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An extract from

The Hex Factor
Dark Tide

Written by

Harriet Goodwin

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The Hex Factor Dark Tide, Pages 40 – 46

"Good news!" announced Miss Ambrose. "I've had a word with Mrs Jacobs in the drama studio and we thought it might be fun if you acted out a few scenes from *Macbeth* on stage later in the term. Possibly in front of an audience."

Xanthe groaned to herself.

"Soon we'll start looking at some of the main characters in the play and choose several of their big moments. But today I want to go back to the witches and read through another of their scenes. Turn to Act 4, Scene 1 in your copies, please."

Everyone leafed through the pages of their texts.

"Grace, I'd like to keep you as First Witch. The part clearly suits you. But Xanthe and Donna, if you don't mind I'm going to experiment with one or two of the others for Second and Third Witch. I didn't really feel either of you quite *connected* with the roles."

Xanthe felt herself go weak with relief. She settled back in her seat and grinned across at Grace. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Donna's pale face relax.

"Emma and Sarah – would you like to have a go?" asked Miss Ambrose. "Come up here to the whiteboard and we'll see if we can put in a few actions this time."

Xanthe watched as Grace and the others made their way to the front, clutching their copies.

Grace hunched her shoulders and beckoned Emma and Sarah close. "*Thrice the brindled cat hath mewed*," she wheedled in her best witchy voice.

Emma gave her a toothy grin. "*Thrice and once the hedge-pig whined.*"

"What's a hedge-pig?" someone called out from the back.

"A hedgehog," replied Miss Ambrose. "Calling someone a hedge-pig in Shakespearian times was an insult."

"*Harpier cries, 'Tis time, 'Tis time,*'" screeched Sarah.

"A harpier is the Third Witch's pet," explained Miss Ambrose. "It's believed to be some sort of monstrous bird." She beamed at the trio of witches. "Excellent, girls. I think we might have found the perfect combination. Now, Grace. Your turn again!"

Grace thrust out one hand and made a swirling motion in front of her.

"*Round about the cauldron go*," she cackled. "*In the poisoned entrails throw…*"

Xanthe gazed into the distance. She tried to imagine Grandma Alice chucking bits of dead animal into a bubbling cauldron – and failed completely. Her great-grandmother's cooking skills had always been fairly basic: the best she usually managed to rustle up was a toasted sandwich or a boiled egg.

Grace had got to the end of her bit and now all three of them had their hands outstretched above the imaginary cauldron.

"*Double, double toil and trouble*," they chorused together. "*Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.*"

The next moment Xanthe was jumping out of her seat.

"Xanthe!" Miss Ambrose hurried across the classroom towards her. "Whatever's the matter? Are you all right?"

Xanthe clutched the side of the table. In the centre of her vision was a huge glowing red X.

She blinked hard, trying to blot out the enormous shape that was pulsating in front of her. "It's OK. I've just got something in my eye, that's all."

"Do you want to go and bathe it in some water?"

"Yes, please," mumbled Xanthe. "I-I won't be long." She stumbled out of the classroom, her head bent. She could sense everyone was looking at her, and it wasn't difficult to imagine who was staring the hardest. The last thing she wanted to do right now was catch Donna's eye.

Closing the door behind her, she made straight for the nearest girls' cloakroom and stood beside one of the basins, gripping the taps. The X had faded now, though the shape was still imprinted on her brain.

She let out a long, slow breath. She'd seen one. She'd actually seen one. And just when she'd given up hope, too.

But why had she seen it so soon? Was it because she'd put in all those hours of practice, or was there another reason? The hex hadn't been Donna's doing, she was pretty sure of that: nothing terrible had happened to her, as it had done at the start of term, when her maths test had been scrawled over, or when her experiment had exploded in science.

No – this hex hadn't been *aimed* at her. She had simply picked it up because the person sparking it was close by: some of the other Hexing Witches must have heard about her battle with Donna and decided to come to Milchester to get their revenge. They were closing in on her.

She shivered.

One thing made no sense. When the X had flashed up in front of her, she hadn't been concentrating. All those hours of staring at her bedroom wall, and when the moment had finally arrived she'd been in a sort of daydream, half listening to what was going on around her and half thinking about something else. It wasn't at all as Grandma Alice had predicted.

And why had it been so big? The glowing Xs she had seen before hadn't been half that size. She'd been so shocked by its appearance that she hadn't even thought to look at its surroundings, let alone attempt to reverse it.

Xanthe sighed. It seemed like there were an awful lot of unanswered questions, and the only person who could help her solve them was Grandma Alice. The moment the bell rang for lunch, she would find a quiet corner and phone her.

For now, though, she needed to get back to English. Miss Ambrose would be wondering where she was. She turned on the tap and splashed water over her face. At least she'd better *look* like she'd been bathing her eye.

Straightening up, she glanced at her reflection in the mirror and felt a small stab of pride. She might not have been Miss Ambrose's idea of a Shakespearian witch, but what did it matter when she was the real thing?

"Are you sure you're OK?" asked Grace. "You scared the life out of me, jumping up from the table like that. It was as if you'd had some sort of vision."

Xanthe followed her up the stairs towards the lockers. "I told you. I'm fine. I just got something in my eye."

"It looks all right to me," said Grace. "It's not even red or anything." At the top of the stairs she turned to face her friend. "You haven't seen another of those glowing shapes, have you? You know, like the ones you were telling me about at the beginning of term?"

Xanthe flushed crimson. "Of course I haven't!" she muttered. "And keep your voice down, will you? I don't want the whole class thinking I'm off my head." She put her books in her locker. "I'll see you in the canteen in a few minutes. I need to give Grandma Alice a quick call. She's – well, she's a bit fragile at the moment and I promised I'd check up on her. Bag me a place in the lunch queue, will you? I won't be long."

She watched as Grace shut her locker and disappeared back down the stairs. Perhaps she'd be better off texting her great-grandmother, rather than phoning her. It was never easy finding anywhere properly private at lunchtime. The playground was always heaving with students, and the girls' cloakrooms were full of people doing their hair and trying on make-up. A bit of quiet texting in the library would be a much safer bet.

Donna was lingering just outside the library, and shot her a sly grin as she went past. Xanthe looked away at once. It wasn't hard to imagine what was on *her* mind right now. She clearly knew all too well what had happened in English.

Apart from a few sixth formers slogging away in the special study area, the library was practically empty. Xanthe sat down at a table in the corner and let the morning's events sink in. The more she thought about it, the more she reckoned Donna must have swallowed her pride and told her ancestor what had happened between them. Why else would she have seen that X? There had to be Hexing Witches in Milchester, surely? She wouldn't have had the power to pick up a hex sparked from any further away.

Shuddering, she huddled over her mobile and keyed in a text to Grandma Alice. *Have picked up a hex*, she wrote. *Feeling a bit scared.*