

WITCHLINGS

SCEPTER OF MEMORIES



New York Times bestselling author

CLARIBEL A. ORTEGA

The background is a light gray gradient with several thin, white, wavy lines that sweep across the frame. Scattered throughout are numerous small, white, circular sparkles or dust particles, giving it a magical or ethereal feel.

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TO IMMIGRANTS AROUND THE WORLD,
FOR LEAVING A PIECE OF YOUR HEART
BEHIND TO MAKE A BETTER LIFE. YOU
ARE LOVED.



PROLOGUE

MOONLIGHT ILLUMINATED THE PATH as Seven Salazar tore through the Cursed Forest. The vision she had just seen—a cabin in the woods, long ago, belonging to a witch she had hoped to find someday—propelled her forward over brambles, around boulders, bypassing the roars and quiet hisses of the monstrosities in the shadows. Seven’s heart thumped wildly with the possibility of finding the one witch who could help her understand her powers, finally: Delphinium Larkspur.

“This way, just over this hill,” Scrape the skeleton bird said from above, flying in the direction of the cottage that Seven had seen in Scrape’s ancestor’s memory.

They reached the clearing from the vision, and Seven spun around frantically. *Where could it be? Do I need a spell or a key of some sort to find it?* The one thing Seven

and Delphinium had in common, the one thing that separated them from all other witches, was monstrous powers. So maybe if Seven tapped into that magic . . .

She closed her eyes, letting the monstrous magic course through her veins. Seven allowed it to bloom inside her and explode in a wave of light from her hands. The air rippled around her, and there in the middle of the clearing, an ivy-covered door appeared slab by wooden slab.

“Oh my goats,” Seven whispered, her heart swelling with hope. “It’s real.” Finding Delphinium would change everything.

She walked slowly to the door, grabbed the handle, held her breath, and turned it. Seven stepped inside the cottage. Unlike the pristine interior she’d seen in the vision, this place was in shambles. Time and nature had crept into the structure. Vines wrapped around the furniture, and soil covered the wooden floorboards. It was clear within moments that no witch had lived here in many years. Disappointment washed over Seven, her hopes dashed.

Scrape flew in through the open door and perched on a beam above her. “I do not think you will find the old witch here,” Scrape said, stating the obvious. “But look.” She gestured with her bony beak at the books and parchments strewn around.

Seven picked up one of the books: It was filled with spells and potions she did not recognize. Perhaps they all

contained monstuo magic. The thought of that made her body buzz with excitement.

In the vision, Delphinium had said she was going to become stronger and stop the Five Families. She had . . . clearly failed. But Seven wondered if the key to controlling her own monstuo powers could lie somewhere in this abandoned home of the first Monstuo Uncle. Could Seven do what Delphinium could not?



CHAPTER ONE

THE FORGOTTEN COTTAGE

BY THE WANING LIGHT OF THE SUNSET, the Witchlings combed through Delphinium Larkspur's things. There were hundreds of books, scrolls with spells, and rancid potions strewn about the cottage. It had been four weeks since Seven had discovered the cottage in the woods, and now she, Valley, and Thorn spent almost every afternoon looking for anything that might help Seven understand her monstrous magic and in turn grow powerful enough to stop Ambert.

Seven plopped her trusty journal beside her and let out a frustrated groan. She had written only five words in it the past few weeks: *Things to Help Defeat Ambert*. But so far, she had found none of those things. Not even one.

"How many books did this old witch have anyway?" Valley asked.

"Too many and not enough all at once, it seems,"

Thorn sighed. “At least not the *right* kinds of books.”

Outside the cottage, the sun painted the Cursed Forest brilliant shades of pink and purple, but beyond Ravenskill a terrible storm was brewing, and dark clouds had been closing in on their town for days now.

“We should go soon. The telecast said the downpour will be here in an hour,” Seven said, holding back a yawn.

The Witchlings nodded, and it did not escape Seven’s notice that Valley and Thorn exchanged looks. It could be because of the exhaustion in her voice, or the dark circles under her eyes, or the worry her friends knew she carried with her as constant as her favorite rucksack.

Months before, Seven was conjuring things unwittingly, and now almost every day, she was dealing with a burning headache. Sometimes it felt like her whole head was going to explode, and more than once, she’d had to be rushed to the Bluewing Infirmary with a fever so high, she could not see straight. And she was hearing howling. Not the kind she was used to from the Nightbeast, but an internal, echoing howl just out of reach of her understanding. Almost like a voice calling to her from the beyond. She hadn’t had a full night’s sleep in weeks, and she knew her family and friends were worried about her. But that wasn’t the only thing keeping her awake at night, she thought, as Valley took a quick swig of the potion that stopped her heart from turning to stone.

The Witchlings began to pack up their things, taking

a few books with them as they always did, when Thorn knocked over a stack of bowls used for eating noodles.

“Oops.” Thorn began to stack the bowls again as a flash of lightning illuminated the cottage. Something glinted in the corner near Thorn, catching Seven’s eye.

“What is that?” Thorn asked, also looking at the shiny thing in the corner.

“Not sure,” Seven said, walking over and bending down to inspect the area. She pushed a few bowls aside and reached for what turned out to be . . . a key.

It was big and ornate, with words carved into it.

“*Wolf Mole*,” Seven said.

“What does that mean?” Thorn asked, and Seven shrugged.

“Beats me.”

“Sounds like one of Seven’s monstrous friends . . . Aw, nuts, the rain started!” Valley yelled. “Come on, goats, we’re gonna get drenched!”

Seven grabbed the key and the Witchlings ran out into the Cursed Forest together. The cottage disappeared as it always did when they left it. They had walked no more than five toadstools though when the key began to vibrate inside Seven’s cloak.

“Wait!” Seven yelled through the howling wind and rain. She took the key out and it shook, pulling her back in the direction of the cottage.

“Are you kidding me?!” Valley yelled. “My enchant-dye is gonna bleed all over my cloak and then you’re gonna have to buy me another one, Salazar!”

“Fine, fine!” Seven said, ignoring her. The key had pulled her back into the clearing but was now pulling her westward, despite being in front of the cottage door. Seven waved her hand and the door appeared again. She tried to thrust the key inside the lock, but it didn’t turn.

“Great, the key doesn’t work, now can we go?!” Valley asked.

“Yeah, yeah, Grumpy Pepperhorn, let’s go,” Seven said, tucking the key safely into her cloak. Thorn laughed and Valley pouted as they ran together, cloaks pulled over their heads, when suddenly Thorn’s laugh turned into a scream.

“What is it?!” Seven asked, throwing her hands up, along with Valley, ready to fight.

“Look.” Thorn pointed to a forested hill just a few toadstools away, where a cloaked figure stood.

Seven shielded her eyes from the rain and squinted. Helio Lophiifor.

“I’m gonna send him flying all the way to the Atlantis,” Valley said, pushing up her cloak sleeves. But before they could descend on the evil Lophiifor twin, he had vanished as if into thin air.

“What in the hex was he doing here?” Valley asked.

“It seemed like . . . he was watching us,” Thorn said.

Seven's stomach sank with fear, because Thorn was right. If Helio was watching them, it meant that Ambert was having them followed, and nothing good could come of that. Seven doubted if anything good had ever come from Ambert Lophiifor in his whole life.

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