

WITCHLORE

“You loved her,” Bastian says. I stare at him. He doesn’t say it incredulously or jeeringly, just factually. There’s something about it that’s comforting. That it’s not an opinion. The sky is blue, life sucks, I loved and still love Elizabeth.

“It should have been me,” I say, voice harsh as I stare at a couple of swans swimming together. A pair. Inseparable. “I wish it had been. I’d do anything to change what happened...”

For E, who is magic.

WITCHLORE

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USBORNE

PROLOGUE

CONTENT NOTE:

WITCHLORE is a work of fiction but it deals with many real issues including suicidal ideation and self harm.

The day she dies is beautiful. It's May, the summer holidays have just started, and the air over the fields is hazy and still, smelling of wild garlic. The light is so golden, it has that intense quality of a lazy afternoon first thing in the morning. She laughs as she tugs my hand, pulling me through the shaded trees towards the cave.

"I'm not sure." I lag behind, staring at the mine gully suspiciously. The ground beneath our feet is hard and dry but the air coming off the ancient grey stone around us is chilled. With the small hole of the cave a black mark in the green and grey stone, weathered smooth and moss covered, it feels as if all the lush, whispering green trees above us are egging us on towards a secret.

"Please, just try." Elizabeth cups my face and kisses my lips. She tastes like coconut lip balm. "For me."

I can never refuse her, tasting so sweet and smelling like suncream and sweat. Her blond hair is like the shimmer off a puddle or the ocean, catching every particle of light as she moves her head.

“Okay.”

“Great!” She smiles that perfect smile, the one that shows off the slight asymmetric nature of her teeth. “Don’t worry. No one’s going to see at this time in the morning.”

There is nothing inside the cave but a thick black darkness that swallows us. It stinks of wet things, of the mulch under leaves, of the inside of a tree. Reluctantly, I press my right hand against the damp stone, its coldness seeping into my skin, making me shiver.

“Are you ready?”

I should say no, tell her that I can feel something wrong coming towards me, that there is danger lurking under the wet moss, but I don’t. She is too excited, too certain, so I only nod. She grins, the bright light outside of the cave only catching one half of her face, an absurd half smile.

“Let’s do it,” she says. I can’t help my admiration when she holds her hands up in the preparatory triangle, taking a deep breath as her beautiful opal ring begins to glow. She flexes her hands. Watching her do witchcraft is always breathtaking; the way power radiates from her and the air around her smells like toasted almonds. Other witches make me feel inferior with their magic, and watching them only increases my resentment towards them, but not with Elizabeth. I never hate her for possessing the skill I lack. Her hands are so fluid as they move through the spell shapes, polished nails catching the pearly glow of her ring.

Then she starts to chant and something is terribly wrong. The coldness from the stone wall is strengthening like ice in

my blood, spreading from my fingertips down into my veins, creeping towards my heart.

“Elizabeth,” I gasp, and my breath is cold against my own lips. I try to pull my hand away from the stone but it’s like it’s glued there and the harder I pull, the more I feel it: the stretching, gnawing feeling that I associate with a shift. “Elizabeth, stop—”

She looks at me with such excitement and I realize she doesn’t know the danger yet, she thinks this is proof that her spell is working. I’ve lost my voice, it’s been frozen out of me, so I can’t tell her that something awful is happening, something neither of us can control or stop, something worse than a shapeshift, more violent and more powerful. I can’t do anything and I can’t save her from it. The last thing I see before the rushing coldness hits my heart is her eyes; one blue in the light outside the cave, one blackened by shadows. Then light explodes from my chest and I am gone.

CHAPTER ONE

Four months later

I stare at the red, healing lines on my right wrist.

“Ouch,” I hiss, as I carefully spread on the antiseptic cream and rewrap my arm. “Ouch, ouch, ouch—”

“How is it?” Beryl asks. She’s standing at the door of the bathroom holding Mr Pebbles in her arms. Mr Pebbles is not a cat. He’s a demon. He hisses at me and leaps down to stalk along the edge of the bathtub, glaring at me with yellow eyes. He has no fur, which I find suspicious in a cat, and a habit of trying to urinate on everything I own, which is frankly just disgusting.

“The same,” I say. It’s been four months and it still looks awful. In the first two months, I could not stop scratching it, so now it has that slightly gnarly look – as if it is deliberately taking its time to pull back together.

“You screamed in the night,” Beryl says, pulling at the crystal on a ribbon around her neck. “I tried to get in. Did you lock your door?”

“I was fine.” I live in a halfway house for young adult witches with “problems” run by Beryl, who is nice but also as sharp as a bowl of marbles. She’s about sixty, with long grey hair that she

wears braided in a crown or loose with feathers in it. She loves a tunic and making her own deodorant and looks, to my mind, like the typical midlife white British witch. She’s also kind enough and makes an excellent cup of tea, but since this is a halfway house she is not the only one who lives here, so of course I keep my door locked. People like me don’t do well in shared environments with unlocked doors. Mr Pebbles hisses. I almost hiss back.

“You’re not meant to do that.” Beryl frowns and takes my other wrist, turning it over, a daily self-harm check. When she sees the skin is cut-free she drops it with a sniff. “Your counsellor said no closed doors.”

My counsellor at the hospital, Counsellor Cooper, is the one who recommended Beryl’s as a good alternative to going back into student accommodation. Given my “challenges”. I could technically leave whenever I want, but it’s better than my parents’ house, which was floated as the other possible option for my mental-health recuperation. If their house was a healthy place for mentally scarred shapeshifters I wouldn’t be in the habit of dodging all their emails. Besides, Beryl’s is convenient for college, even if there is a lot more chat about celebrating the inner goddess and processing trauma through mime than I prefer.

“If you wanted to get in, you could have,” I say. I eye the lapis lazuli ring on her middle finger with dislike. I’ve had quite enough of witches and their damned rings. “But Mr Pebbles pisses on my bed when I don’t lock it.”

“Hmm.” Beryl twists her fingers in a crooked sequence and

the blue stone in her ring glows. Mr Pebbles is suddenly out in the hall, licking his bum, a glow of dark blue magic settling around his ears. I look away in disgust. As a witch's cat, Mr Pebbles is used to being moved by witchcraft. After the summer I've had, it makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. "You said her name again. In the night."

I pause. I am trying very hard, every minute of every day, to not say her name aloud. I should be allowed to scream it in my dreams.

"So?"

"The counsellor said, didn't she, that dreams could be connected to—" Beryl gestures at my body. "—all of that?"

Counsellor Cooper is right. Apparently shapeshifting, especially changing sex when you have absolutely no control over your ability, can be a bit traumatic. This is ironic because my shift is the least traumatic thing to happen to me this summer.

"It's fine," I say.

"How is all this?" she asks, looking me up and down as if deliberately seeking out my broader chest even though she didn't even know me in my old form. She frowns. "I thought the counsellor suggested you...adjust your clothing to something more masculine? To help you get used to the new form?"

"It's not new, it's been four months, and what's feminine about a T-shirt and jeans?"

I look down. Being a shapeshifter, I'm drawn to the same clothes over and over, as a way to reassure the witches around me that I'm the same person under all this different skin.

"Nothing, but..." Beryl gestures towards my ears. I reach up and touch the hoops. They're white gold. They were Elizabeth's and I am never, ever going to take them off.

"Boys can wear earrings and, besides, I'm not a boy," I say, picking up my backpack from the floor of the bathroom. When I told Beryl I was non-binary she thought I was talking about computers. "I'm going to be late."

"Have a good first day back at college, Lando," she says. My stomach lurches. I think a good day might be too much to ask for. I'll settle for a not-terrible one.

I brush past her and head to the front door, past the conservatory where a witch from a local coven is leading a light-and-healing celebration. Eight witches, all between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one, sitting blissfully in the golden September morning light, their rings glowing with inner peace. Beryl thinks it's best I do any morning meditation on my own. She says it's because group stuff won't suit my rehabilitation plan, but I'm not the only one in here after a suicide attempt. I am the only shapeshifter, though. They're nice enough, the other witches recovering from eating disorders or drug addiction or depressive episodes, they're fine to share a kitchen and bathroom with and no one's particularly rude, but I imagine the idea of having a shapeshifter in their morning ceremonies makes the witches twitchy. Especially when the shifter in question accidentally killed a witch over the summer.

When I arrived, there was one witch who wouldn't stay in a house with a shapeshifter. I said to Beryl that it was a pretty bigoted response, but she just sighed and said sternly, "We don't

judge here, we try to deal in facts rather than feelings. The facts are that a shapeshifter with no magical control is not less threatening. It makes you unpredictable and, since you are twenty times more powerful than everyone living here, that unpredictability is dangerous.”

I got the message, loud and clear: *We do judge here, just the same as everywhere else.*

I press my key fob against the electronic door, trying to ignore the sensation that I am checking myself out of a prison. Beryl’s halfway house is in an old red-brick Victorian building in Chorlton, which unfortunately has the look of a haunted hospital, from the twisted wrought-iron gate to the tiny slit windows on the fifth floor. When I first arrived a few months ago, I imagined someone was going to lock me in an attic in a straitjacket and feed me gruel. In reality, it’s a leaky old municipal building that’s been shoddily converted into a facility for young people. The double glazing is terrible, the bathrooms have no windows, and when someone cooks onions the smell gets into every nook and cranny.

I walk the ten minutes down the road to Chorlton tram station and put my headphones on, just like all the other students waiting for the next tram. No one looks twice at me. It’s only when I’m at college that witches know to stare. *Freak. Abnormal. Shifter.*

I let myself settle into the fantasy of another life, just for a moment. Right now, I could be on my way to the Manchester

University library, ready to meet some mates for a study session and get coffee together. If only.

I see a witch further down the tram platform. She’s a bit older than me, dressed for a corporate city job. She’s trying to balance a coffee cup on one of those tilted seats they put on the platform, more a bum rest than an actual bench. In frustration, she spreads her fingers wide and twists them into a spell, her jade ring glowing softly green. The cup sticks to the surface. Around her, several people give her a suspicious glare, stepping away slightly. She is holding the spell with her ring hand, her fingers trembling from the exertion while she fumbles in her bag for something. *Not going to be fast enough*, I think and, sure enough, the spell fades, the cup falls, and the people either side of her jump back in annoyance as coffee splatters over them.

“Fucking witches,” a man in a suit mutters, trying to brush coffee flecks off his white shirt.

“Maybe invest in a Thermos, love,” an older woman says, handing the blushing witch a pack of tissues.

“If I was a witch, I’d change my nails every two seconds,” a schoolgirl standing next to me says. She’s in the middle of sharing a morning Egg McMuffin with her friend, both of them leaning indolently against the wall in their blazers.

“Get a manicure, it lasts longer.” Her friend shoots the witch a stunningly disparaging look for her age. “Nothing they do lasts. If it doesn’t last, what’s the point?”

I watch the embarrassed witch, her ring still haunted by a residual glow as she throws the remnant of her coffee in the bin. She looks up, clearly feeling me watching, and for a second she

frowns and my stomach lurches. I duck my head and cough, looking away, wondering if I'm imagining suspicion in her eyes. You never know what a witch will do with someone they suspect could be a shapeshifter. I remember when my father taught me about magic and witches when I was about five years old.

"Witches are like musicians," he says. "Their rings are their instruments, magic is their music."

"So their rings help them make magic?" I stare at my father's bare fingers, always one moment away from shimmering with white magic. "If a human had a witch's ring, like—" I think of the humans I know. There aren't many. "—Donald the postman, could he do their magic?"

"If a person took a maestro's violin, could they make noise? Certainly. If they studied, might they learn to make music? Possibly. Could they make music like the maestro who has practised since they were born, has lived for nothing but music, who has dreamed in music as their first language, whose musical culture going back generations has baked it into their soul? I do not think so. That is what witches are like. Magic is the air witches long to breathe, their only connection to an ancient, greater past, when they were leaders. Gods. Now they are mediocre."

Father doesn't look sad about it. He looks pleased. Father is rarely pleased.

"But...there are powerful witches?" I ask hesitantly.

"There are surprises, prodigies, there always will be."

He shrugs. "But the magic inside them is smaller than it used to be. Much smaller than ours."

"So we don't make music like they do?"

"No, Orlando." He smiles at me, magic glittering across his face as it changes, a father of a thousand faces. "We are the bird, we are the river, we are the tempest, we are our own music, all the time, always singing. We are magic. They can never have it, they can never take it away from us, and for this, they will always hate us. They will never trust us. Remember that."

When the tram arrives, the two schoolgirls take seats near the embarrassed witch and, two stops later, they are asking her if she has a crystal ball at home or if she dances with the devil. The witch is answering, explaining paganism, and I feel a strange thrum of envy. For better or worse, witches can be themselves in this world. Maybe my father was right and they think more power is the answer to all their problems. I am the proof that is categorically not true. I am a shapeshifter who is learning witchlore and witchcraft, and in May, my girlfriend died and everyone thinks it was my fault. All I have are problems.