

Seriously Wicked



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True Witchery

I was mucking out the dragon's garage when the witch's text popped up on my phone.

BRING ME A BIRD

"Ugh," I said to Moonfire. "Here we go again." I shoved the phone in my jeans and went back to my broom. The witch's ringtone cackled in my pocket as I swept.

Moonfire looked longingly at the scrub brush as I finished. "Just a few skritches," I told her. "You know what the witch is like." I grabbed the old yellow bristle brush and rubbed her scaly blue back. My phone cackled insistently and I pulled it out again.

HANG SNAKESKINS OUT TO DRY

FEED AND WALK WEREWOLF PUP

MUCK OUT DRAGON'S QUARTERS

DEFROST SHEEP

Done all those, I texted back. *Been up since 5 AM.* Out loud I added, "Get with the program," but I did not text that.

The phone cackled back immediately.

DONT BE SNARKY

THESE ARE CHORES BY WHICH ONE MUST

UNDERSTAND TRUE WITCHERY

NOW BRING ME A BIRD

"Sorry, Moonfire," I said. "The witch is in a mood." At least she hadn't asked me about the spell I was supposed to be learning. I stowed the brush on a shelf and hurried out the detached RV garage and back into the house. Thirteen minutes to get to

the bus stop, to get to school on time. I threw my backpack on as I crossed to the witch's old wire birdcage sitting in the living room window. Our newly acquired goldfinch was hopping around inside. The witch had lured him in with thistle seeds. "C'mon, little guy," I said, and carried the cage up the steps of the split-level to the witch's bedroom.

The witch was sitting up in bed as I knocked and entered. Sarmine Scarabouche is sour and pointed and old. Nothing ever lives up to her expectations. She is always immaculate, with a perfect silver bob that doesn't dare get out of place. Her nightgown is white, the bed is white, the sheets, the walls—everything. She spritzes her whole room with unicorn hair sanitizer every morning so it stays spotless. It's deranged.

"Put the bird on the table, Camellia," she said. "Did you finish this morning's work sheet?"

I plopped down on a white wicker stool, fished out three sheets of folded paper from my back pocket, and passed the top one to her. "The Dietary Habits of Baby Rocs—regurgitation, mostly."

Her sharp eyes scanned the page. "Passable. And the Spell for Self-Defense? Have you made *any* progress?"

The question I had been dreading. I unfolded the second sheet from my pocket while the witch studied me.

Because here's the thing: trying to learn spells is The Worst.

In the first place, spells look like the most insane math problems you've ever seen. Witches are notoriously paranoid, so every spell starts with a list of ingredients (some of which aren't even used) and then has directions like this:

Step 1: Combine the 3rd and 4th ingredients at a 2:3 ratio so the amount is double the size of the ingredient that contains a human sensory organ.

In this case, the ingredient that contained a human sensory organ was pear. P-ear.

Har de har har.

That's the only part I've managed to figure out, and I've been carrying around this study sheet for four months now.

The witch looks at these horrible things and just understands them, but then again, she's a witch. Which brings me to reason two why I hate this.

I'm *not* a witch.

Maybe I have to live with her, but I'm never going to be like her. There was no way I could actually work this spell, so Sarmine's trying to make me solve it was basically a new way to drive me nuts.

"Well, it's progressing," I said finally. "Say, what are you going to do with that bird? You aren't going to hurt him, are you?"

The witch looked contemptuously down her sharp nose at me. "Of course not. This is merely another anti-arthritis spell, which will probably work just as well as the last forty-seven I've tried." She drew out a tiny down feather from the white leather fanny pack she wore even in bed, clipped a paper clip on the end, and held it out to me. "Please place this feather in the cage." She picked up her brushed-aluminum wand from the bedside table.

"Isn't this a phoenix feather?" I asked as I obeyed. "I thought you couldn't work magic on those."

"But I can on a paper clip," she said. She touched her wand to a pinch of cayenne pepper from her fanny pack, flicked it at the cage, and the paper-clipped feather rose in the air. It stayed there, hovering.

I tried to remember what some long-ago study sheet had said about phoenix feathers. Very potent, I thought. Had a habit of doing something unexpected, like—

The feather burst into flame.

The goldfinch shot to the ceiling of the cage, startled.

"Watch out!" I said.

The paper-clipped feather levitated and began chasing the finch. The finch cheeped and darted. The flaming feather maneuvered until it was chasing the bird in tight clockwise circles.

"You said you weren't going to hurt it," I shouted, moving toward the cage.

"Back away," said the witch, leveling her wand at me. "I need sixty-three rotations of finch flight to work my spell."

I knew what damage the wand could do. The witch was fond of casting punishments on me whenever I didn't live up to her bizarre standards of True Witchery. Like once I refused to hold the neighbor's cat so she could permanently mute its meow, and she turned me into fifteen hundred worms and made me compost the garden.

But the finch was frightened. A fluff of feather fell and was ashed by the fire. Another step toward the cage . . .

The witch pulled a pinch of something from her pack and dipped her wand in it. "Pins and needles," she said.

"Pardon?"

"If at any time you start to disobey me today, random body parts will fall asleep."

"Oh, really?" I said politely. "How will the spell know?" One foot sneaked closer to the cage, down where the witch couldn't see.

"Trust me, it'll know," Sarmin said, and she flicked the wand at me, just as I took another step.

My foot went completely numb and I stumbled. "Gah!" I said, shaking it to get the blood flowing again. "Why are you so awf—?" I started to say, but then I saw her reach for her pouch and I instead finished, "er, so *awesome* at True Witchery?"

It's really amazing. It's taken me all this time to figure out just one ingredient in the self-defense spell."

The wand lowered. Sarmine eyed me. "Which one did you figure out?"

"Pear." I didn't say it very confidently, but I said it.

She considered me. I thought a smile flickered over her angular face. But the next moment it was gone.

Still, she did not raise the wand again.

I breathed and shook my foot some more. I might get to school on time.

"Camellia," she said, considering. Her manicured fingers tapped the white sheets as she studied me. Even in bed her silver chin-length bob was immaculately in place. "I am going to take over the city."

"Really," I said, with maybe too much sarcasm. I was still on edge about the poor finch, who was cheeping like a frightened metronome. But seriously, the witch was always coming up with new plans to take over the city. The last one involved placing a tank of sharks in the courthouse.

Her fingers tapped the wand but it did not lift toward me. She merely said, "Impertinence. Turn off your selective listening and hear me out. It's time we witches reclaimed the world and came out of hiding at last. I have the most magnificent plan yet to control the city. But first, I need a demon."

"A demon?" That was serious. "Don't you think you should go back to sharks?"

"A demon," said the witch firmly. "I shall put his spirit into the plastic mannequin in the basement. The scheme is perfect. I'm summoning him this very afternoon, so I need you to bring me two ounces of goat's blood to lock him into the mannequin."

She eyed me like I was going to complain about where to

find goat's blood, but goat's blood is *sooo* old news. I've got a supplier. I was more concerned about this demon nonsense. "Anything else?" I said. The pins-and-needles feeling was finally wearing off and I could stand on two feet again.

"Three fresh roses, a dried pig's ear, and two spears of rhubarb. Recite for me the properties of rhubarb, please."

Um. That was just on a study sheet a week ago. "Used for stiffening, sharpening, etching. So frequently used in blinding spells that it was once declared contraband by the Geneva Coven. Also good in pies," I said.

A fractional nod that meant approval. "And goat's blood?"

Hells. "Also good in pies?" I said.

An odd line of disappointment crossed her brow. "Camellia, you really have to learn this," she said. "All witches must be able to protect themselves."

I gritted my teeth against this ridiculous statement. No matter how often I reminded her I was never going to be a witch, it didn't make a dent. I was not going to waste another morning arguing. Especially not when the third sheet of paper in my pocket was my study sheet for today's algebra test, and I had had zero time to study it due to snakeskin-hanging and sheep-defrosting and everything else.

The witch took out two crisp twenties from her fanny pack and handed them to me. "Very well, you may go."

I took one step to the door, then turned. "Do you promise you'll release the finch as soon as he's flown far enough?"

A flicker of the eyelid that was the equivalent of a major eye roll. "Yes, Camellia. What use would I have for a goldfinch? It would have to be fed, and it wouldn't provide me with anything useful, like dragon tears or werewolf hairs."

"Or free labor," I muttered under my breath as I left the room.



I hurried out the front door and down the street toward the city bus stop. I'm usually the only one catching this particular bus, but today I noticed a boy in blue jeans standing there, scribbling in a notebook.

I slowed to a walk, trying to remember what I had read about demons. A tank of rabid sharks was one thing, but real demons were a nightmare. I knew that from the WitchNet.

You wouldn't think it, but witches were very early adopters of the Internet. Like I mean by 1990, every single one of them was on, so there's a huge network of information with everyone putting up their How I Made Some Dude Fall in Love with Me spells and so on. It's not the same as the regular Internet, though. Witches are paranoid, and so just like their spellbooks, their sites have warding spells, attack spells, spell programs that change the spell recipe to be wrong if the site decides not to share with you—fun things like that. Digging for information on sensitive topics can be dangerous if you get far off the beaten path.

The witch won't get me a normal-person cell phone—mine only connects to other witches and the WitchNet so I can learn more about True Witchery, blah blah. I would have to spend some time looking up demons today to figure out how to stop the witch this time. It seemed like I'd read something on Witchipedia about demon-stopping once. . . . All I could remember about demons was that, A) they were fire elementals, and B) they didn't like being fire elementals. Their entire goal in life was to take over a human and warp them to their wicked will so they could stay on earth, and yes, I learned all that from the witch's favorite show about demon hunters.

The boy at the bus stop did not look up as I approached. I still didn't recognize him—perhaps he was a junior or senior I'd somehow missed. He had earbuds in and was muttering something, then scribbling furiously. It sounded vaguely like

“cool stick of butter,” which seemed unlikely, unless he was trying to remember his grocery list. I got all the way to the stop before he glanced up—and right through me. He hummed as he looked back down.

I’m not super-vain, but I have to admit I felt a little miffed at that. I mean, he was tall and all—probably taller than me, which was nice, and somewhat rare. And okay, he was cute. But he wasn’t *my* kind of cute. He looked like he belonged in a boy band, with floppy blond hair and a sweet face. I like them dark and brooding, like Zolak the demon hunter, who wears leather pants with zippers all over them.

The bus was coming up the street. If I pulled out my algebra study sheet, I could get ten minutes of cramming in on the bus.

And then I saw a small yellow thing zip down the sidewalk and go right past my head. The finch.

Behind it was the flaming feather.

The witch had let the finch go, as promised. But she hadn’t bothered to catch the feather.

The finch zoomed around us, going right past the boy-band-boy’s face, and the boy even looked up at that. He pulled out his earbuds, searching for the dive-bombing bird.

I had to catch that feather. The bird streaked past us again, diving and dodging. I swung and missed.

“Is that your pet bird?” he said. “Can I help you catch it?”

“Not exactly,” I said, grabbing at the feather again.

“What—wait, is there something chasing it?”

I lunged again, and this time I caught the feather. Turning so my back was to the boy, I blew on the feather until the flame went out. Smother it, I thought, and shoved it into my back pocket. I whirled around to find the boy looking at me with a puzzled expression.

“That looked like a flaming feather,” he said.

"No, it wasn't," I said. "It was a bumblebee. I didn't want it to sting the bird. I'm against that sort of thing." When you're enslaved to a wicked witch, you end up thinking fast to keep all the weird witchy things a secret. Not always *good* fast, but fast. "Look, isn't that our bus?"

I hurried past the blond boy to where Oliver the bus driver was opening the door for us. Oliver waved at me as I put my foot on the stair. He's a good guy. He waits for me if he sees me running, and I bring him the witch's secret windshield-washing formula when it's sleeting. (Vinegar with three drops of dragon milk; he always says it's just like magic, but he doesn't know the half of it.) I like Oliver, and also I feel you should be extra-pleasant to someone if you plan to bring goat's blood and turtle shells and live roosters onto their nice bus.

"Hi, Oliver," I said, waving back.

"Behind you, Cam," he said. "I think that boy's trying to get your attention."

I turned around to find the boy-band boy making wild fanning gestures at my rear end. "Excuse me?" And then I realized that my butt was really quite warm. A thin trail of smoke was coming from my back pocket.

The feather.

Oh hells. I fanned my rear end desperately, but the smoke only thickened.

"Sorry about this," the boy-band boy muttered. He uncapped his water bottle and doused the rear of my jeans. Water soaked me down to my ankles. I gasped.

He looked both hopeful and apologetic, the same expression Wulfie the werewolf cub gets when he tries to bring in the newspaper and chews it to bits.

It is not often that my wits completely desert me, but they did then. There is no appropriate thing to say to someone who has just emptied his water bottle on your rear end to save you

from going up in magical flames. Well, “thank you,” I suppose. A very squeaky sort of “thank you” came out as I tottered past the wide-eyed gaze of Oliver and sat down on the next-to-last seat left on the bus. Humiliation and anger at the witch warred inside me. How could I keep people from finding out about my weird home life if the witch insisted on sending flying flaming feathers to my bus stop?

Unfortunately, the very last seat on the bus was right next to me. That’s where boy-band boy sat. He looked down at me cautiously, like he wasn’t sure if I was pleased or upset with him.

Inanely I said, “Very hot bumblebees they have this time of year. Liable to burst into flame at any moment.”

He looked at me, and I honestly could not tell if he was as stumped for words as I was, or if he just thought I was the craziest person he had ever met. I mean, really, what *do* you say to that?

Slowly, he reached up and put his earbuds in.

Embarrassment flooded me and I stared out the window all the way to school. I didn’t even remember to look at my soaking-wet study sheet for algebra.



Jenah found me in the girls’ locker room, drying my butt under a hand dryer and flipping like crazy through my algebra textbook with the other hand. “Oh, honey,” she said, beelining to me. Jenah is my best friend and lockermate, and she would be my confidante if I dared have one of those. She’s tiny and trim and Chinese, third generation. Her parents fancy themselves rebellious punk-rocker types, and they encourage her to express herself, whether that means changing the colored streaks she clips into her hair or obsessing about the auras she claims to see around everybody. She says the auras help her tune into

the universe—sure, whatever. When you’ve got a dragon in your garage, you’re in no position to judge.

Today Jenah was all in black and pink and bracelets, and her black, asymmetric, partly shaved bob thing had a clipped-in pink streak. She is so chic, so *herself*, it hurts. My hair is kind of nutmeg, my eyes are kind of blue, my nose is kind of shapeless. Whereas Jenah looks like the epitome of Jenah, someone so perfectly who she is that she’s untouchable. One of those girls whom everybody already knows, even if we’re only in tenth. Jenah would never end up with crispy jeans, witch or no. She commandeered a mini-hairdryer from a freshman on the swim team and turned up the heat on my butt.

“Back to your blush brush,” she ordered the Freshman. “I’ve got news,” she said to me, over the dryer.

“Well? Spill.”

“Happy to,” said Jenah. “Just as soon as you share some information with me.” She flicked back her pink lock of hair. “What color is Aunt Sarminé’s bedspread?”

Seven years of best friendship and Jenah had never once seen the inside of my house or met the witch. I told everyone I lived with my aunt, because it was easier than explaining the truth about how the witch tricked me out of my loving parents’ arms before I was even born. Once when I was eight I looked up all the Hendrixes in the phone book (there were four) and spent the next month of Saturdays taking the bus to each house to ask politely if a witch had stolen a daughter from them—an adorable baby girl with nutmeg hair and a smudge of a nose.

Three of them laughed and one sicced his chihuahua on me.

Anyway, it was one of Jenah’s goals in life to see inside my house and meet Aunt Sarminé. I told her she needed better goals, but she went on about keeping our friendship aura tuned by understanding my living space. Or something.

"Her bedspread is white with embroidered golden bumblebees," I said. That was true. For a megalomaniac witch who made spells with goat's blood, Sarminé could be pretty particular. "Now spill."

Jenah clicked off the hair dryer and tossed it back to the ninth grader. "New boy in our grade," Jenah said to me. "Quiet. Has potential. I think you could nab him if you move fast."

"Not interested," I said. "Too busy. I'm over the whole boy thing. I only date college men. I only date hot-dog vendors. I only date aliens from Neptune."

Jenah laughed appreciatively.

"Do you know if Kelvin's back from his bout with the pig flu?" I said. Kelvin was a total 4-H nerd—and an excellent goat's blood supplier.

"Ew, I do not keep tabs on mustard-aura Kelvin," said Jenah.

"You have him in drama! He gets up and recites monologues about milking cows or whatever. How can you not know?"

"Mustard-aura," repeated Jenah. We left the locker room, and strolled down the hall to First Hour Algebra II. Except we were running late, so it was a fast stroll. School had been back in session long enough for the walls to be well papered—fliers for clubs, posters for some school play, and the ubiquitous school-spirit banners in our stunning colors of orange and forest green. Outside the algebra room, a flyer for Blogging Club was papered over with one for Vlogging Club, and over that, one for the Halloween Dance. "So you'll be okay with going solo to that on Friday?" said Jenah.

"Yuck," I said. "Why do we have a Halloween dance anyway? Who wants to celebrate that?"

"Halloween is super-important," said Jenah. She flicked back her hair as we neared the classroom. "It's a time when you can commune with spirits. Ghosts. Demons."

I shuddered. "You wouldn't be so fond of demons if you

thought they actually existed,” I said. “Just like it’s real easy to think witches are cool if you haven’t actually met them.”

“Witches?” she said, with an eyebrow.

“Or whatever. You know.”

I pushed open the scarred wooden door and Jenah hissed behind me. “There he is. Go get him, tiger!”

’Course, you all know what happened next.

Sitting in the desk next to mine was a sweet-faced boy-band boy who, at the sight of me and my dry jeans, blushed red-hot pink to the tips of his perfectly shaped ears.