

Chapter 1

Death and Despair: The Witchcraft Solution.

I tapped the spine of the volume as I walked past, skipping the books in French and German out of habit. Christa could read those but had to rely on translations for Greek, Russian, and Sanskrit, although she was making headway in the latter. My sister is smart *and* determined.

I tapped one book again. The binding made a soft, muted sound, and I glared at the other side of the room where Christa read pages by her laptop with a pen in hand. I rapped the bookcase with my knuckles.

“Bored, bored, bored.” I punctuated each word with a sharp rap.

“Will you go bother someone else?” Christa didn’t look up.

“I’m bored.”

“So go be bored somewhere else. *Please.*”

I sighed again, walking along the bookcase. “Hey, did you ever finish reading that book of transformation spells? Is your dissertation turning your brain into a higher evolved form of mush yet?”

My sister glared at me from over her glasses. “I’m sorry Sherry canceled out of the camping trip, okay? I really am. But I’ve *got* to work here. You need to be elsewhere or I’m going to add a footnote to these pages on murdering sisters.”

I shrugged. “That won’t work. Your treatise on the political and societal ramifications of everyday magic over the centuries would be tainted by an ordinary murder.” I mentally cringed. Apparently her research had rubbed off on me more than I thought. I actually *understood* what she was writing.

“Not if I used magic to do it.” Christa looked smug.

I hate smug. Smug people are a total pain in the ass.

I tossed a book from hand to hand. “Well, it’s not like any of those spells *work.*”

Christa slammed the lid of her laptop shut. I winced in sympathy for the machine. “Get. Out. Now.”

I slid the book back in place. “I’m sorry. This whole week is so screwed. I really wanted to go camping.”

She rubbed the bridge of her nose. “It’s not just the camping though, is it?”

Damn.

I pretended to be interested in a thin volume on the third shelf, something about conjuring helpful spirits.

“Emily.”

“This book looks pretty interesting. What did people in the 14th century do when their conjuring didn’t work?”

“Get burned at the stake for trying in the first place. What’s going on?”

That’s my sister; still able to answer any question about that blasted paper while behaving like a bloodhound. She’d have made a great bloodhound. I waved the open book in a vague gesture. “Well, I see you need to get back to work. I’ll just—”

“Freeze.”

I froze.

Christa look a long look at my face. “Oh, shit. You broke up with him.”

Well. Conversation stopper, isn’t she?

I refused to answer, stubbornly reading a page that was now blurred. Then I felt arms around me holding me tight, and I turned into her shoulder.

Later, crying fest ended for the while, we sat in the living room surrounded by empty candy wrappers and soda cans. No booze; Christa decreed it off-limits while working, unfortunately.

“You need a distraction,” my ever-helpful sister declared.

I tossed a crumpled-up candy wrapper at her. “What do you think I was trying to do? I wanted to go camping! So I’m left with bugging you instead.”

“Ah, no. I was thinking along the lines of what you said.” Christa tipped the last of the soda into her glass.

“Enlighten me, oh ancient one, what did I say?”

She ignored the reference to the three-year head start she had on me in the world. “When you said that none of the spells work.”

I peered into her glass. There didn’t seem to be anything in it but soda. “Huh?”

“Well, I’m writing about the social, political, and economic implications of magic in European history, but if any present-day people tried them I haven’t found documentation. Now, I’ve got a book of spells with a rather interesting time frame. Its purported date is 1345, which could err by a few years on either side. That would place it at the beginning of the Great Plague.” She saw my blank expression and clarified, “The Black Death, the one that wiped out a significant percent of the population. So what if someone wrote this as a way to stop it—or even start it?”

I leaned forward. “Start it?”

“Many of the spells weren’t just for personal gain, which in the economic structure of the times—never mind. The point is that they were also considered weapons, devices to hurt others.” My sister began humming. I could practically see the letters and numbers whirling around her head and fought the urge to splash water in her face.

“Hey, Earth to Christa!”

She refocused on me. “Sorry. My point is that there’s no record of any of the spells being performed from that book.”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s sketchy, but based on inference of records of ownership, witch burnings, legal transfer of title of properties—”

“Okay, I get it. So what’s the point?”

My sister gave me an angelic smile. “From an empirical standpoint, I think every approach should be covered, don’t you?”

“Oh yeah, fast track to tenure, ‘Trying Out Spells,’ by Professor Insane. I can see it now.” I snorted, hugging a pillow.

“Well of course they’re bunk. But that’s an assumption that should be proven or disproven,” said Christa.

“Bunk? Is that the scientific label that’s too high and mighty for the rest of us mortals to understand?”

“You’re not mortal, you were mutated under a glass.” She

deflected the pillow easily. “Now listen. I had to beg, borrow, and damn near steal to get my hands on this book. It’s all nicely translated on my laptop. So how about trying one out?”

“Trying one out,” I repeated, a superstitious shiver crawling up my spine.

“Well, you’ve got nothing to do right now so why not? Just to wrap things up nice and tight for my dissertation? Maybe I’ll give you a footnote.”

“Unscientific favoritism, it wouldn’t get past your first reader.” I knew she was trying to distract me from my misery but the idea began to sound interesting. Even fun. Of course, if that bastard hadn’t dumped me I wouldn’t be having a conversation about trying spells, but what the hell? I stood and cupped my hand to my ear.

Christa stared. “What are you doing?”

I grinned. “I’m waiting for the ominous music to start. Isn’t that what always happens when people try occult things for fun in the movies?” I ducked the pillow. “Let’s see what you got.”

Christa laughed and opened her laptop.

“This isn’t going to make me eat seven live spiders or something, is it?”

“No, that’s to increase your iron, you’re not anemic are you?” She hummed as she scrolled through the pages. It was a bad habit of hers but I gave up years ago trying to make her stop.

“Got it!” Christa printed out a page and handed it to me. “Try that and let me know.” She snickered.

I stared at the page. “Are you nuts? Why in the world would I do that?”

“Time on your hands, kiddo. You’re free at the moment.” Despite the impish smile she threw me, her eyes were sympathetic.

I tried to ignore the sadness that weighed me down like a stone. This was frivolous and silly and just what I needed. “Where do I start?”

“Check the listing under occult supplies and call Octavia’s. I don’t know if they’re open this early.” Christa was already immersed in her work, gazing at multiple files.

I stared at the page and read the ingredients and instructions for summoning a demon.

If I hadn't known my sister so well, I'd have suspected she wasn't as oblivious as she appeared. But she never looked up, and within minutes I heard that tuneless humming from her corner.

"Supplies," I muttered as I walked out of the room. I pulled out my phone and ran a search. Amazingly, there were a number of listings under the heading of occult supplies, and Octavia's was there in Gothic lettering. I dialed the number before I lost my nerve.

It rang three times before a matter-of-fact voice answered. "Octavia's Occult House."

I cleared my throat. "Um, hi. What are your hours?"

"One p.m. to one a.m."

"Do you take charge?" I cringed. It sounded like such an asinine thing to ask.

The matter-of-fact tone didn't change. "Yes, we take all major credit cards and you can order from the Web at www.ooh.spk."

As God is my witness, I didn't have a clue what to say after that. I cleared my throat again. "Thanks."

"No problem. Have a nice day."

I stared at the phone in disbelief.

"Problem?" Christa breezed in, heading for the fridge.

"Uh, yeah. I just called Octavia's Occult House and they seemed...I don't know...a bit commercial? The ad was kind of cheesy too."

She poured a glass of orange juice. "Yeah, but they bring in a lot of cheese. They have a big presence on the spook server."

"Spook?"

"Didn't they mention their website? It's on the S-P-K server. Short for spook, get it? Lots of interesting stuff there once you know to look, and OOH does big business although they like to downplay it."

"'Ooh'? Since when do you gush?"

"O-O-H," Christa spelled, rolling her eyes. "Short for 'ooooh, how spooky.' Or Octavia's Occult House, even though there's no Octavia. They just liked the name. In fact, they're a chain across the country. But their image is to have one small store in every major city, each under a different name and each with a different look so no one will catch on."

“Really.” I was intrigued. “How do you know all this?”

Christa finished the juice and rinsed out the glass. “When I started my paper I began contacting people for help. They got to know me and referred me to others. I picked up a lot of information that’s interesting but not necessary to my paper.”

That’s what I love about my sister. Every other person I know writing a dissertation always called it that so you heard the capital D. To my sister, it was “her paper.”

“So, are you going now?”

I looked at her. “What do you mean?”

“Are you going to Octavia’s? It’s a neat store. Just stay clear of the grungy wannabes who look like they need a bath. Most of them don’t but then you get the ones who definitely do.” She wrinkled her nose. “And avoid the ones who think you have a terribly dark aura and need a cleansing that only \$500 in a private session will help dissipate. Or the ones who think you have a wonderful aura and want you to go with them for a truly uplifting experience—depending how much you’re into their orgasm.”

“All right already! I didn’t just fall off the boat. I suppose I’d better take the spell with me—”

“No. Don’t let anyone see what you have or what you’re doing. Write the list of ingredients on a separate piece of paper and make something up if anyone asks.”

“Why? No one really believes this would work.”

Christa sat across the table and gave me a very direct look. “Some people do believe. And some unbalanced people who believe might be outraged that a nonbeliever even looked at this book. So make something up—say you need it for a school play, need it for atmosphere, to help in getting over writer’s block—anything but the truth.” She paused. “You know, maybe this isn’t a good idea. How about we just order Chinese and rent some movies instead? I can take a break.”

“C’mon, don’t get freaky on me now. I’ll get the stuff, we’ll try it out, and then you can make a note that it’s a nice book that doesn’t work.”

She gave me a half smile as she stood. “Yeah, got the shivers for a second. But not from demons. Just be careful, okay?”

“Okay. A step up from porn stores, right? So it should be easy.”

“Have you been to any porn stores?”

“Well, no.”

“Then don’t knock ’em.” Christa threw me a cheeky grin before heading back to her room.

Not exactly the thing I ever thought I’d hear my sister say. I wonder if she’d give me a list of the best ones to shop at.