

WITCHHLINGS

THE GOLDEN FROG GAMES



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CHAPTER ONE

SECRETS, SECRETS

DEEP IN THE SHADOWS of the Cursed Forest stood Seven Salazar and her secret.

It was a terrible secret and a dangerous one, but right now Seven had other things to worry about. Namely, the flock of skeleton birds with razor-sharp beaks and glowing red eyes that kept diving at her from the tippy tops of the Strangling Figs.

Cymric Rune, the Hastings-on-Pumpkins Uncle, cleared his throat. “Hmmm. This should not be that complicated.”

“It should be *easy* to summon birds,” Sybell the Oracle said, from where they were draped on a mossy log like some sort of model.

“Why don’t you try again?” Cymric said softly, before shooting the Oracle a weary glance.

Seven nodded once, then raised her hands toward the

trees, which were bathed in the eerie purple light of the early morning, and spoke.

“Aves!”

A few seconds passed in tense silence, but then like every time before, instead of summoning normal birds, her magic brought the flock of skeleton creatures toward her. They pecked at her scalp and any exposed skin before spewing disgusting goo all over her. It burned like hex.

“Rats!” yelled Seven, waving her arms wildly to get the green slime off and stop the sting.

“The healing mushrooms, Seven, quickly!” cried Cymric.

“Surely she can pull off *this* simple spell,” muttered the Oracle.

“Hongos!” said Seven, throwing her hands up and out. The earth rumbled slightly, and for a moment, Seven thought she might’ve gotten it right. Instead, a sound like a balloon deflating fizzled in the distance and her magic failed. Again.

“Hongos.” The Oracle waved their hand lazily in Seven’s direction as they flipped through an issue of *Teen Witch!* magazine. From a distance, the whispering of leaves approached. The whispers turned into violent rustles that shook the forest around them. A batch of multicolored cura-shrooms emerged from between the twisted trees and zoomed right at Seven. They hung suspended in the air around her, then each cura-shroom exploded like a firework, a chalky poof filling the air with rainbow smoke. Purple,

green, and pink dust settled on Seven, and instantly her blistering skin was healed.

“See?” The Oracle licked their finger and turned another glossy page. “Easy.”

Sometimes Seven Salazar wished the Nightbeast had never spoken to her. Right now, covered in dust and goo, in the middle of the Cursed Forest, her body weary with exhaustion, was one of those times.

“Is . . . something keeping you from focusing?” asked Cymric. His eyes, a vibrant green with slit pupils that were typical of a half fae, half witch, were kind, his demeanor patient, and yet Seven felt hot shame wash over her.

“She looks delicious,” hissed a flor culebra as it slithered past Seven. She tried not to look at the petals sprouting from its skin—a beautiful monstrosity.

Yes, she wanted to say, there are a million things keeping me from focusing.

Instead she shook her head no, and Cymric nodded.

“All right. Let’s try that one more time.”

It had been four months since Seven learned she was meant to be the next Town Uncle, the second-most-powerful witch in her town, with the gift to speak to animals. And apparently monstruos. At first, she’d been so froggin’ excited. It had been a welcome win after being declared a leftover witch, a Spare, and not having her coven circle close. She had been the first Witchling in many years to invoke the

impossible task in order to make sure she and the rest of her coven didn't lose their powers. And Seven, Valley, and Thorn *had* beaten the impossible task, not by killing the Nightbeast but by stopping it. And then the Nightbeast had spoken to Seven. She had been blessed with the powers of the Uncle, given to her by nature. It was something that didn't happen to *Spare* witches. Not ever! And it had felt like a dream come true.

That was . . . until the voices of the monstruos didn't stop like they were supposed to. For most Uncles, after the first appearance of their powers, they could only hear animals—not monstruos. But for Seven, the monstruos were growing louder and louder, and one terrible voice in particular was growing loudest of all. But Seven hadn't told anyone that. Not even Valley and Thorn.

“Witchling, if nothing is keeping you from concentrating, then why is it you can't summon birds, of all things?” the Oracle asked. “It is a low-level Uncle task. One of the most basic.”

“I have a name, you know,” Seven said. “And technically I'm not a Witchling anymore.”

Everyone kept calling Seven, Valley, and Thorn Witchlings. It was as if everything that had happened last year had left them marked for life. She had, in fact, grown half a toadstool since then.

“It's a term of endearment,” said Sybell with a shrug.

Seven held in a laugh. Sybell liked to play at being tough on her in front of the Uncles and the Gran, but in reality, the two witches had something resembling a friendship.

“Nature has lost trust in our Uncle because of Barbatos and his coconspirators. The connection between animals and Uncles hinges on that trust. It will take time to build it up again,” said Cymric.

“Agreed. But it is still strange,” Sybell said.

They stretched and got up from their log, moss sticking to their holographic cape and metallic-dusted cheekbones like it was meant to be there. It was obvious Sybell came from House of Stars. If anyone lived up to their coven motto—beautiful, brilliant, generous to all—it was the Oracle. They were indeed gorgeous, and brilliant, an expert in their field. They were definitely generous with their time but also with their critiques. That was the thing about coven mottos, thought Seven—sometimes things that sounded positive could also be bad. She’d learned that much in the past few months.

“It is . . . a bit strange.” Cymric mussed his soft auburn curls. “You’re positively sure there’s no interference with the communication from animals? No monstros speaking to you still?”

Seven began to sweat.

“Would it really be that bad to talk to monstros? Aren’t some monstros animals too?” Seven looked up into the trees, and ten pairs of beady black eyes blinked back at her.

Raccoons. A few of them smiled, their pointy little teeth glowing in the near darkness.

The Oracle scoffed. “Yes, it’s bad. Remind me: What does section 17, paragraph 187 of your Uncle handbook say?”

Seven sighed and recited the section. “The first Uncle communication is often the most powerful and can therefore manifest in unusual ways, such as hearing deepwater creatures, bacteria, fungi, or, in the rarest of cases, monstruos.”

“Correct,” said Cymric, holding Seven’s gaze. “And after that first communication, it should never, ever happen again.”

Except it is happening to me.

The Cursed Forest *should* have been the one place Seven could actually concentrate, because—with the exception of animals that were part monstruo, like raccoons for example—animals did not dwell here. They should’ve been far enough away that they wouldn’t interfere with Seven’s training, and indeed they were. But that did not stop her from hearing the Forest’s culebras, mega-ratas, skeleton birds, and all the other monstruos. Being here and trying to practice magic was torturous. Seven wrung her hands, her head just about ready to split.

“What if an Uncle were to keep hearing monstruo voices?” Seven asked slowly.

Cymric and Sybell exchanged looks.

“We don’t know. It has never, to our knowledge, happened before, but I imagine it would not be good,” Cymric said.

Disappointment pressed on Seven's chest, making it hard for her to breathe.

They were lying.

There *had* been an Uncle who spoke to monstros long, long ago. Her name was Delphinium Larkspur.

Seven's Uncle training required her to know about all the functions of Ravenskill, which meant lessons that had nothing to do with animals. This winter she had spent an entire month helping Alaric, the head archivist in the Hall of Elders (and a ghost), organize old, abandoned Uncle records. Deep in the Hall of Elders one snowy day, Seven had wiggled her way into a crawl space only big enough for a Witchling and found a dust- and cobweb-covered box, Delphinium's diary forgotten within. Seven tried not to look at her rucksack, where the pilfered diary now sat, buried beneath her school-books. She had been making her way through the entries slowly, but the truth within those pages frightened her.

Seven shook her head and pushed her sleeves up. "Shall we try again?"

"Yes. At the very least, you need to be ready for your Uncle exhibition at the Golden Frog Games," Cymric said.

Seven raised her hands again, intoning the summoning spell and getting the same pitiful results. Again, the Oracle healed her and another layer of colorful dust settled onto her clothing, skin, and hair. This would be a nightmare to wash out.

“Somehow you are capable of spells high above your skill level, and you even helped defeat the Cursed Toads, but you cannot manage this level-one Uncle spell,” Cymric said, before running his hands over his face in frustration.

Seven cringed.

The Cursed Toads had been the Ravenskill, Stormville, and Boggs Ferry Uncles, or at least everyone had thought they were. In reality, they had been the Spare witches of 1965, who used powerful and forbidden archaic magic to take on the forms of three Town Uncles. They had relegated the real Town Uncles to a punishment—living out the rest of their days as toads—that was meant for the Spares for not completing their own impossible task. The Uncles had watched from their tanks as their lives, their loved ones, and their powers were snatched away. The Cursed Toads had also done the unthinkable—they had hexed the entire Twelve Towns into forgetting. It wasn’t until last year, thanks to Seven, Valley, and Thorn, that the truth had been uncovered.

“Could it have anything to do with the pace at which we’re training her? We’ve been at this all morning. The Witchling must be tired,” the Oracle said.

“No.” Seven furrowed her brow. “No. I have to keep going. There’s only a few months till the autumnal equinox.”

If she could only train herself hard enough, maybe it would fix her magic. Maybe she could learn enough to quiet the monstrous voices and be a normal Uncle.

Cymric smiled. “That’s not for six months! And if you don’t pass your Uncle trials this fall, you can try again.”

“You will be okay, Seven,” the Oracle said.

Although Seven nodded, she knew that wasn’t true.

The Town Grans and Uncles had been patient with Delphinium too. They had waited. Until one day when their patience ran dry and they decided she would have to die.

Because instead of getting her powers under control, Delphinium’s connection to monstrosities had grown stronger every day.

Just like Seven’s was now.

They had grown afraid of what Delphinium might be capable of.

Just as they would with Seven.

And there was one voice, louder than all the rest, consuming her every thought, her every waking moment. Even now, it spoke to her. Crisp and clear as if it were whispering right in her ear. She could almost feel its hot breath on her skin, the brush of fur on her cheek.

“I’m *ever* so hungry,” said the Nightbeast.