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Opening extract from

The Broken Spell

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Weeds, Weeds and More Weeds



The demon's eyes, fiery red in the darkness, narrowed to slits as its almighty roar shook the world around them. Grace's straight, brown hair shone in the moonlight, cascading down the black silk cloak that billowed in the howling wind. Gripping the ruby-encrusted dagger in her right hand and raising it above her head, she took one fleeting look at the surrounding forest. They were there, the four shadows that confirmed her friends were strategically hidden amongst the trees.

'Your time has come,' the demon growled, thick saliva dripping from its elongated fangs. 'I'll devour your still-beating heart, and all your power will be mine!'

'Come and get it, Demon!' shouted Grace.

The creature's claws curled tight as it sprang forward, missing Grace by inches as she dodged to the right. Screeching in frustration, the demon threw itself towards her feet, missing again as she leapt impossibly high into the air, and hovered. Her cloak spread wide in the night sky, before she dived to the ground and plunged the dagger deep into the demon's chest. Its horrible screams echoed throughout the woods but, with superhuman strength, Grace kept her grip on the hilt of the knife. The demon's claws encircled Grace's throat, squeezing and cutting into her skin.

'Foolish girl,' it croaked. 'You're mine now.'

Grace hissed in agony, but leaned on the dagger, pushing it further and further into the monster's flesh. A sudden flash of reflected moonlight signalled the cavalry – Grace's four friends, Jenny, Rachel, Una and Adie. Their silver ropes wrapped around the demon's wrists, pulling them away from Grace's neck towards the ground. The demon, spread wide with each of its tethered limbs held by one of her friends, writhed pathetically before lying still. Then Grace stood slowly and pulled the dagger from the demon's lifeless body. The creature's remains vanished in a puff of black smoke.

'He nearly had you then,' Rachel said, her porcelain brow creased with worry. Grace glanced at her own reflection in the dagger's blade and smiled.

'Nope,' she drawled. 'His heart wasn't in it.'

'*Grace*! Are you paying attention?'

'Huh?'Grace snapped out of her daydream. She was back in Mrs Quinlan's kitchen, with its musty cat smell and roughly drawn weeds on the homemade blackboard.

'Well?'

'Yes, Mrs Quinlan.'

'Good. Then wake up what's-her-face. She's drooling on my table.'

Grace looked down at Una, who had fallen asleep with her cheek directly on the worm-eaten wood. She gave her friend a firm, but gentle, pinch in the ribs.

'Wha'?'

Una shot upright, smacking her lips and wiping her mouth with her sleeve. Strands of her short, black bob stuck to her face, framing her grey eyes. She groaned.

'Did I miss anything good?'

'No,' Adie said flatly. 'Just more weeds.'

Una rested her chin in her hands as her eyes drifted shut again, snapping open as Mrs Quinlan cracked the board with her pointer in emphasis. The woman glared accusingly with her pale eyes and grimaced, showing off her yellowing teeth.

'And that's *really* important. Make sure you get that bit down. Well, that's obviously all the information your pea-brains are going to absorb today, so I guess you can get lost as soon as you like.'

The girls rose to their feet like arthritic elderly ladies and mumbled insincere thank yous.

'You *should* be thankful. No-one's paying me for this, you know.'



'Do you remember doing photo-singdingding last year in Science class?' said Una as the girls clambered through the wiry hedge that separated Mrs Quinlan's street from the school grounds.

'Photosynthesis,' corrected Grace. 'And, yeah.'

'Remember how we said it was the most boring class ever?'

'Yeah.'

'Well we were wrong. This is the most boring class ever. I can't feel my face I'm so bored. How is this so *boring*? I mean, it's supposed to be magic,so why is it *so* boring?' she paused. '*I'm so bored*!'

'Yes, we get that, Una, and you're not the only one,' Jenny replied, her purple doc boots stamping through the grass. 'We're *all* bored. Who knew learning magic was mostly stupid botany and stuff? I mean, when you read about it online, and check out the books, it's just all spells and curses and enchantments.'

'I'd give my right arm to have a go at a good spell,' sighed Rachel. Unconsciously, her manicured nails plucked at a badge with a pentagram symbol hanging off the back of Jenny's rucksack.

'We tried that before, remember?' said Grace. 'Una got possessed by a demon, and we wound up with nine horrible spells to deal with? It wasn't exactly the best of times.'

'Are you saying you're enjoying *this*?' Una's voice rose.

'No, I'm just saying that I get why we have to learn all the boring stuff first. I mean, it makes sense.'

'Yeah, but it's *agony*!'

The tired silence that followed confirmed everyone's agreement. As they trundled across the football pitch, Grace's mind drifted back to her daydream of the demon in the woods and an enchanted ruby dagger...



When the initial shock of their first adventure into the supernatural had worn off – and Una had recovered from being possessed by a demon – the five girls had been eager to continue with their witchcraft. Ms Lemon had promised that she and Mrs Quinlan would tutor them in magic, giving them all the tools they needed to keep themselves and others safe from the demon well. They were to become *bona fide* witches. This summer had promised to be the most exciting, adventurous summer of all time! But within two minutes of Mrs Quinlan's first class, they knew it wasn't going to be – not by a long way.

'There,' the woman had said, heaving a giant tome onto the kitchen table. 'Learn that.'

'What?' said Jenny. 'The whole thing? What is it?'

'*Madame Papillon's Guide to Herbs and Weeds*, tenth edition. Updated to include the newest, most exciting discoveries from South America and Japan.'

Grace blew some dust from the cover and opened the first page. 'It was printed in 1910.'

'For magic, that's new.'

'Do we get to try out a spell today?' asked Una.

'No,' replied Mrs Quinlan. 'You learn this first.'

'Do we get to try out some spells as we're learning it?'

'No.'

'Just little spells?'

'No.'

'Can't we try out a spell using a herb or weed when we've learnt *all* about that herb or weed?'

'Yeah, sure.'

'Really?' Una's face brightened.

'No.'

'There's just so much of it,' Grace murmured as she thumbed through the yellowed pages of delicate drawings and tiny text.

'Lesson number one,' said Mrs Quinlan, dragging her homemade blackboard off the floor and balancing it on the kitchen counter. 'Witchcraft is all about *knowledge*. When a witch has knowledge, she has power. A powerful witch controls the spells she casts. A power*less* witch is controlled *by*

the spells she casts. An obvious example is when you lot cast a bunch of spells, willy-nilly, and nearly got dead for your trouble. *Learn* first. Magic later. So, what is lesson number one?'

She didn't wait for an answer but scrawled, with her nails occasionally scratching the board with teeth-clenching squeaks, *Knowledge = Power.*

'Write that in your copy books in big capital letters,' she said sternly. 'It is by far the most important thing you will ever learn in this class.'

The hour and a half that followed was full of Latin names, common names, domestic properties, supernatural properties, classification, location, identification… At the end of the class, Mrs Quinlan smiled and said, 'You may find it dull now, but when you've learned all the flora we move onto–'

'Spells?' Una said, grinning.

'No, *fauna*. That's when things *really* get interesting. Right, class dismissed. That means get lost.'

Every one of Mrs Quinlan's classes so far had lived up to the excitement of the first. Hours and hours of pointless facts, and sketching little leaves that all looked the same. Ms Lemon's classes were marginally better. Always an enthusiastic teacher, she tried to inject some fun into the proceedings. They took field trips into the woods, where the girls would compete to identify lists of plants, winning glitter-filled pens and chocolate if they were fast enough. Sometimes she

would take them to the beach and they would collect different types of seaweed and ancient coral leaf, if they could find it. She told them stories about the old days when she and Mrs Quinlan were at school together, and about all the spells of theirs that had gone wrong, and why.

'It's a very fine art,' she said. 'There are so many ingredients, so many combinations, so many ways for it to go wrong. But when you know your way around magic, the possibilities are endless.'

'We wouldn't know,' grumbled Rachel.

'Patience, girls,' Ms Lemon said, tapping her on the nose with a dried piece of seaweed. 'Good things come to those who wait.'

The girls had waited. Three whole months of hard slogging with no end in sight. By the time September came around bringing the new term at school, they were almost looking forward to it.

'Good morning, class,' said Mr Collins loudly, striding into Grace, Adie and Rachel's Geography lesson, and not waiting for the kids to settle down. 'I'm afraid Mr Gains will not be returning this year. As I'm sure you've all heard, he had a very unfortunate, and frankly bizarre, gardening accident. I am sure we will all think twice before balancing on rickety patio furniture while using an electric hedge-trimmer. But, onto happier things. To replace Mr Gains, we have a new Geography teacher joining us. Ms Gold.' He gestured

towards the door and the new teacher entered.

Ms Gold could not have been more aptly named. She beamed brightly, her hand brushing her shoulder as she swept back long locks of golden blonde hair that glistened in the morning sunshine. Her eyes were such a light shade of brown they also appeared golden. Even her skin had a luminosity that seemed to light up the whole room.

'Wow,' Adie whispered. 'She's *so* pretty.'

She frowned, tucking away a few dark curls that had escaped from her hair bobbin. Her almond-shaped eyes gazed enviously at the lovely woman standing next to Mr Collins.

'Wonder if that's a foundation, or just a moisturiser,' Rachel said quietly, 'with glitter in it, or something. Looks like she's glowing. Do you think it would be weird to ask her where she got it?'

'Maybe leave it 'til her second day in school,' replied Grace, 'before you ask what's in her bathroom cupboard.'

Rachel wrinkled her nose and scowled softly.

'Mr Collins is smiling so wide, it looks like his head might fall off,' Adie giggled.

'He's probably racking his brains to try and guess what brand of moisturiser she uses,' said Grace, turning to wink at Rachel, who stuck out her tongue in reply.

'Anything you need,' beamed Mr Collins, 'I'm just down the corridor.'

'You're *very* kind, Mr Collins,' Ms Gold's voice was like honey. 'I think I will manage just fine.' She turned to face the class. 'And I'm looking forward to getting to know my new class. Shall we start?'

Mr Collins seemed disappointed at the polite dismissal but took the hint, waving cheerfully as he left.

Grace had never been a big fan of Geography, and Adie and Rachel liked it even less, but there was something about the way Ms Gold explained things that made the world come to life around them. They could almost smell the spices in the air of Mumbai and hear the great crashing water of Niagara Falls. The entire class hung on her every word, raising their hands enthusiastically when asked a question, and arguing over who got to scrawl the answer on the whiteboard.

'I can't really explain it,' Adie said in their lunchroom later, trying to avoid watching Jenny squish a Mars bar into her ham sandwich. 'It's like all that stuff that Mr Gains used to go on about is actually *interesting*. Like if you say it the right way, it all sounds really cool.'

'We're doing volcanoes next class,' said Grace. 'And I just can't wait!'

'You two have lost your marbles,' Jenny said through a large mouthful of chocolate and ham.

'I thought it was cool too,' said Rachel.

'You've all three lost your marbles,' said Una, staring at her friends. 'Geography's the most rubbish subject ever.'

'That's because you've got Ms Lynch,' Rachel replied. 'I know for a fact she's had at least four kids fall asleep in her class.'

'Speaking of boring classes,' said Grace, 'we're onto ferns tonight.'

Everyone groaned. Ms Lemon's class was better than Mrs Quinlan's, but it was still all weeds. Weeds, weeds and more weeds.



'The woods are that way, Miss.'

'I thought you girls might need a break from plant life this evening,' Ms Lemon replied. 'So today we're going to visit Mr Pamuk.'

'Who's Mr Pamuk?' said Grace.

'Mr Pamuk,' their teacher replied, 'is an invaluable resource for any witch in this area. He provides the necessary supplies that the woods cannot.'

'You mean like the Chi Orb we used to catch the lost souls in? Stuff like that?'

'Precisely. He has all the paraphernalia any witch could possibly need for any enchantment. Or, at least, he can order it in within five to seven working days. His shop will soon become your new best friend.'

Mr Pamuk's shop turned out to be called *The Penny Farthing*, a tattered old newsagent's near the edge of town.

It was the kind of shop that stocked all sorts of colourful, sugary sweets and lollipops in massive glass jars. The faded red-brown sign, written in sloping, joined letters above the open door, was barely visible, as was the little painting of the old bicycle that was its namesake.

'Not that way, girls,' said Ms Lemon, leading them past the door and down the alleyway beside it. 'It's not the newsagent's we're interested in.'

Stooping to pluck a daisy from a clump of unexpected wildflowers halfway down the pot-holed alley, she tore it between her fingers and scattered the pieces against the shop wall. A heavy perfume suddenly filled the air, and the girls watched, open-mouthed, as the old red bricks pulled apart, dropping to the ground that sank under their weight, and folding downwards to reveal worn stone steps beneath a brickwork archway.

'Now *that*,' Una exclaimed, clasping her hands and hopping up and down, 'is more like it!'

'Is that there all the time?' Grace was so delighted she was almost dancing on her tiptoes.

'It's kept well-hidden,' Ms Lemon said, 'but it's always there.'

'Brilliant!' Jenny gasped. 'Can we go in?'

'You're here to learn, so off you go.'

Grace made the first tentative steps down, gripping Una's hand behind her. The smell of perfume got stronger, catching

in her throat as she stepped further into the darkness. There, at the base of the steps, she could see a faint light, which grew and grew until she reached a large cavern, illuminated by numerous torches along walls that dripped with damp. The room was filled with coffers and tables, draped in dark-coloured cloths, and each flat surface was in turn covered with trinkets and figurines. Larger objects lay strewn across the floor, or leaned against the weeping stone. The air was thick with the smell of incense, damp rock and old wood.

'Welcome!' said a man's voice.