiating energy, they cannot help it—they dance. The rabbit hops atop the fox; the fox joins hands with the possum; the bat clutches a tree branch with its hooked claws and swings itself up and over, up and over, ‘round and ‘round. The owl’s head spins with each whooha it hoots.

And of course you already know Arabella would morph into some weird beast and join the creature party if she could, but she is busy right now—her eyes are glued on her granddaughter Aurora. Stirring a cauldron’s brew is not as easy as it sounds.



Chapter Four

Brouhaha Is No Laughing Matter

Aurora clings to the top of her broom, which is standing upright in the bubbling pot. Her legs are wrapped around the handle, and her hands grasp the top of the broomstick. Steam is rising from the bubbling concoction. Aurora takes a quick peek below at the boiling brew and then quickly looks away; golden-orange bubbles percolate below her, reminding her of the time she visited that volcano in Iceland. It's a good thing she's a witch rather than a human, or she'd feel really stupid right now—given the way she looks. Her hair is tucked so tightly into her cloak that she nearly looks bald. And with its hem attached to her belt, her black cloak is billowing, making her look more like a black pumpkin than a witch.

“Now Aurora, if you feel dizzy or faint, hurry and leap away so you do not fall and boil with brew.” Cortexia tries to give the best advice she can think of.

When the cousins hear Cortexia's remark and look at each other, their eyebrows dance across their foreheads.

“Mother, you're going to scare her.” Cinnabar mutters and then gives an extra big smile to Aurora. Cortexia cringes and bites her long yellow fingernails. Cinnabar bats her mother's hand. “Nasty habit,” she reminds Cortexia.

“Is your cloak's sash tight enough?” Arabella's eyelashes are trembling as she simply stands there—not doing anything to steady her granddaughter. She must be crazy to permit her little Aurora to hover over a churning brew that sits atop a blazing fire.

“Yes.” Aurora hollers and grits her teeth. “Everything's fine—ready to stir.”

“Is your hair securely tucked into your cloak?” Cortexia asks.

Deselda cups her perfectly scalloped black lips. “Are your eyebrows itchy?”

Vervina giggles and acts awake for the first time that evening. “Is the sweat about to run into your eyes? Do you feel like you have to sneeze?” she asks.

“Can I just start?” Aurora says as she, together with her broom, no longer wait for permission but begin to rotate in the pot. Slowly, she and the broom move along the cauldron's inner edge. As she stirs, the ingredients unite, and the golden slosh froths with glee. Aurora then moves slightly inward and circles the pot, now picking up speed. The broom's bristles lightly sweep the base of the cauldron.

What's all the fuss, she thinks. They act as if this is so hard. Her chest inflates a bit. She gains momentum.

“Wow, Aurora!” Cinnabar says.

“You're doing great!” Cortexia says.

“Be careful, Aurora,” Arabella says.

Aurora accelerates. Her cousins stand there gawking. Cinnabar, Cortexia, and Arabella have never had such large eyes—bulbous globes so large they seem to shrink the size of each face. Aurora sees their expressions and takes it up a notch. She whirls to where their faces become somewhat blurred. The bubbles jump. The brew is popping and something is pinging—such wonderful sounds to her witchy ears. The brew below looks more vibrant than ever. Instead of just gold, there's a neon



green

swirling beneath and now a fluorescent pink. The faster she whorls, the more popping and pinging—the more vibrant the glow. Now there's radiant orange that is whirling inside the brew.

So fun, she thinks. I'm really good at this. Aurora has never felt such a haunting thrill. “Watch this!” She decides to try it one-handed. And when she lets go, everyone emits a witchy gasp—including the dragon—including her cousins. Now a witchy gasp is not like a human gasp. Well, it is like it, but not much, because a witch's honest-to-spirit gasp is one that makes a school window rattle, or a school bell ring, or a teacher's wig fly. So when they all gasp at once—you can imagine the result. Aurora spins, she whirls, she gyrates like a food processor. No, that's not fast enough—like a tornado. She spirals so fast that she and her broom blow a socket and end up in the trees—stone-hard trees with bull-horned branches—slithering branches that snake outward into venomous points—dagger-like points that long to snatch their prey and thread them like popcorn on a Christmas tree. That's a fairly big OUCH.

There's not the slightest cackle; not one spidery eyelash moves; there's no flutter of chin hair. All eyes are peering into the thicket, searching for Aurora—all eyes but Juniper's. Her eyes are indeed widened with dread, but they are aimed at her cloak as she pats down her pockets, searching for something. Seconds later she has stopped her frantic hunt and has joined the others, gazing into the trees. But her lips are resting sweetly on her face; her eyes are peering with a steady calm.



Chapter Five

A Fox-Forbidden Flight

“Aurora!” the elders cry.

Deselda, Vervina, and Juniper stand gaping, forgetting to breathe.

Aurora does not answer. All they hear is the breaking of twigs. Then a slight whimper.

“That was some stirring you did, Aurora.” Deselda is smiling as she hollers up into the thick, black foliage.

“Hush, Deselda.” Cinnabar gives her daughter a sharp look.

“What?” she says, wondering what she’s now done.

“My hair—stuck.” Aurora speaks, and instantly everyone remembers to breathe.

“Valco, Sham—to the tree!” Cinnabar points first at Cortexia’s crow and then Arabella’s owl.

Before the birds lift their wings for flight, Arabella is raising her arms to her sides and over her head.

Once more—downward, then upward, her black cloak flowing, cascading, altering—she is a raven with an oily black plumage stretched outward. Her massive wings glint as she lifts, whooshing through the night to Aurora. Arabella, queen of the ravens, reaches the tree before Valco and Sham. When they reach Aurora, they find her long blond hair entwined with the gnarled branches. Together, Arabella and the birds work to untie the knotted locks.

Before the others can wave their wands and climb a stairway, Arabella has lifted Aurora from the tree. Her beak is clamped tightly around Aurora’s gown and cape. The force of Arabella’s beating wings bends the tree backward and whirls its leaves, showering the witches below. A shower of debris pings against the rocks on the forest floor beneath them.

As soon as Aurora is placed on the mossy earth, she looks up at her family who is hovering over her. “Is it time to sweep the brew upward? Can I come?”

Cortexia chuckles and Cinnabar smiles. “No,” Cinnabar uses her long, green fingernails to comb through Aurora’s hair, “not for you, little fox.”

“This is true. You must rest,” Arabella says as she returns to form.

Aurora sinks inward and becomes concave.

“A cunning fox as you will someday long to rest from flight—to break from service and place your claws in the mossy earth,” Cortexia says, tucking a lock of Aurora’s hair behind the ear.

Aurora has no idea what Cortexia means, but she knows she has said something kind.

Vervina gets a devious look and turns to Deselda. She reaches up and begins combing through Deselda’s hair with her nails. “Oh, Little Fox,” she mimics Cortexia. The two girls giggle. “Hey, you’ve got sprinkles in your hair, you nitwit.”

“Uh,” Deselda examines Vervina’s snaky locks. “You do too,” she says. The girls shake their heads, and the tiny bits of candy fling right, left, and directly into Juniper’s face.

“Hey,” she complains, batting away the debris, causing something to fall out of her cloak’s pocket.

“Hey, yourself,” Deselda eyes Juniper.

“I thought you gave that to Aurora,” Vervina scoffs.

Juniper says nothing.

“Ooh,” Vervina reaches out to comb through Juniper’s hair, “You little fox.”



Juniper snatches up her brooch and stuffs it back into her pocket.

“Come, my daughters!” Cinnabar bellows while turning Raptor’s tail to the left to switch off his furnace. She then snatches her broom. Her daughters do likewise. Juniper will borrow Arabella’s broom this evening, no plastic, glittery artificial anything for work such as this.

As Arabella leads Aurora into the house, Aurora turns to watch the witches ascend their brooms. Their beady eyes are aflame with desire; their cloaks dance behind them; their brooms’ bristles tremble with eagerness.

“Do not worry, Aurora,” Arabella says as they enter the house. She abruptly stops Aurora in the entryway and whisks her around to look at her. Her cloak whooshes as it whirls; there is a soft scattering sound, like that of a rainstorm’s first gentle taps. “You are a skilled rider; you will fly with us soon.” She adjusts Aurora’s cloak as she gazes into her granddaughter’s face. Aurora’s eyes smile. As they maneuver through the dark house to the bedroom, they can hear the whisper of the witches’ brooms lifting, and then a hiss as the brooms sweep through the air. Forest leaves flutter into the house. Arabella hears a crunch beneath her feet as she walks through the house, but she doesn’t care. She’ll look at the mess tomorrow.

Meanwhile in the moonlit night, Cortexia cackles—her crowing call fills the night as she sweeps the air upward. Even Aurora’s cousins are smiling. Their smiles are large; a human would describe their smiles as terrifying—as the smile of a human who is rocketing down a roller coaster. The witchy gals are black sillouttes caught in the moonlight. They sweep the air upward, plunge, and sweep some more—lifting the evaporated brew higher and higher into the air. Soon it will reach the moon and the open mouth of the man within. He will inhale the brew’s autumn magic and by tomorrow evening, he will be looming his expanded face over Earth; his golden-orange hue summoning humans to gaze upward. For a while they will remember the Universe’s greatness; they will feel grateful for the portion of its greatness that resides within them.

Cloaks slapping the wind. Inky glitter whirling behind broom bristles. Cackles of elderly witches with nothing to hide.

“Yip, yip, hee, hee, ahh...” Cortexia cackles her joy as she soars. She feels nothing but bliss.

On nights like these, time is forgotten—at least for a brief, thrilling moment. Nothing haunts their minds, no duty weighs them or their brooms down. They soar; they dip; they twirl. Pure exhilaration. Time is erased—until the moon’s man yawns and his eyelids grow heavy—until the wily gals see the good old sun pushing her way onto stage. Then, the ladies know it is time to descend, time to go home. They will lay their heads on their spongy pillows and cocoon themselves in their spiderweb blankets; they will close their eyes—but they will not find much sleep. As always, their anticipation will battle their weariness. They’ll toss and turn, waiting eagerly for the next evening when they will peer into the night sky and see the work of their potion, the glorious golden harvest moon they have helped to create. It has always been this way.



Chapter Six

Lunar Lunatics

Something is terribly wrong. Nothing is right. All is cockeyed and cockamamie. And Cinnabar's pointy hat is spinning from the fury she exudes. Let me explain...

The next evening when the witchy gals gaze into the night sky, they do not see a harvest moon gazing downward; they do not hear the man within's whispering words of comfort. No. If only it were so. What they do see is complete lunar madness. Pure insanity.

"Spirits alive!" Cortexia and Arabella thunder when they peer upward the next night. Cinnabar alights and dashes into the night to see it with her own eyes. At first she is silent. But then, then—her cloak billows, her eyes become flames, her nails tear at the air. For when she looks upward, there is no golden harvest moon.

"Poisoned!" she screams. "The moon has been poisoned!"

Instead of a magical autumn gold there is neon green, a blinding pink, and fluorescent orange that swirl and flash within the moon.

And should you think that a psychedelic moon as this will only aid the witches in their goal to help humans look upward, well, then you are correct. However, when the earthlings do peer into the night, they are not filled with peace. They are not filled with serenity. They do not sigh and think of greatness. They become stark-raving mad. Lunatics. Seething, heaving imbeciles. Believe me—it's true.

Mothers stealing Halloween candy from children, men cowering in corners—clutching their child's teddybear and crying like babies. Teachers shredding rulebooks. Ladies sweeping fall leaves into the house instead of out. Adults mowing their living-room carpets. Cats are chasing dogs. Principals are hurling mud balls at parents. Waiters are serving customers dirty plates heaped with half-eaten, saliva-covered food. Customers are dancing on tables—some even dive into the kitchen's pot of hot soup. Children are wearing pumpkins on their heads—this could be normal, not certain. Windows are smashing, cars are bashing, computers are crashing. It's crazy I say—utterly crazy. The world's gone mad. It must be that potion. Has to be. Who did this? Who dares to mess with the universe?

So, the witches call to you—they plead. They shriek. If there be one sane human—just one who hears this cackling news, then perhaps there is hope.

Listen closely, Earthling: If madness has not yet overtaken you, there is a reason. You are needed. You must pinpoint the potion permuter; your deciphering powers will unearth the evidence and lead us to the one who bungled the brew. We must find this witch. For only she can reverse this crime against nature.



The Conclusion to A Well-Seasoned Brew

By Wendy Wright

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Chapter Seven

A Batty Battle

All pointy hats are tipped inward and toward the center of the wooden kitchen table. No one is speaking, although there is the occasional groan. All their effort, all their work—ruined. They have failed the Universe. Their hopes, their longings for their home behind the clouds—these feelings must be banished. Until the goal is met, this earthly cage they now live in is where they must stay. Cinnabar works to squish her indignation down into her toes, but it keeps blustering upward and out, lifting the table beneath them. Arabella is polishing the mole above her lip as she contemplates. Cortexia pulls on her thick, black chin hair.

“We must retrace our actions,” Cinnabar says, gritting her teeth.

Deselda stares downward, deep in thought; her finger traces the swirls within the table’s rough, raw wood. Juniper is so engrossed in thought that she, without realizing, is using the tip of her wand to carve holes into the wooden table, an ancient table around which witches visiting Earth have sat for thousands of years. Each time she digs her wand into the wood, sparks shoot from the wand and fly into her sisters’ faces. They do not notice. Intensity drips from their expressions. Thinking...Thinking...What went wrong?

“Vervina,” Arabella’s froggy voice has a sharpened edge, “did you add any of the painted toenails to the brew?”

Vervina stares at Arabella, her eyes enlarged; a spark shoots across her green pupils. “No.” Her tone is that of an ax plunging into wood.

“The sprinkles,” Deselda shudders, “in the yeasted cake—it’s my fault.” Her thick eyebrows become jagged arrows. “We spit them out.” She looks at her mother and pulls on the edges of her hat with both hands, shrinking into herself as she speaks. “...Spit them into the brew.” Her panicked self is fading.

“Deselda,” Cinnabar looks at her daughter; her voice is both hardened and smooth, like wadded spiderwebs. “Did you spit your cake into the brew?”

“No.” Demoralized, Deselda’s words twist out of her mouth; she continues to fade. “I turned from the cauldron.”

“We all did,” Arabella adds. “No sprinkles or cake were spit into the brew.”

“It was not you,” Cinnabar reaches toward her daughter, “who spoiled the potion.”

Deselda’s image brightens.

“The only difference we are certain of,” Cortexia speaks in a slow whisper, “is Aurora.” Cortexia’s soft eyes look at Arabella.

“It is true,” Arabella’s saddened voice is barely audible. She reaches out and cups Aurora’s arm with her knobby hands. “I take full responsibility,” Arabella says.

“I knew it!” Vervina hisses and looks at Juniper for support, but Juniper’s head remains lowered; she continues to carve the table with her wand. Now she is prying slivers of wood from its surface. Vervina jerks her attention toward Deselda instead.

Responding to Vervina’s signal, Deselda turns to her mother. “I told you she shouldn’t do it.” Deselda struggles to swallow; her lips crack with dryness.

“She is not a graduate,” Vervina adds through clenched teeth. “Now because of Aurora, we’re trapped in this earthbound house; I’m sick of it—I want to go home.”

Aurora is frozen. Is she to blame? She feels as if ice water has been thrown into her face. The weight of



everyone's stare pains her back and shoulders. If only she had memorized a vanishing spell.

"That means," Cinnabar sounds hesitant, "The only way to undo the potion is for Aurora to..."

"No." Arabella pounds the table. For a moment, her image flickers and transforms; her massive, black wings flutter; her sharp beak snaps. But when the witches blink, Arabella is returned to form. "I will not permit this."

Just then, the table shudders. All believe it is the force of Arabella. But when the pounding shudder is repeated, Arabella looks left and right. "What is it?" she asks.

The trembling boom occurs again and the floor vibrates. It travels through the floor and rocks the table beneath them; the walls of the house pulse; their brooms crash to the floor. They turn toward Cinnabar.

"It comes not from me," Cinnabar says.

"It's outside," says Deselda, jumping from the table. Vervina follows. They scurry to the window and pull back a corner of the velvet drapery to peer outside.

A fiery glow fills the black night as a torch-clasping mob stomps down the street, now just yards from the witches' house. The angry humans within the mob stare straight ahead; their lower jaws protrude, giving each a ferocious expression. Their pupils are dilated; their nostrils are flared. They seethe with self as they shout:

"We're fed up and will take no more.
On our (something) we declare war!"

"What?" Deselda asks. "They're declaring war on what?"

Cortexia and Arabella join the teens and peer through window, watching the horde of protestors.

Cinnabar shakes her head. "Doesn't matter; they just want to fight."

"They're shouting at different things," Cortexia answers Deselda's question.

"I heard 'government,'" Arabella mutters, still peering around the corner of the heavy velvet drapery.

Aurora tests the words. "On our government we declare war." She barely moves her lips.

"I heard some say 'school system,'" Vervina says. "And those people," she points toward the middle of the line, "are shouting about their relatives."

"They've lost their minds," Cortexia mutters.

"Soon," Arabella says, "they will lose their souls."

As the mob grows closer, its energy seems to intensify and a cold, prickling pain pecks at the witches' skin. They can physically feel the chaotic energy the crazed humans emit. It is a twisting and writhing force, a devilish confusion that is now struggling to burrow into the witches' minds. It taps on their ears and dances in their faces.

"I feel strange," Vervina tells Cinnabar.

"You must resist." Cinnabar looks into the eyes of each young witch.

"But," Cortexia croaks, "resist by releasing. Think on the Universe, and you will remain intact."

"Do not let their anger in," Arabella says still peering through the window, her eyes following a group of humans that break from the mob and scurry into the dense bushes growing along the side of the witches' house.

Arabella releases the drape and turns to face the others. The witches stare at each other. Their minds



scramble to latch onto a peaceful thought. Meanwhile, the thunderous pounding grows louder.

“We must do something.” Cinnabar’s face is torn with fret; she looks at Arabella, glances at Aurora, and then returns to Arabella for the answer.

“Fast!” Deselda adds. “We’ve got to hurry.”

Just as Arabella opens her mouth to speak, there is a sudden thud and then a shattering of glass. Cinnabar points toward the back of the house. Immediately, the witches snatch their wands and follow Cinnabar—all but Arabella and Aurora, for Arabella is now her raven self; her massive, black wings have scooped up her granddaughter. And before Aurora can even protest, she is being flown away from danger and to the room’s rafters—heavy wooden beams above their heads—where long ago Arabella had constructed a massive nest. She had prepared for a time such as this. Twigs and leaves fall from the nest and onto the kitchen table as the mob now stomps past the witches’ house. But not the entire mob.

Those humans who broke from the group are now pouring into the house. One, two, three, four, five—they keep coming—clamoring through a broken window like manic monkeys.

“Cease!” Cinnabar points her wand at one intruder who dashes across the hallway and into another room. But he doesn’t stop; instead, he picks up a chair and hurls it at her. She flicks her wand, freezing the chair midair. She flicks her wrist again, and the room’s drapes wrap themselves around the human chair-flinger. In a matter of three seconds, the beast is rolled tightly within the drapery like rice within a sushi wrap. But Cinnabar cannot rest; human maniacs are crawling everywhere—in the corners, behind the door, in the closet, under the bed. Soon Cinnabar is spinning in place, zapping flying objects and petrifying intruders—I mean literally petrifying them, as in turning them to stone.

Meanwhile in another room, lunatics are snatching items off dressers and throwing them at Cortexia who is flicking her wand left and right, flinging the objects backwards—straight toward the throwers. As the intruders are focused on ducking the returned objects, Cortexia makes her next move. She summons her pet spiders hidden within the room. Hundreds of long, furry legs scuttle toward her; their tiny steps down the walls and across the wooden floor chime like crystals of a chandelier. When they gather, Cortexia merely nods and—faster than a witch can cackle—the spiders’ silk thread bursts from their bodies like confetti escaping Christmas poppers. And just like that, the intruders are netted with sticky webbing, unable to escape. Having contained these human assailants, Cortexia then waves her wand at the broken glass. Immediately, the window is replaced.

But just as she is turning to exit the room, the corner of her eye catches movement outside the window. “No!” Cortexia shouts when she sees that there are more humans outside, and they are running toward the window, planning to throw themselves through the glass and into the house.

“Stop, you fools!” she commands. Cortexia must stop them before they hurt themselves—she waves her wand at herself and then leaps through the window—the window remains unbroken. Hurling forward, her body smacks the assailants and knocks them to the ground where they lie dazed yet unhurt. Unfortunately and too bad for them, the insane brutes do not remain there.

“Get the witch!” the villainous humans cackle as they struggle to stand; saliva drips from their ravenous mouths.

“Cease!” Cortexia shouts. “I wish you no harm!”

But it is no use; the empty places of their minds have been filled with poison. The savages lunge forward. Cortexia bends her stiff, knobby wrist, and their feet are magically cemented to the ground. And then, slowly moving her wand upward, she provides the fools a new perspective—for as her wand rises, the attackers’ bodies stretch upward, higher and higher. Do not stop, dear reader; you must imagine a greater



stretch—upward some more, higher, keep going... Stop. For now the attackers stand as tall as the trees. Their long bodies sway like balloon figures in the breeze.

At this point, most would smile, say ‘Mission accomplished, and then take a bow. But not Cortexia.

“Minds and souls together!” she commands as she raises both arms in the air and then swings them inward, freeing the humans’ cemented feet and moving their stretched, rubbery bodies together. Then whirling her wand in the air, she twists them ‘round and ‘round each other, braiding their bodies and forming the world’s largest human Twizzler. (Never have liked the taste of those ropey candies.)

All the while within the house, Deselda has been standing at the bathroom entrance, busily warding off another beastly human who is pitching handful after handful of toilet water at her. Typically, this wouldn’t be a problem for a witch with a wand. Unfortunately, however, she has lost hold of her wand. You see, when the brute hurled his first handful of toilet water, Deselda didn’t wave her wand like she should have. Instead, she covered her face and screamed. Of course, this means that she dropped her wand. The crazy human doesn’t realize that a wand has rolled within his reach.

“Melt, you witch—melt!” the fiendish human shrieks as he continues hurling toilet water at her; he then plunges his hands back into the toilet for more.

Deselda ducks and dodges each droplet—not because she will melt (water doesn’t really melt witches) but because who wants toilet water in the face? Disgusting. The brute definitely has the wrong idea about witches. She’s got to get that wand back.

While all this takes place, Vervina and Juniper have joined forces in the family’s gathering room and are battling lunatics there. Human imbeciles have found the witches’ brooms and are now trying to fly them inside the house. What screwballs. They’re climbing to the top of the refrigerator and jumping off; they’re running along the center of the dining table and diving off its edge. Of course, each dive or leap ends up in a bashing crash to the floor. But the nutcases don’t stop. They jump to their feet and start over. This time, two of the wannabe flyers, who are each equipped with a broom between the legs, charge at the walls—yes, the walls. Apparently, they think they will:

- 1) Run up its side
- 2) Fling themselves off its surface and
- 3) Launch themselves into the air.

Instead, they thwack straight into the wall—face first. They now stand molded to the wall’s surface like a hand pressed into wet cement, except it’s not wet, and it’s not soft; it’s hard, very hard.

“Well, that’ll hold those two for a bit,” Juniper scoffs.

“Our brooms,” Vervina whimpers. “They’re embedded in the wall.”

Juniper says nothing but—“Look out!”

Yet it is too late; just as Vervina looks up, a semi-flying broom and its human rider crash into her, knocking her across the room. She lies on the floor motionless. As for the broom driver—although he also plunges downward—when the broom’s nose makes contact with the wooden floor, he pulls up on the broom and skids across the room—unfazed.

“Whoowee!” he bellows, delighted with his landing.

Juniper is not one bit happy; she raises her wand high and then powerfully jerks it downward. A stream of shrieking bats pour from the wand’s end and zipper through the room. Their hungry mouths hang open, showering the room with bat saliva. Juniper lifts her wand and swirls it in the air. Suddenly, as if connected by one cord, the bats spiral together as one, forming a twisting vortex that whirls toward the human and lifts him



off the broom by each pant leg.

“Whoowee,” the crazed human shouts again as he hangs upside down from the whirlwind’s mouth. “Yahoo,” he bellows as the batty tornado twists him up the chimney and out of the house.

Juniper stands gaping at the fireplace. Is it over? Are they safe?

“Give that to me, you moron!” Deselda suddenly yells from somewhere.

Before Juniper can decipher where Deselda is, the toilet-water man runs into the room. He’s clutching Deselda’s wand and giggling fiendishly as he jerks the wand right, left, up, and down. Flames shoot from the wand and dance through the air, toward different objects in the house. But just when a flame opens its hungry mouth to take a bite of something, a deadly icicle plunges downward and shishkebabs the flame, dissolving it into oblivion. Juniper peers upward and sees Arabella in her nest, still in her raven form, although now she is a giant raven Pez dispenser with icicles rather than candy shooting from her mouth. She fires icicles upward into the air and then bats them downward with her wing. Her aim is perfect each time.

“Give me that!” Deselda shouts as she reaches out to snatch her wand from the man’s chubby, paw-like hand. She shouldn’t have shouted like that because the man turns, and this time he flicks the wand at her. Instantly, Deselda glows. Actually, it’s her hair that glows. Each knobby end of her long, twisted locks has risen and now opens its mouth to hiss, revealing a mouthful of flames.

“I told you to hand my wand over,” she says, smiling—thinking she’s got the best of the potty perp. But she smiles too soon, actually—because those fire-breathing locks of hers do not defend her against the crazy human—no, instead they bend their bodies inward and turn their faces toward her. In unison, they take a deep breath, and then in unison, they blow—not fire but water—stinky, yellow-brown water right into her face.

“Melt, you witchy!” the bathroom beast hollers.

Deselda opens her mouth to scream, but before she releases, she freezes—the flames are gone, and now an ice cube stands before them—one giant ice cube with Deselda frozen inside, her mouth open wide into a silent scream.

Ghosts alive—Arabella has had enough of this stinky character. Be assured, Mr. Pottymouth has stepped into the toilet now. When you hurt Arabella’s family, you hurt her. And, believe me, you best not mess with an old crow, especially an old crow like Arabella. She’s been holding back her force, allowing this attacker to continue existing—allowing the graduates to apply their skills. But now—now she feels ready to flush this toilet-troubler out. It’s time he tastes a bit of his own brew.

But just as Arabella prepares to fire (not sharp icicles, not anything sharp of course—well, must I spell it out? What do you think a giant raven would fire at someone who hurls toilet water?) Arabella squawks and squawks, sucking in air, stirring her system, working up a force.

“Grandma?” Aurora hopes Arabella is preparing to fly from the nest. It’s only right that she helps to battle the humans. If she’s the one who spoiled the brew and caused this disaster, then she must be the one who cleans the muck they’re in now.

“Stay put,” Arabella squawks to Aurora.

And then Arabella begins to change. Little by little her powerful raven form dissolves into itself. First her head, then her wings—as her image disappears on one end, a hose grows from the other. It is an Arabella-style hose: warty and knobby with surface cracks and tiny wrinkles, but it is thick and durable. This long black squirming hose slithers downward toward the toilet lover who now faces Juniper.

Giggling like a foolish imp, he holds out the stolen wand before her, taunting her. Juniper is not sure what to do. What if he shoots flames at her bat spell? She cannot endanger a bat. What if he turns on Deselda



again? Does she remember any other spell to stop him? No need. Here comes Arabella. The witless human has no clue.

“It’s your turn to be scared, you witchy.” He snickers at Juniper.

Ever so smoothly and in complete silence, the hose continues to lower itself.

“What? The little witch doesn’t know what to do?” the crazed man titters, not sensing his approaching doom.

Suddenly, the hose begins to shudder; it begins to rumble. A force is churning within. The sides of the hose begin to bulge. The looney man pauses, pondering the source of the noise. Juniper’s lips curl; soon, this waterboy will be gulping his own brew. But then the hose’s rumbling stops. Everything stops, and just when things are about to get interesting too—because, wouldn’t you know, just when Arabella is ready to deliver a mighty blast, there is an enormous crash from above. Everyone looks up, even the hose. Its nozzle bends upward, peering at the ceiling where two human feet have broken through the roof, just above the nest where Aurora obediently sits. Hasn’t anyone ever heard of a front door?

“Get back here!” Cortexia’s yells from outside the house.

While Juniper gazes upward, the wand-stealer makes his next move. He begins thwacking things nearby with Deselda’s wand. “Haa!” he cries when he strikes a candelabra and it turns into a frog that sits within a puddle of scummy water.

Meanwhile, Aurora is busily fleeing the approaching intruder, whose boots will soon perch themselves in her nest. She’s got to get out of there. Thinking quickly, she swings herself over the nest’s edge and slides down the hose toward Juniper.

“Ooh, look what I can do!” the insane human chortles as he whacks a broom with Deselda’s wand, turning it into a giant slime sucker that begins slurping up the puddles of scum on the floor.

“Stop!” Aurora yells as she leaps from the hose and into the room.

“Oh, look—a baby witch,” the man laughs. “Whatcha gonna do, little witchies?” The man moves away from Deselda and toward the couch. Juniper begins turning her wand, preparing her bat spell, hoping he will not cast flames at the bats.

Meanwhile, above their heads, Arabella is busy. Her gassy hose self is thunderously rumbling. And then WHOOOOOOOSH—there’s a powerful explosion as the hose blasts the human who has dropped through the roof and into the nest. The human shoots out of the nest like a cannon ball; he propels through the roof’s opening, hitting the feet of another who is dropping into the house. Too bad the feet belong to Cortexia. Both the human and Cortexia hurl upward and tumble through the air. But it’s not over yet. You would think the humans would get a clue, but no. They keep coming. One after another tries to drop through the roof and into the house. Each time, Arabella delivers a mighty blast that sends them gurgling.

Juniper continues to stir the air with her wand, but she stirs in slow motion. She’s unsure if she should. The nutcase has got to move further away from Deselda before she casts her spell. And now, on top of everything else, she must worry about Aurora. Juniper inches forward, trying to wedge herself between Deselda and the crazy human. The madman notices.

“I’m tired of you crazy, spider-loving witches. You tarantula-loving weirdos.” He looks over at the green couch that is across the room and gets a hopeful idea. “You love what’s creepy? I’ll show you creepy,” he says, moving toward the couch.

“Here!” Aurora has her own sudden idea. She plunges her hand into her cloak’s pocket. “Use this.” A shocked look comes over her when her hand finds nothing there. She futilely twists her hand within the



pocket. A few sprinkles fall from the rip within the pocket's seam. "Where is it—I lost it!" Aurora wails. The madman turns to see what's happening. Aurora's panicking now, patting down her cloak.

"You crazy, spider-loving witches," the man says and then turns back to the couch.

Juniper's eyes suddenly widen; she realizes Aurora's idea—the man is scared of spiders. She reaches into her pocket and takes hold of her tarantula brooch, but it's too late. The madman strikes the couch, not once but three forceful times.

"Ha!" he smiles. "Look what I've done!"

The couch is no longer. Stretched across the room is an enormous crocodile. Two long fangs protrude from its closed mouth; the couch's clawed feet are now real claws—long, sharp claws that spread outward, ready for attack. Luckily, the croc's eyelids are closed.

It's too late for a tarantula scare. Juniper releases her grasp on the brooch and raises her wand to perform the only spell she remembers.

The insane human cannot take his eyes off the croc. "Beautiful," he whispers, gazing at the powerful creature before him, a hypnotized look in his eyes. Transfixed on the beast, the crazy man reaches out and runs his fingers down the croc's spine, petting his creation. Instantly, the croc's eyes open—of course they do.

One beady yellow eye looks up at Juniper. She can wait no longer; she must act. She raises her wand again and this time jerks it downward. Bats stream from her wand and zipper through the room. And as they do, their fluttering wings brush the scaly skin of the giant croc. The mighty creature's scales stiffen and lift.

"Juniper, stop. Get back!" Aurora screams and jumps in front of her, pushing her away from the crocodile.

Faster than a wand can whirl, the croc's mighty tail swings, bashing the man, flinging him into the wall across the room. The force is so great, so profound, that he bounces off the wall and into Aurora and Juniper. The witches scatter like bowling pins. While Juniper is flung into the kitchen, Aurora propels forward, into the croc's massive mouth where she lies rolled within the croc's tongue.

At last, Cinnabar rushes into the room. "Cease and Transform!" the expert witch commands, sending a stream of glowing energy directly into the croc's open mouth. The magical current swirls between each sharp tooth and floods the underside of its tongue; it misses Aurora entirely. In seconds, instead of being clamped within the jaws of a crocodile, Aurora is engulfed in the soft pillows of the couch. Seeing Deselda's frozen state, Cinnabar then touches the ice cube in which she is enclosed, and instantly, it liquifies.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa—disgusting!" Deselda finally unleashes her scream. "Toilet water," she gags, wiping her eyes.

Vervina lifts her head from the floor and grimaces.

"Vervina, are you well?" Cinnabar asks as she scurries to help Vervina up—all the while keeping an eye on the madman who is slumped in the corner. Slowly, Vervina is able to stand, although she does appear a bit wobbly. "My head," she says, rubbing her pulsing scalp. Her mother waves her wand, and a cold ice pack is suddenly wrapped around her forehead.

"And for you, you beastly human." Cinnabar turns to the madman. One look at Cinnabar and his arrogance melts: the witch's eyes look like daggers; each eyelash bends and twists like the writhing legs of a tarantula; her thick, black eyebrows zigzag across her forehead; her snaky locks lift and hiss; her cloak begins to billow.

"We protect humans." The words gurgle between her clenched teeth. "But you act not human!" As she raises her wand, the madman cowers.



But before she can react, a rocketing surge of water gushes forth in an eroding force. It flattens the madman against the wall. Thinking quickly, Juniper runs to unlatch the front door. The hose swivels and bends, aiming its force at the man's side. The insane toilet-water hurling man is promptly and properly blasted out the door; Juniper swings the door shut and latches its many deadbolts.

Is that it? The witches remain still, only their eyes swivel left and right, looking for the next catastrophe. Their wands are erect and ready. They freeze in position, waiting. They wait. Still waiting. What crazy human will attack next? Their minds hurtle, but their bodies remain motionless. Yet, nothing happens. At last—there is nothing. Only silence. But for the statuesque humans, petrified by Cinnabar, they are finally human-free. The witches look at each other and exhale; their shoulders drop; their wands rest at ease. The current battle is over. That's when Aurora begins to sob.



Chapter Eight

A Pocketful of Tears

“It’s all because of me.” Aurora covers her face as she cries. “I ruined the brew, and I,” she looks up at Juniper, “lost your tarantula brooch.” Again, Aurora covers her face in her hands; her hat deflates; her eyebrows spiral in confusion.

Continuing to wring the water from her locks, Deselda looks up at Juniper. “Show her,” she says.

“Show what?” Cinnabar snaps at Deselda.

“Don’t look at me.” Deselda steps backward and holds the palms of her hands in front of herself as she speaks. “I don’t know why she has it!” She then swivels sharply toward her sister. “Show her, Juniper.”

“Yea, little fox,” Vervina scorns, “Cough it up.”

Juniper hangs her head; her boots begin to sink through the wooden floor. Never has she looked so small. Slowly, she pulls the tarantula brooch from her cloak’s pocket and without looking upward, holds it out in the palm of her hand for all to see. No one speaks as the hose bends its nozzle toward Juniper’s hand to peer at the brooch. Juniper prepares to receive a punishing blast of water, but instead the hose yanks itself upward. In seconds, Arabella stands before Juniper, saying not a word.

Finally Cinnabar speaks. “What is this!” She steps closer to her daughter.

“Yeeheehheheee,” Cortexia zips through the rooftop’s hole. Directing her broom with ease, she swivels around Arabella’s nest, somersaults around a rafter, and finally lands with a gentle sweep across the floor. A smile has overtaken her face. “Glorious battle be won outside! How is it in...” But she stops mid-question and looks at her family. The room is permeated with anxiety. Cortexia’s bristles twirl, those on her chin as well as those on her broom.

“Juniper,” Cinnabar’s voice does not miss its aim, “what say you?” The mother’s purple lips twist as she waits for the answer. The spider that nests within the scallops of her ear scuttles partially outward to peer at Juniper. Everyone stares at the tarantula brooch in Juniper’s hand.

“I did it.” Juniper slowly raises her head to look at her mother.

“But why?” Cortexia speaks in a whisper; her chest feels tight and her shoulders sag.

Juniper’s mouth is dry; her lips stick to her teeth.

Aurora looks up as she rubs her eyes. “I didn’t do it?”

“Tell them,” Vervina’s eyebrows lift; she doesn’t take her eyes off Juniper.

“It wasn’t fair!” Her voice grows louder with each word. She stuffs the brooch back into her pocket. “We worked hard to graduate; we’re the ones studying— and—and you let Aurora do it all.” The words gush out.

“All?” Cortexia questions and then bangs the end of her broom against the floor. “You did not complete any part of the brewing?” Cortexia’s eyes now flicker with flame.

“She indeed played a part in this brew,” Vervina says—the corner of her mouth curls upward.

But when Cinnabar glares at Vervina, the smile fades. “It’s because of the spoiled brew you were hurt, Vervina; do not speak foolishly.” Cinnabar’s eyes storm. She folds her fingers inward and digs her nails into the palms of her hands, trying to stop them from growing into sharpened claws. “What have you done?” she asks Juniper through gritted teeth.

Juniper’s lower lip begins to tremble.

“Look on the floor,” says Vervina.



“Sprinkles.” Arabella is the only one who dares to speak. She places her boot over a group of sprinkles and presses downward. The crunch is slight, but it is enough.

“That’s what I heard last night—when I took Aurora inside.” Arabella stares at the floor as the data connects. “There were sprinkles on the floor.” Arabella’s mind races backward—walking Aurora into the house, swishing her around to speak with her, the soft pinging she heard but failed to really notice. “Aurora, let me see your pocket.”

“There’s a hole,” Juniper mutters without looking at anyone.

“You knew there was a hole? You purposely put sprinkles in it?” Cinnabar’s whole body begins to shake with fury. Her eyelashes skitter; the knobby ends of her locks awaken and hiss.

“That’s why the brew turned pink, green, and orange, the same as the sprinkles,” Deselda realizes.

Cortexia’s eyebrows zigzag across her forehead. “When she stirred the brew—when Aurora went too fast stirring the brew—they fell inside.”

“Why!?! Why would you do this, Juniper!?” Cinnabar digs her growing claws deeper into her palms.

“Aurora this—Aurora that. I know I’m not like her.” Juniper looks at the floor. “I know she’s better,” she snarls. Her face twists with pain and disgust. Suddenly, Juniper lifts her head and glares at her mother. “It’s not fair!”

Aurora is the one who now looks frozen; she cannot believe what she has heard. “But that’s how I feel,” Aurora whispers to Juniper, “about you.”

The witches stare at each other.

“Fair?” Cinnabar screeches. “Fair? Where did you learn such a foolish word?”

Juniper pulls back; her features recoil.

“Is it fair that Aurora has not a mother with her? Is it fair that Cortexia and Arabella grow old? Is it fair that we must help those who attack us?” Cinnabar takes a breath and exhales slowly. She stares at Juniper without a word—she stares until she sees her daughter.

“Can not you feel your greatness within?” Arabella finally speaks.

Juniper lifts her head to her aunt.

“Cease this jealousy—all of you!” Cinnabar commands.

“But...” Juniper does not finish.

“Artificial—” Arabella says, turning to look at each young witch. “Again you are duped.” The creases in Arabella’s face deepen, revealing her pain.

Cortexia looks at her honorary cousin, Arabella. “So true, my dear—awfully wonderful—cousin,” she says, resting a thin gnarled hand on Arabella’s shoulder. Her hand then drops, and she sighs with exasperation. “I thought you and I banished this diseased weed from the family long ago, yet here it grows again.”

“This time entwining the minds of our granddaughters,” Arabella adds.

The aged witches look at one another with a sad, knowing smile.

Cortexia then turns and takes Juniper’s chin in her shaky hands. “What you truly feel is not jealousy but fear, fear of being small.”

“Foolishness!” Cinnabar hisses through her fangy teeth; her hot breath ripples across the witches’ cloaks and pushes a wooden chair across the floor until it bangs into the wall. “Now you season your young, naïve minds with artificial thoughts!” she growls and raises her wand, revealing her long, sharpened claws. “We are each called. Enough nonsense—come, I know what we must do.”



Chapter Nine

Magic

A heaviness weighs the air; it burdens the branches above them, bending them downward. Even the forest leaves hang, twisted and lifeless. Every few moments, the man in the moon utters a low, hollow-sounding moan that travels through the night. The Earth is bathed in a sickening color, like that of a child's glass that is filled with a mixture of all the machine's sodas.

"Raptor." Cinnabar's voice is solid.

The dragon lifts its head and emits another jet stream of fire. Within seconds the brew is bubbling. Steam rises from the cauldron and coats the witches' faces, forming tiny beads of water on their foreheads. As the water droplets work their way down and over the witches' savage brows, their snaky eyelashes reach out, drawing water into their mouths. The dampness draws snails to the tips of the surrounding leaves where the moisture collects. Valcro and Sham dive back and forth scooping up the snails with their sharp beaks; a slight crunch is heard as they munch on the delicacy.

"Valcro," Cortexia holds her knotted finger out to her crow.

"Come," Arabella calls to her owl.

The pets obey. They flap their wings excitedly as the old gals place them on a shoulder.

"Juniper—Aurora—take your places," Cinnabar instructs.

Standing on either side of the cauldron, the young witches face each other. Their lashes pull inward; their eyebrows flatten against their faces; their hat tips collapse inward. They stare at one another through the thick of the steam.

"Let us begin," Cinnabar states.

"Wait!" Juniper refuses to hold it in any longer. "Here," she says, reaching across the brew to Aurora. But Aurora doesn't move—she just stares at the tarantula brooch in Juniper's hand.

"Take it," Juniper shakes her hand at Aurora.

"But,"

"No, take it," Juniper's voice is firm and anxious.

Aurora, looks at Juniper. Slowly, she reaches out. And then a strange thing happens—stranger than eyelashes hissing, stranger than eyebrows zigzagging or hat tips spinning—something that the witches have never seen before. Just as Aurora begins to take the brooch from Juniper's hand, the brooch begins to glow—first a bluish purple, then a reddish pink, until next it swirls into a golden-orange. It is a syrupy glow that stirs within the tarantula's abdomen like heated honey. The glowing substance travels down each leg of the tarantula brooch and then out. Juniper's and Aurora's outstretched hands fill with the luminous entity. It travels up their arms, and as it does, the brooch suddenly squirms—the tarantula brooch is alive. As the glowing essence moves up Aurora's arm, the tarantula follows. It climbs and climbs. The higher it climbs, the wider Arabella's eyes grow. No one knows what will next happen, but no one makes it stop. The tarantula brooch skitters after the glow until it reaches Aurora's head and begins burrowing into her blonde locks. All at once—and why now, no one knows—those watching are able to voice their amazement—they gasp. Immediately, the trees bend backward; the leaves swirl; the forest creatures somersault into the foliage. And just like that, the magic ceases. The glow vanishes. Everything is once again bathed in a sickening hue.

For a moment, no one speaks.

It is Deselda who breaks the silence. "Let us add the ingredients," she says, suddenly looking much older.



Vervina says nothing but walks over to her mother and grips one corner of the page on which the recipe is written, helping the paper to remain still.

Cinnabar calls out the first ingredient, “Three bowlfuls of sunflower pollen—divided.”

Juniper and Aurora each lift a container and slowly pour the ingredient into the cauldron’s frothy pond water. The others analyze their every move.

Vervina reads the next ingredient. “One hundred yellowed toenail clippings of elderly men,” she says, and together Juniper and Aurora sprinkle them into the brew.

“Deselda—the honey,” Cinnabar says, and Deselda brings each a portion of the ant-honey mixture.

When it is finally time to stir, it is Juniper who climbs into the cauldron and clutches the broom, Aurora’s broom.

And then, together, the witch family takes flight to sweep the sky. This time, Aurora rides. It is her first, true broom sweep, but it is not as she always dreamed—a thrilling flight that displays her power that makes her cousins take notice. No. She rides with Arabella, tethered to her grandmother’s broom, held safely within another’s care. But she rides. It is a serious, hope-driven and passionate sweep upward. Through the night, the witches sweep the potion to the moon. And when the sweeping stops, there is no other task but to wait.



Chapter Ten

Rapt and Ready

Was it that the witches worked together? Was it—as some claim—because the gals were finally quiet, submissive, and without a cackle as they worked? Was it the blonde strand of hair that fell into the brew? Or did something else take place when the potion was brewed? You tell me. Hurry, tell. Tell before the humans find their voice. Explain while they are yet unable to speak. Speak while only the soft, hushed sound of “Ahh” is sung. Clarify before the earthly creatures cease from lifting their chins to the heavens—drinking in the magical harvest moon.

And yes, I hear your cackling. “Science, not magic, brings us this immense golden globe,” you say. Science—magic; magic—science. It is all the same. Just look up; study the Universe. Then you will know.

Arabella, Cortexia, Cinnabar, Deselda, Vervina, Juniper, Aurora—all witches inhale deeply. All hats are tipped backward, both smooth and warted. All chins are raised. Never have the witches seen such a moon, filled with such a joyous man. He nearly swallows the Earth. And never have they seen the moon clothed in such a color. The deepness of the orange, tinged with a blush of pink and encircled by a halo of bluish purple.

“Yeeheeeeheeee,” Arabella suddenly releases her emotion.

“Yeeheeeeheeee,” the others echo, their fangy teeth glinting in the light.

The man in the moon beams back.

The Earth is quiet; its creatures are still.

As the gals stand side by side, gazing upward, a sudden chill blows through the trees and rustles the ladies’ cloaks. Arabella and Cortexia shudder and wrap their boney arms around themselves.

“Ahh, the season is changing,” says Cinnabar.

“Yes,” Arabella speaks in a bubbly whisper, “and soon the heavens will summon my warty self to a new season as well.” She continues to gaze at the moon while speaking; a gentle smile is on her twisted, warted face.

Cinnabar tries to force herself to swallow, but she feels as if she has swallowed a hornet’s nest. Cortexia reaches up and pats Arabella’s shoulder; they smile at one another.

“What do you mean?” Vervina asks.

But before Arabella can speak, Cinnabar blocks the answer. “Let’s not think of this tonight. Come,” she says, taking her Juniper by the arm, ushering everyone into the house’s gathering room.

Late into the night—after most humans have tucked themselves into bed—the witches remain huddled in the gathering room. The roof has been sewn shut with spider thread; the brooms have been hung on the wall’s clawish hooks; the candelabra has been lit; the sprinkles have been flushed down the toilet.

They must prepare; the season is transforming. Soon the witches will put away their summer garb. They will retrieve their thicker cloaks from storage trunks and peel away the protective film of snail-luminous in which they are kept. Cinnabar’s pet spider doesn’t wait for the season to fully change. As Cinnabar sits wrapped in a blanket of moss, she feels her pet spider emerge from the scallops of her ear where it lives during the warmer months. She smiles when she feels the tickle of its tiny feet move across her cheek. It has packed its belongings and is moving into its cozy, winter home. Cinnabar flares her nostril, welcoming her pet. It hunkers down and wraps itself within the warmth of her soothing nose hairs. Still smiling, she gazes into the



flames. “Good Raptor,” she says.

On nights such as this, when a chill stirs the air with its frosty wand, Raptor is invited indoors. His scaly tail wags excitedly as he opens his mouth and blows flames into the fireplace.

Deselda curls her legs into her body and tucks the mossy blanket below her chin; it is promptly snatched off her and tossed across the room. No one says anything—except for Cortexia—well, she doesn’t say anything; she just snickers. Deselda grabs another blanket and tucks it more tightly around herself. Moments later, when Cinnabar opens a book to read, the book is snatched from her hands and flung across the room—into Vervina’s hands instead. Cortexia cackles.

“Uh, Grandma,” Aurora says, “Why are you being such a pest?”

Arabella does not answer; instead she raises her nose—her long, long trunk of a nose—and shoots a blast of water at a lone sprinkle that escaped earlier and is now cowering in the corner. As soon as the jet of water lifts the sprinkle, the jet stream ceases. Before the sprinkle can fall to the floor, Raptor fires a flaming shot at it and blows it to smithereens.

“Uh, Arabella—” Juniper says, “Why transform into something so uncomfortable? I mean, big elephant, small room?”

Cinnabar exhales. “She’s trying to make us talk about something.” Cinnabar straightens and stretches her back. “Ok, Arabella. We’ll listen, if we must.”

The massive elephant raises its trunk and trumpets as its form fades and Arabella reappears.

“Dear family,” Arabella says, scanning the room of witches, stopping when her eyes meet Aurora’s. “I have seasoned many a brew. My cauldron is filled.”

“What do you mean, Grandma?” Aurora asks.

Cinnabar waits.

“The season is changing. Spices do not last forever. It will not be long until this important ingredient will need replacing,” Arabella says, using her twisted, bony finger to point at herself, her eyes glinting.

“And what type of hat,” Cortexia tries to lighten the mood, “will you wear, dear cousin, when you are taken to the next dimension beyond the clouds?”

“I know many witches trade their black hats for white,” Juniper says, not fully understanding the impact of Arabella’s words—or perhaps—the sweet lightness in her words reveals that she does understand—even more fully.

“I bet you’ll wear the most sparkling white hat ever created, Grandma,” Aurora says, her words percolating with admiration.

“White, gold, pink, blue: I am not sure the hat I will be given, but knowing you, you will be able to spot my whereabouts regardless the hue.” Arabella smiles.



Chapter Eleven

The Heavens Declare

One day when the clouds turned black, when the heavens rumbled, tossed, and roared—that was the day that Arabella declared she needed a new adventure. Aurora hadn't thought much about her grandmother's words; her grandmother was known for her outlandish ideas. Take flight on a day when the clouds frothed and stirred like a boiling potion within a cauldron? Crazy. But Aurora knew her grandmother, and the witch family knew their Arabella. To her, navigating a lightning storm was like riding a roller coaster, only grander. At the time, it seemed so Arabella of her, so like her sneaky self, to choose this day—the day when Cortexia and Cinnabar were away on a short mission—to twirl with the twisting storm winds. Now, when Aurora thinks back, she realizes it was the day of her grandmother's goodbye.

“Do not be gone too long, Arabella,” Deselda had said. “I want your opinion on a new yeasted cake I have concocted.”

The look Arabella gave Deselda had made Aurora giggle. It had been an expression of contrast, one thick eyebrow curling into a question mark and the other forming an exclamation point, her mouth cringing as she remembered the taste of the neon sugar bits.

Arabella's reaction had made Deselda laugh too. “No, I promise—no sprinkles this time,” Deselda said, her eyes twinkling with delight.

“Excellent!” Arabella said with a bit too much enthusiasm. Her energy wasn't quite fitting the event, more than usual—even for Arabella. Aurora now remembers how everyone pretty much just ignored the way Arabella's over-the-top energy rattled Deselda's pots and pans. She remembers Vervina and Deselda giving each other a questioning look, but that's all. A lot felt different since the battle.

The more Aurora went over those final events, the more things fit together. Now when Aurora rifles through each detail of that day, she recalls that her grandmother's hug had been just a bit too long; she remembers how her grandmother had gotten so serious for a moment when she hunched over to look into her eyes. “Remember,” Arabella said softly, “brew your own concoction, Aurora. Add nothing artificial.”

How foolish Aurora now feels when she thinks about the answer she gave. “Don't worry, grandmother,” Aurora remembers whispering. “I'm sure Deselda knows how to bake the yeasted cakes this time. But I'll make sure.” Aurora now knows her grandmother had not been talking about cakes, or food of any kind.

“Great,” Juniper sulked just before Arabella took flight. “While you're outside riding the wind, we'll be stuck in here with nothing to do but listen to Deselda rattle on about her baking.”

“Ah,” Arabella had seemed happy to respond, “I see someone who needs to start using her cleverness. The way you strategize; the way you surprise others—use that skill, my dear.” Arabella's froggy voice had a depth not typically heard; it echoed in the kitchen. “When things are mundane, clever witches like you know to morph.”

And then, Aurora recollects, Arabella risked a hiss when she leaned over and plucked the earbud from Vervina's ear. “Don't forget to play your music for others at times.”

The words had seemed a bit syrupy for her grandmother. However, when Aurora thinks back, it all makes total sense—the way she gave advice, the way she gave each witch a hug before setting off.

“Remember Aurora...” she yelled over the thunderous rumbling as her broom lifted just outside the door, her fangy, twisted teeth glinting, her wand pointing upward, “Chin up! Chin up, Aurora!” The clouds had seemed to emphasize all her grandmother's corny drama because with those words they lit the heavens and roared in agreement. Arabella then pointed her broom toward the sky, but before racing upward, she turned to them and bellowed, “Chins to the sky, dear witches!” And then she was off.



Chapter Twelve

Molting—Morphing

A strange hollowness has been in Aurora's chest for weeks. It's like there is a chunk missing from the base of her frozen beetle-mash cone, and all the good stuff is leaking out the bottom. A heavy hush fills the house right now; everyone is moving so carefully—like they're tiptoeing on the exoskeletons of arachnids. In fact, ever since Arabella left, family members have been flying their brooms inside the house, that way their boots do not clonk against the wooden floor. Flying indoors is something Cinnabar usually forbids. Typically, Aurora would join in such unusual fun. But for some reason, she has not felt like flying. In fact, she hasn't felt like doing much of anything at all. Mostly, she has been lying in bed, counting the spiders on her ceiling and watching each day turn to night. Right now, the only thing she wants to do is what she is doing, curling up in bed with her mossy covers pulled over her head. If only that stupid tapping noise would stop—then maybe she could sleep the day away.

Tap; tap; tap. Aurora groans and covers her head with her pillow.

TAP; TAP; TAP. Suddenly, Aurora wonders. "Grandma Arabella?" she gasps and flings the covers off, sitting up.

Tap; tap. Aurora deflates. "Sham," she says, staring at Arabella's owl that is perched outside her window.

The owl's massive eyes look deeply into Aurora's; slowly, he leans over and gives one more gentle tap on the glass. He looks so lost. Her grandmother's owl belongs with her.

Aurora springs from her bed and scurries to open the window to let Sham inside. As she lifts the window, the owl flutters his wings happily and then hops onto Aurora's shoulder. Suddenly, a light, lacy snowflake dances downward and lands on Aurora's nose. Aurora lifts her chin and peers upward. The cold air stings her cheeks as she squints into the sky where puffy clouds slowly drift.

Aurora is about to close the window but then stops. What kind of cloud is that? One white cloud is lengthening and twisting. Aurora watches as the cloud—and I'm telling you; you might think this part is fiction—BUT IT ISN'T—the cloud moves, twists, and divides until it forms a word in the sky. Staring upward, as clear as the warts on Cortexia's face, is the word "SEE."

See—? What does it mean? *Does* it even mean something? And then something even more mesmerizing happens: The long perfectly swirled "S" tips sideways and connects with the other letters, it transforms before her. When the movement stops, Aurora gasps—an elephant. "It's an elephant!" Aurora shouts. "Hey, everyone, come and see the..." Aurora is unable to finish the word because the elephant in the sky suddenly raises its trunk and then blows. A storm of snowflakes are blasted into Aurora's face.

"Grandma!" she yells. She wipes the icy flakes out of her eyes. And she smiles.