

The Hunter and the Witch
A Crescent City Arcana Short Story
By Rachel Chanticleer

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Thank you.*

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Prologue

The Imperial City of Rome
December 21st, 47 CE

The cloaked woman pressed two dozen *denarii* into the guard's sweaty palm and slipped into the shadows. One by one, her torch lit upon cells holding imprisoned men awaiting trial, or more likely, death. The stench of desperation and all things foul assailed her nostrils and she covered her nose with the side of her hood.

Maddened wails echoed across the cold stone walls, falling on deaf ears. Condemned souls pled for freedom. Others begged for an end to their misery. These wretched creatures would find no such relief from her; Helena's mission tonight had but one purpose. She sought a man who should by all accounts be dead—his blood spilt and swept away along with the fetid sand of the arena.

Instead, Lucius Sempronius Asper lay unconscious in the farthest and darkest chamber, sprawled over a crude mat on the floor. Alive, she noted. But just barely. She glanced into the blackness behind her before snapping her fingers once over the iron lock. The mechanism inside turned over at her will and she lifted the latch. With some effort, she pushed open the door to the cell, sending several rats darting from their refuge.

Firelight danced over Asper's prone form as Helena slid the torch into a wall sconce. The gladiator was impressive up close, maybe even more so than when she had witnessed him at the Circus Maximus this afternoon. Stripped of his armor and weapons as punishment for an escape attempt the night prior, he'd managed to defeat multiple opponents tasked to finish him off. All spectators in attendance for the city's Saturnalia festivities were thrilled by his ferocity as he fought for his life. And won.

Humiliated twice over by his slave, his master sent him to this frigid prison to rot.

Once warm and bronzed, the hard planes of his face were now ashen gray. The deep brown color of fresh *medjool* dates, his shoulder-length hair was damp from fever. Gashes from a recent flogging marred the finely honed muscles of his back. His ripped tunic was soaked with blood and clung to a well-defined rear and thighs. Despite his current state, he still remained quite the sight to behold.

He did not stir as she approached. Focusing her energy, she closed her eyes and used her powers to determine what life he had left within him. In her mind's eye she saw him standing on a towering cliff of ice, teetering on the edge. She shook the bleak image from her head—he did not have long. Without her intervention, he would make his journey to the Elysian Fields tonight.

But she wouldn't allow it. Not when she needed his strength, his skill in dealing death. The vision she'd seen in the waters of her scrying bowl under the glow of tonight's moon showed her yet another witch with the potential to become more powerful than herself. Helena couldn't ignore it. She had to act.

She had survived too long, sacrificed too much of herself to ensure her talent surpassed all others. If another's gift exceeded hers, she would become the hunted. They would try to seek her out just as she had done to countless others—unless she found them first. She would not break the vow she made to never again become the prey.

Thus far, Helena had succeeded in dispatching all the threats revealed to her on Winter Solstices falling on full moon nights. But the murder and magical draining of a fellow witch—a sister in all but blood—was the darkest of enchantments, and her body had become frail over the years. Though her innate gift had increased when she absorbed the energy of each rival, her physical strength had been severely exhausted. The gradual weakening of her body was a cruel tax imposed for using her abilities for such malevolence. Necessary malevolence, of course, but it took its toll nonetheless.

Bribing her way into Rome's festering underbelly in order to revive and rescue this dying slave was her last and only chance at survival. And like with anything else she wanted, she'd take it.

"Do you agree to my terms, slave?"

Lucius stared at the sable-haired stranger through bleary eyes. He was sitting upon flat, chilled rock, but the visible moon in the night sky told him he was no longer in his cell. When he turned his head to the side, soaring columns came into focus. Somehow, this woman had brought him to Agrippa's Pantheon. Or had he stumbled here himself? He had flashes of recollection, but nothing was clear. After a moment, foggy memories started to return.

Yes, his legs did carry him here, with her at his side. Opening locks without touching them and...

The woman slapped him feebly and asked again. "Do you agree to my terms?" Out of breath and barely able to hold herself upright, she used the stone column for support.

The thought struck that his back no longer pained him. Leaning forward, he reached his hand around to touch the wounds from his beating, but felt only slightly raised welts where his flesh had been scourged not long ago.

"What is this?" he demanded.

"A second chance. That is, if you're willing to work off the debt you now owe me."

"Debt?" He stood, feeling stronger than he had in hours. "What debt do I owe you, woman?"

She laughed, a shrill and empty sound. "You owe me but your life, slave. And should you wish to keep it, you will honor your debt."

"I have no time for this foolishness." Looking around the immediate area, he was certain the guards would be close by—ready to shackle him once again and throw him back into that cage. But he saw none. Just a few late-night revelers wandered the streets, merrily shouting '*Io Saturnalia!*' to anyone they passed.

The woman wrapped skeletal fingers around his wrist. "You will make time, Lucius Sempronius Asper."

At once, his heart felt as if it were covered in rime. He clutched his chest and fell to his knees. If his heart was encrusted with frost, his back was surely on fire. Searing pain spread across his shoulders and spine as the lash marks reopened. Fresh blood trickled down his side when he fell to the ground. His head nearly burst as her cackle rang in his ears, though her mouth did not move.

She bent down to meet his eyes. "This will be your fate if you disobey me. I brought you from the edge of death, and I can take you back to it. I will keep you alive in this state of torment until the end of time, slave. You will know no reprieve. And if you slip into madness, I will restore your sanity so you may know every second of the agony." Her green eyes flashed and the freezing grip around his heart tightened. "What I want from you is simple. There are those who must die so I may live. You will kill them for me."

The woman released him and the pain ceased. With a deep inhale, Lucius sat upright, wincing at the peculiar feeling of his skin knitting back together.

“A sorceress,” he spat between breaths. “You will be burned for this.”

Amused by his assertion, she quirked her lip. “And who will listen to you? You are a slave. A fugitive.”

He considered her words. And quickly decided she was right. If he took her to the *Vigiles*, they would think him a fool. Gods, he hardly believed this himself. And after the watchmen had a good laugh, they would promptly send him back to prison—or execute him on the spot—if he was lucky.

Standing, he shook his head. “Why do you require my assistance? Can you not do this yourself?”

“They must be killed using more...primitive means.”

Lucius’ gaze fell to the floor. “They must be killed by one’s hand, not magic.” It was a statement, not a question. He seemed to have gone from one master to another. Again to be used as a weapon. A nameless, faceless, wielder of death. Once for amusement, and now as an assassin for a witch.

“I will ask once more. Do you agree to my terms?”

He glared at the woman. This woman who held his life in her bony hands, threatened him with eternal suffering if he did not do her bidding. With a snarl, he reached for her neck, but before he could make contact a flare of emerald light arced in his direction, throwing him against a column and down the front steps of the temple. As she approached him slowly, the pain returned, more quickly and severely than before.

“You cannot injure me, slave. Just as my magic will prevent you from inflicting harm upon yourself. As much as it disagrees with you, you are bound to me. And I will have your answer.” She raised her arm, his pain intensifying as she curled her fingers into a gnarled fist. “Now.”

She stood above him as he writhed under her torture. His body contorted in spasms and he bled from his nose and ears, the warm fluid coating his face. “Y—,” he sputtered and coughed up more blood.

“I can’t hear you, slave.”

“Yes! Yes, I agree.”

“Very well.” Her invisible attack ended and Lucius drew in long, stabilizing breaths. “Now your work begins.”

Chapter One

New Orleans, Louisiana
February 17th, 2015 CE

Bethany Hayes chewed on her lower lip. Looking from mirror to mirror in the cramped dressing room, she took in her appearance from different angles.

"I don't know, Aunt Mae. This one is just so...red." She sucked in her stomach. *And snug*, she added silently.

"Well? Come on out, darlin', and let's see it."

She let out a defeated groan and slid the curtain open. Her aunt's eyes widened over her gossip magazine.

"No good?" Beth asked, frowning.

"Bless your heart, child. Did you even look at yourself in it?" Aunt Mae tossed aside her reading material.

"Ugh, yes. I'll try a different one." She reached to pull the curtain shut but Mae rushed forward from her chair and swatted her hand away.

"Turn around, sugar." Her aunt stood at her back as Beth faced the mirror. The 1950's red velvet dress had a square neckline and a ruched waist flaring into a full pleated skirt with tulle underlay. "See how well it accentuates your shape?" She gestured to her niece's hourglass figure, making a dramatic silhouette with her hands. "Darlin', you're beautiful."

Beth sighed then worried her lip.

"And you're wearing this dress. No arguments," she declared with a decisive nod. The bell hanging from the front door of her vintage clothing store, Mae's Closet, jangled and one of her regulars sauntered in. "Mornin', Mrs. Wallace!" Aunt Mae called from the back of the shop. "I've got that purse you had placed on hold right behind the counter."

As she hurried to attend to her customer, Beth closed the dressing stall with another sigh. She pushed the blonde side-swept bangs of her textured pixie cut aside and chanced another look at herself in the dress. Soft and luxurious, the material hugged and highlighted her curves. Swishing the skirt from side to side, she allowed herself a little smile as it hit playfully just below her knees. She had to admit she felt pretty great in it. This was nothing like the simple, understated outfits she usually wore. Her conservative parents would *not* approve. But it really would be perfect for her good friend Nikki's annual Mardi Gras costume party tonight.

"What are you worried about, girl?" she mumbled as she reached back to undo the zipper. Shimming out of the dress, Beth grudgingly admitted she knew exactly what was making her anxious. And it wasn't the disapproval of her mother and father. That, she had more or less made peace with.

It had been four years since the last time she went to Nikki's for Mardi Gras, but what had happened on the ride home was as fresh in her mind as ever. Having recently turned twenty-one, she did have a bit to drink that night. One rum and coke. That was it. She had sipped it the first hour she was there and had plenty to eat during the party. When the police had given her a Breathalyzer test she barely blew a .02, proving she was well within the legal limit for driving.

She slipped the dress back on its hanger and hung it on the hook before getting back into her own clothes. As she pulled her sweater over her head, the ragged pink scar along her shoulder

blade caught her eye in the mirror. Aside from the broken ankle, the laceration on her back was the worst injury she had sustained from the rollover crash. Caused by bent metal protruding through the collapsed roof, the gash was several inches long and required almost two dozen stitches. She had other minor cuts and bruises, but the trauma with the most lasting impression couldn't be seen.

Some people black out when they're in an accident but Beth remembered everything, right down to the song on the radio, "Seven Nation Army" by The White Stripes. And the part she knew she'd never forget was the sudden blaze of strange green light in the darkness.

Not to mention the man standing behind it.

His eyes were empty as he watched the force of the blast veer her car from the road, sending it spinning into an embankment. When the car finally settled, the rock song's iconic riff thundered in her ears and tires spun in the air. Upside down and struggling with the seatbelt latch, Beth saw him approach. Her breathing became ragged as her lungs filled with the cloud of fine powder expelled when the airbag deployed.

After the belt unlatched, she fell hard onto something sharp and scrambled upright. Over shattered safety glass and thick Louisiana mud, she crawled through the open window the best she could with an injured ankle. At this point she didn't even feel any pain. He was getting closer and every instinct she had screamed for her to get away from him as fast as possible. That she could worry about her injuries later.

She didn't make it very far before the initial shock wore off and her body refused to go on. The man had followed and stood before her as she collapsed in the dirt along the edge of the road. His face was grim with resignation.

Surprising herself, she started to shout at him. Not from fear, but out of rage. Too angry to be frightened, she demanded to know why he did this and who—or what—he was. Her heated tirade seemed to catch him slightly off guard and a frown line creased his brows. He quickly schooled his expression into that of apathy and reached for her.

With a defiant scream, Beth lunged forward, and for a split second the strangest feeling washed over her body. Almost like blood rushing back into an appendage that had fallen asleep. Immediately following the brief pins-and-needles sensation, the same green flash that had flipped her car from the road surged from her fingertips and hit the man square in the chest. He stumbled backward and her jaw dropped. Examining her hand, she wondered what in the hell had just happened. When he recovered, she spied the hint of a smile on his lips. He took another two steps forward, stopped, and scrutinized her for a moment. Coming to some internal decision, the man closed his eyes and let out a deep sigh.

And as abruptly as he entered her life, he left it, walking away from her into the pitch black stretch of highway. Shortly after, she finally passed out.

Beth shook her head and buttoned up her jeans. Devout Southern Baptists, her parents didn't believe her tale of an otherworldly ability. They were convinced the accident was her own fault—a consequence of drinking and partying with her no-good friends. Any mention of "magic" was not to be uttered in their presence.

She had been crushed by their emphatic denial and the wedge between them grew when her gift continued to manifest itself in incredible but unreliable ways. Perhaps with the occasional bit of telekinesis, or clairvoyance, but it unfortunately came and went without warning. Beth had yet to master it and was lost without any support. Her parents were more comfortable when she

stayed quiet about her so-called abnormality, and at times there was an undercurrent of intolerance and hostility directed her way. She'd eventually given up on waiting for them to change how they felt about her newfound talents and left home to live with her Aunt Mae.

The bell on the shop's front door sounded again and her aunt wished Mrs. Wallace a great day.

Aunt Mae was nothing like her brother, and for that Beth was beyond grateful. Mae Hayes had always been the black sheep of their lower middle class family. An odd bird who never quite fit in with their traditional southern ways. Somewhat of an outcast herself, Beth had always gotten along with Mae like a house on fire. And to her relief and more than a little surprise, her aunt was considerably open-minded when it came to her explanation of what had happened that night and what had occurred since.

She found the no-questions-asked kind of love she never had back at home during the several years she lived with her aunt and worked in her quirky resale shop. Aunt Mae even encouraged her to turn her love of jewelry making into a profitable side business. A hobby her parents had told her on more than one occasion was a waste of time. As it turned out, there was quite a demand in Uptown New Orleans for Beth's funky, upcycled designs sold in Mae's Closet. Utilizing unwanted or broken costume jewelry sold or donated to the store, she made fun new pieces. A clip-on earring without a match might become a statement ring, or a brooch missing its pin may be turned into a trendy necklace. Locals and tourists alike were fans of her work, and she never would have attempted it if it weren't for her aunt.

Mae also did the best she could to help her learn to control and focus her magic. Of course it didn't come with an instruction manual, but her aunt was a great cheerleader. Sometimes just having a loved one at your back to tell you not to give up made all the difference. But despite the fact she had to make it up as she went, she had gotten much better than when she'd first discovered her talents. She found she could do amazing things with just a mental command or flick of her wrist. It was a work in progress, but they were both proud of the strides she'd made.

But lately, even with her aunt's support, she was having a hard time managing. Her magic was getting stronger. Like it was simmering inside her and close to boiling over. And going back to the place where it had all started wasn't helping her nerves. She'd avoided not only the lonely road leading to Nikki's place, but had seen very little of her friends since the accident. It was a self-imposed exile; her parents had succeeded in making her believe her choices had brought upon the chaos. Aunt Mae told her for years it wasn't her fault, and her words had only recently started to sink in. When Nikki came in a week ago with her yearly attempt to invite Beth back to her Fat Tuesday party, she'd finally relented.

She walked from the back of the shop, dress in hand. While all these factors added to the stress of going to Nikki's party, the biggest source of her anxiety was *him*. The authorities had never located him and of course she hadn't seen him since that night. Not in person anyway. No, the man standing in the middle of the highway remained in her thoughts no matter how hard she tried to put him from her mind. There was something about the defeat written on his face when he'd walked up to her, like he didn't want to be doing what he was doing.

Ridiculous, she murmured. He'd tried to kill her. She just didn't know why he decided not to follow through with it. Or why he had attempted it in the first place.

Heading to the front counter, she rubbed her temple. Her power was increasing; she could feel it in every fiber of her being. What she needed was to learn how to direct it. She needed to know how to tell it what to do. Because right now, it did just about whatever it damn well pleased.

“Sugar, are you all right?” Aunt Mae asked, startling her.

When Beth flinched, hat boxes piled on a high shelf tumbled from their perch near the ceiling.

“Oh! Aunt Mae, I’m sorry!” She draped the dress over a chair and began to clean up the mess.

“Hush, now,” she soothed. “You know you can’t help it.”

Beth pushed the hair from her eyes and did her best not to cry. “It’s getting worse. And the dreams are happening every night now.”

Sitting next to her on the floor, Mae tucked her niece’s short hair behind her ears. “The dreams of him?”

She nodded. “The same one every time. I’m sitting on one end of an old stone bridge, and he’s walking away from me to the other side. I still don’t know what to make of it. But in the dream, I want to follow him. I want to know what’s on the other side of the bridge.”

Mae gave her a soft smile. “Darlin’, I know a little somethin’ about wanting to know what else is out there, what’s beyond the life you know. Me and your daddy grew up in the same house, believe in the same God, and still go to the same church. But we couldn’t be more different. He felt right as rain keeping everything as he’d always known it, never trying anything new or seeing things a different way. But I was never like that. I wanted new experiences, to meet new people and see what they had to say about things. So I left that tiny town in the middle of nowhere and I’m all the better for it.” She patted Beth’s hand. “And you did the same thing. That takes some kinda strength, darlin’. Which is why I know you’ll get this gift of yours under control.”

Beth gave a humorless laugh. “Is it really such a gift? I’ve been wondering if I should’ve listened to Mom and Dad. Maybe I should just forget everything that happened and try to hide what I can do.”

“You will do no such thing!” Her aunt gave her a gentle push on the shoulder. “You remember that professor I dated years ago? He told me once about this quote by Benjamin Franklin. ‘Hide not your talents, they for use were made. What’s a sundial in the shade?’ And it stuck with me.”

Beth smiled and let out a gusty breath.

“That’s better. You know your smile just lights your face right up.” Aunt Mae helped her with the rest of the boxes. “Huh.” She paused and looked up as if in deep thought. “Now that I think about it, it may have been the tennis instructor I went out with for a time who told me that quote. Doesn’t matter though. You get my gist. Right, sugar?”

“Yes, Aunt Mae. I get it,” Beth said with a laugh.

Chapter Two

Lucius stepped from the path of the vase before it crashed into the door to Helena's suite in the Ritz-Carlton on Canal Street.

"Four years, Asper! It's been four years since I saw the vision of her in my scrying bowl! And what have you to show for it? Nothing!"

Avoiding the broken crystal and scattered lilies, he clasped his hands at his back and strode into the living area. "Your vision showed a glimpse of a blonde girl wearing beads at a Mardi Gras party. That's not very much to go on, Helena."

She scoffed. "Well it narrowed her down to one city, did it not?"

"I scoured New Orleans for months after the Winter Solstice in 2010. I conducted daily searches all throughout January and February 2011. If she was in this city during the celebrations, I would have found her. She could have been at a Mardi Gras party in any city."

Helena slumped onto the suite's plush couch. "I've grown tired of that excuse, Asper. It's had you gallivanting all over the States wasting our time for years. She's here. She's always been here—I can feel it." She covered her eyes with the back of her arm, her hair cascading over the pillow in dark waves. "I should have accompanied you the first time you went. Maybe then we could've moved on from this nonsense instead of dragging it out for as long as you have."

He walked to the window and observed the activity below. A cheerful brass band and thumping drums led a parade of costumed performers down the street. Mardi Gras participants in the traditional colors of green, purple, and yellow threw trinkets to the excited crowd from atop garish floats. He wondered if she was down there right now... Bethany. *His* Bethany. At least that's how he'd come to think of her these past years.

After countless centuries acting as Helena's attack dog, Lucius thought he'd forgotten how to feel. Thought he'd lost the capacity to empathize. When your hand is forced again and again to murder the innocent, putting aside the part of yourself that cares is a necessary defense mechanism. But Bethany...she brought him back from the void. She had such a fight in her, such spirit. In that moment in the empty highway, she had awakened something in him he was sure had died a long time ago. He now had a purpose.

To do whatever he could to make sure Helena never found her.

The dark witch didn't make it easy; if she had he would've escaped her grip back when Rome was still in power. He'd tried on numerous occasions to take his own life, but her magic protected him from every attempt. No matter the distance between them, her power would slow down an intentional fall, or even divert a galloping horse if he jumped in its path.

As long as they were bound, Lucius was immortal. Helena did not age—a gift bestowed to her in antiquity by a water nymph who had taken pity upon the witch. Helena had been assaulted by a man who came upon her when she was washing clothes in a river. The naiad, known as Larunde, found her violated and beaten nearly to death. The nymph had also experienced the pain and humiliation of rape, and brought her back from certain death. With the nymph's act of kindness, she was granted everlasting life. She maintained the appearance of a woman in her early forties, and Lucius had appeared to be twenty-eight since the day she took him from his cell.

And if he simply declined to do as she commanded? She held over his head the threat not only of his own torment, but she promised to torture the witches they hunted as well. Helena had

in her employ men who would take great enjoyment in “using” her victims before they died. At least, at one time they were men. They had become so corrupted by the use of dark magic they were barely human. She’d forced Lucius to watch their depravity when he refused to comply with her demands at some point during the Dark Ages. It made him ill to think about it even now. The fact she allowed it, having been through the very same horror was a testament to her heartlessness.

And because her spell protected against it, he couldn’t harm her or hire another to do so. The woman had thought of everything.

All he could do was provide the witches some dignity in death. To ensure it was quick, and make sure they didn’t experience the terror and pain Helena would have waiting for them.

But his decision not to bring Bethany to her complicated matters. He had managed to distract Helena for a time by taking on some lucrative contracts in magic’s dark underworld. Organized crime was as rampant with witches and mages as it was with regular people, and Lucius had a reputation as both a great tracker and an efficient killer. While he took no pleasure in it, at least these people were anything but innocent. They were deeply embroiled in everything from human trafficking to human sacrifice. His master was happy with the money coming in, and for a while, she forgot about the witch that got away. He knew he couldn’t stall forever, and now she insisted they both go to New Orleans and he look for her again.

“She’s getting stronger,” Helena said through gritted teeth. “You *will* find her, Asper. You’ll find her and bring her to me so I can perform the ritual. If you don’t, I’ll find someone who will. Trust me when I say they won’t be nearly as kind as you choose to be.” She took a steadying breath and raised her hand. At her gesture, the front door to her suite swung open with a bang. She nodded in its direction. “Now get out. I don’t want to see you again until you have the girl.”

Lucius exited the room and the door slammed shut behind him. He needed to find Bethany. Tonight. And he had an idea of just where she’d be.

Gripping the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white, Beth made her way through the winding roads of New Orleans’ Lakeshore suburb. The upscale neighborhood sat nestled along the southern edge of Lake Pontchartrain where the per capita income was more than double the Louisiana average. It was nothing like the tired, rural town next to Bayou Barataria where Beth grew up.

She and Nikki had met as Brownies at an area Girl Scout meeting, and when you’re that young, you don’t worry so much about have and have not. They remained close friends all through junior and senior high school despite being in different districts and still kept in touch after graduation. It had been tough being away from Nikki, but a part of her felt she deserved the punishment. Fortunately Aunt Mae was able to talk some sense into her.

Beth held her breath as she drove past the stretch of road where she’d crashed her beat-up Ford Taurus and let out a sigh of relief when it was in her rear-view. She had no intention of reliving the experience—seeing him nightly in her dreams was more than enough. She also had no intention of sharing with Aunt Mae the extent of him she actually saw in the dreams. The bridge dream was one thing, but there were other, more explicit visions that came to her when she was awake.

She often saw him in his bed with white sheets twisted around his nude body in stark contrast to his bronzed skin. His deep brown hair just barely touched his broad shoulders, and when he turned onto his stomach, she saw thick crisscrossing scars all over his back. She sensed him as he lay there awake for hours, his pale blue eyes staring at nothing in particular. Beth

couldn't read any specific thoughts, but somehow she knew when he came to her in these visions, it was because he was thinking about her. Thoughts of her kept him up at night, and she felt from him the combined sensations of guilt, longing, and profound sorrow.

For the life of her, she didn't know what any of it actually meant, other than the distinct impression his actions that night weren't what he'd truly wanted. What she did know, however, was thoughts of him had been keeping her up nights as well.

She pulled into the residential cul-de-sac and found a space along the street. Cars were parked bumper to bumper on both sides, and she heard music and laughter from Nikki's parents' house as soon as she opened the car door. She grabbed her borrowed clutch from the passenger seat and smoothed out her skirt before heading inside.

Nikki's parents lived in what was easily considered a mansion, but the two story Greek Revival facade they had added to the front made their late 90's house look like an elegant Antebellum plantation home. She trailed her fingers over one of the columns as she traversed the porch to the open front door. When she was barely two steps into the foyer, Nikki's excited squeal rang over the noise inside.

"Bethie! I'm so happy you made it!" Nikki weaved through the crowd of costumed partygoers to reach her.

"Hi, Nikki!" Beth shouted over the din and rushed to hug her friend. They stepped back after their embrace to take in each other's outfits. Nikki was classic Lady Gaga in a bobbed wig, geisha-style lipstick, and a futuristic metallic peplum dress.

"Nikki, you look fantastic! And tall," she added, looking down at her sky-high platform heels. "Are you freaking crazy? Those are out of control!"

"I know!" Nikki wobbled and grabbed Beth's shoulder for support. "I can hardly stand in them, but they're fab, right? A couple more sips of my hurricane and I'll change into some flats. But I'm working them for now aren't I?"

Beth laughed. "Hell yes, you are!"

"But look at you...Miss Marilyn Monroe, you are looking divine tonight."

Beth fluffed her curled blonde hair and leaned forward with her best Marilyn impression, tilting her head back with a sultry laugh.

"Yes!" Nikki exclaimed, cracking up. "Amazing." She took Beth's hands and gave them a squeeze. "You look good—like really good. I'm so glad you made it, Bethie. I really missed you."

"I missed you too. Look, I'm sorry I dropped off the face of the earth. I just needed some time to get my head straight."

Nikki nodded. "I know, I know. Listen, just forget it. You're here now. That's what matters."

Swallowing past the lump in her throat, she smiled. "Thank you for understanding."

"All right, all right. Enough of that." Nikki waved her hands in dismissal. "How about a drink?"

"Oh. Just a water I think."

"Fair enough." She led her to the makeshift bar to grab a bottle of Evian. "Here ya go, sweetie."

"Thank ya, darlin'."

Beth steadied Nikki as she nearly lost her balance again.

"Whoops!" Her friend giggled and flailed her arms. "I think it may be time to de-Gaga my feet."

Laughing, Beth agreed. "I think you might be right."

"Will you be okay on your own for a while?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Go on." Shooing her off, Beth put on Marilyn's breathy purr. "Don't you worry about me. I'll be busy mingling with all these lovely people. We'll have a grand old time."

"Good, I want you to have a good time. Don't think too hard on anything and just have fun, all right?"

"You got it, sister."

Nikki gave a firm nod. "Well all right then. I'll see you a bit later." With intense concentration to the task at hand, she pivoted and stepped away slowly in the massive heels.

Lucius stalked around the far perimeter of the home near the lake. The sprawling residence was filled to the brim with party guests in costumes, just as it had been the night he scouted it four years ago. Bethany was in there, of that he was certain. He felt the familiar pull to be near her that often struck on those nights when sleep eluded him. When thoughts of her flooded his mind like a torrent and made him wish he had a different life. Not the hundreds upon hundreds of lives he had lived at the mercy of a cruel master, but just one life, this time lived for himself.

But he knew better than to dream about the impossible. He had committed too many sins in his many lifetimes to be looked upon with any favor by the gods.

What he could do, here and now, was warn Bethany. Tell her to get as far away from Helena's reach as possible. Explain she had to go to a place where he'd never be able to track her down. Even that couldn't guarantee her safety, but it was the only option.

Now he just had to find a way to make her listen.

A lakeside breeze gusted and he glared in the direction of his quarry. When the air settled, he moved toward the vast backyard, the locks of his windblown hair partially obscuring his face and his mouth set in a firm line. He had with him a dose of Helena's nightshade potion, a potent mix of herbs and enchantments used to subdue the witches without force. Lucius had demanded she provide him with a painless method to bring in her victims. Ingesting a few teaspoons would render the witches unconscious for several hours, enough so they didn't experience their magical draining and inevitable demise. A couple of drops would knock Bethany out long enough for him to take her somewhere quiet and relay his warning.

That was the easy part. Getting her to trust the man who had nearly killed her was another matter altogether.

Chapter Three

Laughing, Beth clapped her hands to the music as the guests who entered themselves into the night's costume party showed off their moves in a Soul Train-style dance line. Nikki's gregarious father had a microphone and announced the contestants with note cards as they shook and shimmied by.

Nikki's family did *not* mess around when it came to Mardi Gras.

After finishing her water she wiped a bead of sweat from her hairline. The entire first floor was packed with dancers and spectators shouting for their favorite costumes. Sandwiched between a giant M&M and someone in an inflatable sumo wrestler getup, she started to feel somewhat claustrophobic.

"Excuse me," she said and made her way through the crowd to get some air.

Once out back, she took a deep breath of the refreshing winter chill. It usually hovered around the mid to high fifties in February, but to a N'awlins girl that was downright brisk. Beth shivered and rubbed her upper arms, but wasn't ready to head inside just yet.

Illuminated by randomly scattered tiki torches, the backyard stretched a ways toward Lake Pontchartrain. Situated a good distance from the house, a wooden pergola wrapped in white Christmas lights caught her attention and she looked over her shoulder to the commotion inside before walking to the cushioned patio set under the lights.

She sat in one of the chairs and bent down to take off her shoes, finally letting out a great sigh when she undid the strappy sandals. Rubbing her foot with one hand and holding the high heels in the other, she paused at the sound of movement by the other end of the structure.

"Is someone there?" She craned her head to see past the thick wooden beam.

A booted foot came into view, followed by a long leg in dark denim jeans. A muscular torso in a collarless leather jacket drew her eyes up to the man's face.

"You!" Her shoes slipped from her grasp as she stood.

The man who had attacked her—the one she couldn't stop thinking about—was back to finish her off. She stared him down as he approached and put his hands up in an apparent gesture of peace.

"I'm not going to harm you, Bethany," he assured her. "I'm here to help you."

"Like hell you are."

The corner of his mouth briefly curved into a smile.

"You can trust me. I know you have no reason to. But you have to believe—"

Beth had focused her power and blasted him with a wallop of her energy before he could finish his lie. The green flash lit up the area around them as he was thrown into the corner of the pergola. The framework trembled and the Christmas lights flickered. She concentrated, readying herself for another shot.

He groaned as he sat up. "I see you've been practicing."

"Damn right I have." She whipped her head from him to the house. Everyone was inside and preoccupied with the costume contest, too far away to hear if she called for help. "Don't move," she warned.

"Bethany, listen to me. We don't have much time." He stood up slowly. "When I come back empty-handed she'll send her dark mages after you. You can't stay here."

“Who will send *what* after me?” She shook her head quickly. “I need you to shut up. Okay, psycho? Can you do that for me?”

“Beth, please.” The man took a step toward her.

She shot him again, this time at his feet. It knocked him off balance but he caught himself on the back of a patio chair before he fell.

“I can do this all night, creep. Or maybe I should stop holding back. I’ve taught myself a lot since you tried to kill me.”

“Lucius.” He straightened and started toward her again. “My name is Lucius.”

“I don’t care what your name is, and back off!” She directed every ounce of mental strength to blast Lucius once more with her magic, not knowing the extent of damage he’d suffer. It was her or him, and she wasn’t going to pull any punches.

With a growl, he jumped forward, right into the path of the electric arcs flying at him. Her magic didn’t strike him, instead it bounced violently from a protective green field around him just like her car had before it rolled from the highway. Beth ducked just in time and it missed hitting her by less than a second before it faded into the darkness.

“I’m bound to Helena with her magic, Bethany. I have been for some time. Since I put myself in front of your blast intentionally, it couldn’t touch me. That’s how your car went from the road that night.”

Beth stood on shaky legs. “Who the hell is Helena?”

“She’s the reason I came after you. I never wanted to hurt you. I never wanted to hurt anyone, you have to understand that. Helena is a very strong witch, maybe the strongest one of you left since she drained so many others of their magic. Please, we have to hurry. Come with me now and I’ll explain everything.”

“Witch?” She never said it out loud about herself, never openly associated her gift with that word. Not even to Aunt Mae. But having it come from him somehow made sense, felt right, even if she wasn’t ready to hear it. “No,” she said, shaking her head, “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Lucius tracked Bethany’s eyes as they darted from him to the perceived safety of the house. She was going to run.

He couldn’t let her escape—he needed to slip away with her quietly. They’d already pushed their luck with her impressive flashes of magic arcs. No one had seen, but if she kept it up she’d be sure to draw someone’s attention. He covertly pulled the vial of nightshade from his back pocket, his other hand held up in an effort to calm her down.

She met his eyes. Bethany showed no fear, just determination and anger. He admired her for it all the more.

In an instant, she turned and made a run for it. Lucius caught up with her in a few long strides and wrapped his arm around her from the back, pinning her arms against her chest. She screamed and fought and kicked, but none of the people in the distant house paid any mind. He thumbed the cork from the small potion bottle and brought it to her mouth.

Her short hair brushed against his face and the velvet dress she wore was impossibly soft under his fingers. If he had another life, he’d pull her lush curves against his body and never let her go. But even if she didn’t despise him, it could never be. He had to make sure she was as far from Helena as possible. And in turn, far away from him. He lowered his eyes in defeat and tipped the nightshade against her lips.

“No!” she shouted, and the vial flew from his hand.

Bethany had the gift of telekinesis.

Helena was the only other witch he had ever come across with the talent, and it took a lot out of her; she rarely used it as it required so much magical energy. Momentarily caught off guard, he didn't notice as Bethany's teeth came down hard on his fingers. He pulled his bloodied hand away with a curse and she used the opportunity to push him off.

Beth's bare feet pounded over the cool grass. She didn't dare look back—she was almost to the house.

She opened her mouth to shout for help when the disco beat blaring from inside suddenly stopped. The people inside no longer danced, no longer whooped and hollered at the costumes. Instead, they seemed frozen in place. Some were mid-clap, others with a drink unmoving against their lips. Beth stopped in front of the French sliding glass doors and gazed in awe, her pursuer forgotten.

"It's too bad you'll never learn to do that."

A woman with dark, flowing hair sneered when Beth turned to the direction of her voice.

"It really is a fun trick," the woman continued.

Farther back, Lucius was on the ground struggling against the unseen hold of four tall, gaunt men standing over him in black robes. Were they the dark mages he spoke of?

"Helena," Beth rasped.

"The one and only! And I am *so* glad to finally meet you. I had a hunch my Lucius here had been lying to me about you so I asked a few friends to follow him." Helena shook her head.

"We'll talk about this later, Asper. But you should be aware I'm severely disappointed."

"What do you want from me, Helena?" Beth demanded.

"To be honest, my dear, I'd be happy just to have you dead. Draining your magic would be preferable, but seeing as Lucius is temporarily out of service, you'll have to die by some good old-fashioned dark magic."

Helena brought her emaciated hands up and Beth recognized the look of concentration that would precede the flash of green light. Instinct took over and Beth produced her own magic to deflect the emerald orb barreling toward her.

Blinking twice, Helena was taken aback by her defense. She scowled, bared her teeth, and redoubled her efforts. Beth parried every shot and threw as much of her own magic she could toward her attacker. She was inexperienced compared to the older witch, and her aim left much to be desired, but Beth made up for it with grit and fortitude. And the promise to herself she wouldn't stop until Helena was down for the count.

The night turned as bright as day with their vibrant clashes. They leaned forward and dug the balls of their feet into the ground as their power pushed them away from one another.

One of the dark mages moved to assist Helena, and she screamed at him, not ceasing her barrage against Beth. "No, you fool! It will take the power of all four of you to keep Asper down!"

Beth took advantage of the distraction, using her telekinesis to fling a large planter at the woman's head. Luckily, her magic once again did as she asked. Helena moved her arm in a wide half-circle, creating a bright shield to block it. Terracotta shards exploded in every direction as the pot made contact. Both women covered their heads to protect themselves from the shrapnel, but a heavy piece struck Beth in her knee and she cried out before collapsing to the ground.

An invisible weight forced Beth flat on her back and held her arms at her sides. She thrashed back and forth to no avail as Helena used her more practiced telekinetic power to restrain her.

“My, my.” Helena breathed heavily through clenched teeth. “You are a strong one, aren’t you? Such a shame. I’d love to see what I could do with your power.”

Another weight began to crush Beth’s throat.

“But I’d rather see you dead!”

She gasped for breath but none came, and an enraged roar sounded from where the dark mages held Lucius down. From the corner of her eye, she saw him break free from their enchantment and sweep a leg across the grass, dropping two of the mages to the ground. When she spied the flash of the blade he pulled from his jacket, a renewed sense of hope washed over her.

Summoning every stich of power within, she projected the mental image of her own fingers around Helena’s neck. The older witch’s eyes widened and her face turned red. As she grasped at her throat, the heavy, choking grip on Beth lessened. She stood and drew in a shallow breath. Then another. Helena released her and she did the same, before they both diverted all of their power into one final attack.

They heaved their magic at each other one last time, Beth’s green flashes and arcs taking on a new bluish glow as she called upon every bit of her preternatural strength. When the bright spheres of pure energy crashed together, a pulse reverberated in the air above them. The force of the pulsation hit Helena hard and she staggered back.

Helena began to cough and wheeze, a look of abject terror falling over her face. Her skin turned gray, then dark purple. Her magic was failing. Beth backed away as she clawed at her sunken cheeks in desperation. Instead of blood, the scratches turned to ash until her head and neck collapsed in on itself.

Lucius took out the last dark mage, and like the others, he turned to dust. He pulled his dagger from the crumbling corpse and ran to Beth. As Helena disintegrated before her, a strange warmth filled his chest for the briefest moment. With her death, he was free. And he had Beth to thank for it.

He approached her tentatively. She stared in shock as the last of his former master fell to her feet like soot in a fireplace. The music from the house started up again without warning and the people inside carried on, oblivious to what had just happened. Beth didn’t even jump.

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah.” Lucius nodded with an amused smile. “Are you all right?”

Mouth agape, she looked up at him. “Uh, no. Not particularly.” Beth swayed a little and he caught her.

“Shh, you’re safe now.”

He hesitated, then fanned his hand over her back. To his amazement, she relaxed in his arms. He traced his finger over the long, pink scar on her shoulder blade, not unlike the scars he bore on his own back. Lucius hated that she had it because of him. If she let him, he’d spend the rest of his mortal life making up for the pain he’d caused her.

“I’m still mad at you,” she mumbled, weary from the battle she’d just won.

Lucius laughed quietly. “I figured as much.” He pulled back and cradled her face in his hand, wiping a tear from her cheek with the other. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Epilogue

Five Months Later
Washington, DC

Beth tapped her foot impatiently while she waited for Lucius to call back that the coast was clear. The unused Metro tunnel was pitch black, save for the soft blue-green glow radiating from her hands. A slow dripping of water sounded somewhere behind her and the smell of mechanical grime persisted along the tracks.

Lucius hated that she wanted to do this, but all she had to do was remind him he owed her. When she saw the news reports of the sickening attacks on women in the DC area, it sounded a lot like what he had told her of dark mages. She'd insisted on going to see if it was true and if so, she wanted to do whatever she could to stop them. With the help of Lucius' training, her magic had grown stronger by the day and she felt she had to do something. She needed to utilize her gift for something good.

The two of them had tracked the dark mages to an abandoned underground passageway they believed they were using as a nest. The plan was to ambush them while they rested and Lucius was not happy she demanded to go with him.

She smiled.

If someone would have told her a few years ago she'd be trudging through a tunnel with a former gladiator hunting dark magic users, she would have told them they needed to get their head checked. Yet here she was. And while the setting lacked ambience, the company wasn't half bad.

Slowly but surely, and most likely against her better judgement, Beth had warmed to Lucius since Mardi Gras. On top of that, she couldn't help but notice how his eyes lingered on her when he thought she wasn't looking. And she found she didn't mind looking at him, either. But thoughts of their relationship and where it might go had to wait.

There were dark mages to slay.

*Beth and Lucius will return in **Infernal Embrace**
Available August 2017*

*Read on for an excerpt of
Infernal Embrace
Book One of the Crescent City Arcana Series
by Rachel Chanticleer*

Excerpt from *Infernal Embrace*, available August 2017

It was just after eleven when Beth took the dog out to the courtyard behind the townhouse where she now lived. The man watched her from a distance, waiting for the right moment to carry out his plan. Her short hair was almost golden under the decorative outdoor lamps lining the walkway and the belted dress hugging her hourglass figure fluttered in the slight breeze. The apples of her cheeks had a rosy tinge from time spent in the sun, a warm contrast to her otherwise fair skin. She closed her eyes and tilted her head up, evidently enjoying the brief respite from the oppressive Louisiana heat. This was the perfect time—she was relaxed, unprepared. He'd strike now.

He rolled a small leather pouch around in his hand. The bag was filled with *yagé* leaves, typically boiled after being freshly picked by Amazonian shamans to brew a hallucinogenic tea. But this Spirit Vine, or *ayahuasca*, was prepared neither as it is traditionally in Peru, nor as given to groups of adventurous celebrities and the bored elite of New York and Los Angeles willing to vomit for hours in exchange for a potentially life-altering trip. The leaves crunching within the leather in his palm had been dried and purified by a local *brujo* and sealed in the bag with a binding charm. But not before a few strands of Beth's and his own hair were tucked inside. He needed to get her alone. Just the two of them.

With his lips pressed to the pouch, he whispered an ancient verse, and then lit it with a silver flip-top lighter. As he held it away from his body, the bag burned cobalt blue, then the fire changed to a bright purple. The flames neared his fingertips and he scowled. In the back room of the *botánica* shop he'd been warned not to release the *yagé* a moment too soon or both he and Beth could become trapped in *el Velo Entre los Mundos*.

The Veil Between the Worlds. A place for neither the living nor the dead. Somewhere Beth would have no choice but to use her magic.

The fire had darkened to a deep plum and the searing heat now toyed with his thumb and index finger, but he didn't dare drop it. At last the space surrounding her began to fade away, black and empty at the edges like a photo taken with a pinhole camera. Beth must have seen the margins of reality falling into shadows as well; she took several steps back and looked around frantically. Before the courtyard vanished completely, she found him in the darkness and met his eyes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Chanticleer is a writer who sees beauty in darkness, and can find a love story where you'd least expect it. Her stories often feature worlds where the paranormal hides just out of view—until it's time to turn the lives of her characters upside down. She lives in a former steel town along the East Coast's revitalized Rust Belt.

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