

A
WITCH
ALONE

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Chicken House

SCHOLASTIC INC. / NEW YORK

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First published in the United Kingdom in 2017 by Chicken House,
2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-18851-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 18 19 20 21 22

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, October 2018

Book design by Maeve Norton

BREAKFAST

The kitchen was littered with the remains of breakfast. Plates and bowls were discarded on the table, eggshells sat cracked and empty in their cups, crusts of toast lay abandoned on plates. The tablecloth was sprinkled with crumbs and smeared here and there with rich orange marmalade, butter, or bright raspberry jam. The radio burred in the background.

Arianwyn took a sip from her cup of tea, looking up from the charm recipe she had been working on to gaze out through the window across the rooftops of Kingsport. Ribbons of smoke snaked high into the bright, cool sky. The leaves of a nearby tree were beginning to fade dusty and pale, and the air through the open window had the crisp, cool feeling of autumn.

She felt wonderfully relaxed. She really had needed a vacation after all the goings-on back in Lull over the summer.

Salle, her best friend in the whole world, gave a squeal of excitement and thrust a crumpled newspaper in her face. “Look! There’s going to be a parade from the palace this

afternoon.” She beamed. “Can we go, Wyn? Please?” she asked, her eyes wide, lashes fluttering.

“But don’t you have an audition today?” Arianwyn asked. This would be Salle’s fourth audition since they had arrived a week and a half ago. She had her heart set on becoming a great actress.

“Oh, I did.” Salle smiled and glanced away for a moment. “But it’s a silly part, boring, hardly any lines—I’d much rather go and see the king, wouldn’t you? *Pleeeeeease*, Arianwyn?”

Arianwyn laughed. “I suppose so. We could go to the Museum of Hylund too; it’s just around the corner from the Royal Palace.”

Salle nodded enthusiastically, stuffing the last piece of toast into her mouth and beaming again. “I still need to visit Leighton & Dennison’s to get Aunt Grace a present,” she said.

It was Salle’s first visit to Kingsport and they had been making the most of it. They’d explored the city on foot and by bus, visited parks, galleries, and the harbor market—and, in between, they’d hurried to theaters all over the capital in hopes of Salle finally securing her first part in a proper play, show, or revue. She really didn’t seem to mind what it was at this point, as long as it was in a real theater.

From out in the hallway, they heard the front door of the apartment open quietly, followed by the clatter of shoes being kicked off in the hall and the sound of keys being dropped into the bowl that stood on the hall table. “Girls?” Arianwyn’s grandmother called. “Are you still home?”

“In here!” Salle called cheerfully, spraying a few more crumbs across the table. Grandmother appeared at the door. She leaned on the frame and yawned.

“Late meeting?” Arianwyn asked.

“Or early, I’m not entirely sure!” Grandmother replied as she dropped into her armchair next to the kitchen fireplace. She sighed contentedly, stretching her legs out and resting her head back against the seat. “I had no idea when I agreed to rejoin the Council of Elders that there would be quite so many meetings.”

“I guess there’s a lot going on at the moment with the war. Is there still a shortage of trained witches?” Salle asked.

Grandmother nodded wearily.

The war against the Urisians in the northern kingdom of Veersland and the increasing magical activity across the Four Kingdoms in the last few years required skilled witches. There just didn’t seem to be enough of them.

“I’ll make you some fresh tea,” Arianwyn said, getting to her feet. She moved quickly across the kitchen. “Do you want some breakfast as well?” she asked, putting the kettle back on the stove and then arranging a cup and saucer ready for the tea.

“Well, actually, I think it’s nearly lunchtime. What on earth have you girls been doing all morning? You’re still in your dressing gowns!” Grandmother chuckled.

“We’re planning to go and see the parade at the palace and then maybe go to the museum,” Salle said brightly.

“That does sound very lovely,” Grandmother said, closing her eyes for just a moment.

“Why don’t you come with us?” Salle asked. “Have the day off?”

“If only.” Grandmother sighed. “But I’ve got reports to read.” She reached for her bag, which bulged with folders and papers. “And I’ve got to meet with some members of the Royal Senate. Why the High Elder asked me, I have no idea, as the last thing I want to be doing is dealing with a load of politicians. I can’t be doing with all their bluster and nonsense.”

“Perhaps that’s why she asked *you*, then.” Arianwyn handed her the cup of tea.

Grandmother rolled her eyes and groaned, but she smiled as she settled back into her seat and sipped gently on the tea.

“We should go and get ready—we don’t want to miss the parade,” Salle said as she darted out of the kitchen. Arianwyn scooped up some of the breakfast things and carried them to the sink.

“I can sort those things out for you. Off you go and get ready.” Grandmother smiled.

Arianwyn skipped to the door and then paused, her hand held on the frame.

“Everything okay?” Grandmother asked, the teacup hovering near her lips.

“I . . .” The question had been gnawing at the back of Arianwyn’s mind since they arrived in Kingsport. “I wanted to know what had happened about the . . .” She felt a chill just thinking about the night ghaist they had encountered in Lull. She didn’t dare to say the words, worried that this

most terrible of dark spirits might suddenly appear before them in all its horrifying darkness.

Grandmother sighed and placed the teacup carefully down. “The night ghaist?” she said, rising to her feet. She was tall, her long silver hair pinned tidily away. She put her hand on Arianwyn’s shoulder. “I keep telling you there’s nothing to worry about. The council has reviewed all the reports. Mine, yours, Mayor Belcher’s, even the Alverston girl’s—”

“Gimma?” Arianwyn asked. A name that she also hadn’t dared say for weeks.

Grandmother smiled. “That’s all done now, all behind you. You don’t need to be worrying about anything, Arianwyn. You did everything you could. There is no blame.”

Arianwyn smiled, Grandmother’s words soothing the worry. She always knew how to make things right again. Then Salle came barreling along the hallway, pulling on her jacket and at the same time fixing a hair clip into place. “Hurry up, Wyn, or we’ll be late . . . unless you’re planning on going to the royal parade like that?”

Arianwyn smiled and did a quick spin on the spot, flapping her dressing gown around her like a cloak. “But I hear it’s all the rage in Highbridge!” she laughed, her dark thoughts briefly chased away.



Salle and Arianwyn hurried along the sidewalk. The streets were packed with people waving small paper flags and jostling toward the palace.

“Hylund flags! Two for a shilling!” a man called from the street corner. He held a bunch of flags tight in his hand like a bouquet of flowers. “Flags, ladies?” he called as Salle and Arianwyn approached.

“No thank you!” Arianwyn called. Salle looked crestfallen. “You don’t want to miss the parade, do you?” Arianwyn asked, dragging Salle along as she gazed forlornly back at the flag seller.

They turned off the main street and onto a smaller, quieter avenue full of dazzling white Highbridge houses, each identical to the last, finished with clipped hedges and high metal railings, with ebony front doors and gleaming brass handles. “We can cut down to the Royal Circle this way,” Arianwyn explained, recalling so many trips with her grandmother to look at the palace or visit the nearby parks.

The sidewalks in Highbridge were spotlessly clean—not even the first few scatterings of autumn leaves littered the paving stones. They passed a pristine nanny pushing a vast stroller with huge silver wheels that flashed in the warm afternoon sun.

“Well, it’s certainly the swankiest bit of Kingsport, isn’t it?” Salle said, twirling on the spot just as an impeccably dressed woman emerged from her front yard. Salle’s clumsy pirouette forced the lady to dodge aside, almost tumbling into her neatly trimmed hedge. She muttered something under her breath in a biting, crisp Highbridge accent.

“Sorry!” Arianwyn offered quickly, but the woman only glared at them both and carried on without another word, a bit of hedge stuck to her bottom.

“Snob!” Salle called, with no effort to lower her voice, then imitating the woman’s very stiff upright walk farther down the street.

Arianwyn chuckled and ran to catch her up. Just ahead, the avenue widened, the buildings curving off to the left and right, opening onto the Royal Crescent, which was already packed with people. As they passed the last house, they were swept giggling into the crowd like paper boats on a river.