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Opening extract from

Witches at War!: The Wild Winter

Written by

Martin Howard

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The Prisoner in the Tower

Black magic curled like ink through water, poisoning everything it touched, freezing the world into a deathly mid-winter. At the heart of the darkness stood the Bleak Fortress – *exactly* the kind of half-ruined, turrety, dark, and brooding castle you would expect to find on a jagged mountain top in Transylvania. Wind moaned around crumbling battlements. Snow and ice battered stained grey walls. Bats burst from a broken tower, only to turn around and head back inside, where it was slightly less cold. Hanging upside down beneath the rafters, they wrapped themselves in leathery wings and went "brrrr," very quietly.

A light shone in an arched window high up in a tower that was only slightly crooked. The window looked in on a prison. It would be nice to say that it was a cold, dark dungeon with chains on the wall and rusty machines with nails in, but in fact it was a warm, comfortable room, with soft carpet, a crackling fire and flickering candles. Nevertheless, it was a prison.



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Inside, a young girl paced up and down as well as she could while wearing an extremely tight dress of black velvet. This made her pacing up and down more like taking tiny mouse steps but it was helping her to think, and that was the important thing.

Wherever Sam stepped frogs hopped out of the way. With her foot, Sam gently nudged one under a huge wooden bed that had been carved with ghastly gibbering demons. She took a deep breath. "OK Ringo," she said to a beetle who was doing star jumps on an equally ghastly chest of drawers. "We're not doing so well with the whole witch-war, saving-the-world thing, so pay attention."

The beetle stopped exercising and looked up.

"These are our most urgent problems," she said, holding up a finger. "Number one. Evil, power-crazed sorceress Diabolica Nightshade is turning the world to darkness, making it winter forever and setting free all the dreaded creatures of the night. On the night of the Midwinter Moon she is going to crown herself Wicked but Lovely Witch Queen of All the World. All of this is very bad."

She paused in her pacing for a moment, glancing at her familiar to make sure he was paying attention.

"Two," she continued, "my best friend is in the dungeons and will be tortured if I disobey Diabolica or even *think* about doing any magic. Again, this is the opposite of good."

"Three. Our only friends are a bunch of very confused old women and Esmelia Sniff, who won't think twice about betraying us if it serves her own wicked plans, or if she just happens to feel like it. Once more, this is bad."

"Four," Sam grumped, throwing herself onto the ghastly, but surprisingly squashy, bed. "This is a really stupid dress for pacing up and down in. It must have been designed by Stupidity Stupid of the Stupid Dress Company. It's like being squeezed into a sausage skin."

Ringo gestured with his front legs.

"Good idea, thanks," panted Sam. Laying back, she wriggled until the dress was bunched up around the top of her thighs. She crossed her legs with a sigh of relief. One of the seams burst with a ripping sound and a couple of diamond buttons popped off. "I don't know why I can't just wear jeans," Sam moaned. "Even old trout-face Esmelia let me wear jeans."

With a clatter of beetle wings, Ringo flew onto her knee and looked up at her.

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"Anyway, what was I saying… oh yes… We need a plan Ringo. Any ideas? I was thinking we should try and steal my wand back then, you know, undo all Diabolica's wickedness."

With the thought of The White Wand of… Oi You Could Have Someone's Eye Out With That, Sam scowled. She'd risked her life to make it, but Esmelia had stolen it from her a few moments later and then Diabolica had taken it. Now it had been hidden from her. Even so, Sam could feel the gentle fizz of its magic. The White Wand of… Oi You Could Have Someone's Eye Out With That was somewhere in the Bleak Fortress, and it was calling to her.

The beetle patted her knee gently.

Sam realised she'd been staring at the wall. "What?" she said, blinking and trying to push the faint magical buzzing of her wand to the back of her mind. "Have you thought of something?"

Ringo rose into the air and buzzed around the room. He came to a stop an inch from the end of Sam's nose and hovered there.

"Go and find help? In this weather? Are you mad? Absolutely not Ringo, you'd never make it through the storm."

Landing on the tip of a polished wooden demon's horn at the end of the bed, Ringo looked up at her and flexed his tiny muscles.

"Yes, I know you've been working out," Sam replied. "You're in great shape. If I had to pick any beetle to fly thousands of miles through a blizzard, it would definitely be you." She pointed at the wind-blasted snow out of the window. "But look at it out there. You'd freeze to death in seconds."

Ringo flicked a leg, waving away Sam's objections.

She peered at the beetle, her green eyes thoughtful in the dim firelight. "I know you're brave Ringo, but the answer's 'no'. We have to do *something* though. If I just had my wand…"

On the duvet, Ringo clicked his pincers sulkily.

Sam ignored him. Somewhere in the Bleak Fortress The White Wand of… Oi You Could Have Someone's Eye Out With That was calling to her again. A silly, dreamy look crossed her face. "If I just had my wand I could crush Diabolica like a bug," she muttered.

Ringo crossed his front legs and tapped his back foot.

The look left Sam's face abruptly. She blushed. "Sorry… I meant like a grape, or something else easily crushed. A cream bun maybe. Definitely not a bug."

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After a moment of embarrassed silence, Sam gasped in excitement. "You're right though Ringo," she whispered. "Someone's got to get out of here, but it doesn't have to be *you*. We'll rescue Helza. Yes, that's it! I'll use magic. I can magic her anywhere in the world just like *that*." She snapped her fingers.

Ringo raised his wings unhappily.

"Yes, Diabolica will punish me," Sam breathed. "Of course she will. But what's the worst she can do? Keep me prisoner in the Bleak Fortress? Tell me to go to my room and think about what I've done?"

She paused for a moment, then said, "Not even Diabolica would hurt her own daughter, would she?"

Ringo looked uncertain.

"Well, she might, but it would be worth it." Having decided that she couldn't care less about what punishments might be in store, words tumbled out of Sam's mouth. "Helza will be safely away from the torture chamber," she babbled. "*And* she can take a message for us, to Esmelia and the crones… I know, I know, Esmelia can't be trusted but she really *hates* Diabolica. She won't be able to stop herself coming and trying to give her another black eye. And while Diabolica's got her hands full with Esmelia we can find The White Wand of…

Oi You Could Have Someone's Eye Out With That. Then we can cause Diabolica some *serious* trouble. It's brilliant Ringo. Brilliant. They'll probably write a book about how clever you are. Well done."

Ringo looked confused. This had not been his plan at all. His plan had involved being the brave and heroic beetle of the hour, flying through snow and ice to fetch help. Nevertheless, he rather liked the idea of someone writing a book about him, especially if it were called something like *Ringo: Beetle of Destiny.* Quickly, he decided that it would have a close-up of him on the cover, looking serious and clever. For a moment he wondered if he should wear glasses. Everyone looks clever in glasses. Possibly a hat too.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go get Helza out," said Sam, interrupting Ringo's thoughts of bookish fame. Holding up her skirts, she ran for the door, stopped and ran back to the chest of drawers. Opening the bottom one she said, "On second thoughts, I'm not rescuing anyone dressed like this."