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THE WITCH IN THE WALL

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CHAPTER 1

BO

Bo thought she blended in well as she stepped off the train at Victoria Station with the intent to rob Buckingham Palace. This was not exactly the case. While she went largely unnoticed, several people shot a second glance at the small Chinese girl walking unaccompanied through the hubbub of the platform. She could not have been older than eight and stopped just shy of four feet. Her close-cropped hair and jutting determined jaw gave her the look of an obstinate toddler. She was swaddled in a dark grey coat that was slightly too large and was walking very fast. There was also something else, something strange and ageless in the pale rosiness of her face. But the people of Victoria Station didn't stop to find out what it was. They had places to go and people to see. Just like Bo.

CHAPTER 2

BEETLE

Mrs. Peters couldn't keep a garden to save her life. It was safe to say that every plant, every variety and station of flora, regardless of flowering health or withering frailty, potted and welcome, mouldy and not so, was doomed to certain death the moment it entered the Peters' household. Of course, it meant the house was clean and free of mould and mildew throughout the damp English winter, but it was to Mrs. Peters' continual despair that no greenery was to be had inside or out for a radius of approximately twenty metres.

It hadn't always been this way. Before moving to London in search of a better life and school district, she'd been an avid gardener in the country. Lush peonies and springing lavender had decorated the flower boxes of their Kent cottage in the spring. Chrysanthemums had intermingled with tiny rolling hillocks of bentgrass all the way up to the porch as lovingly tamed ivy hugged the walls. She sighed whenever she thought of it--every time she looked out the kitchen window onto the street of tall, connected white houses that lined the opposite sidewalk, knowing that she lived in a copy of those houses, but without flowers or a lawn. It stuck out from the rest of the well-kempt houses by way of the barren plot of dirt out front. How embarrassing it was to be the only one in the neighbourhood with an eyesore like that. She knew they'd already been branded as social pariahs through the rapidly cooling conversations with the other parents of the school. Mothers in their matching tracksuits would jog past every morning with a quick distasteful glance at her yard, and she'd never received so much as a hello, much less an invitation to join them. *They think we're destitute, unable to manage our affairs, much less this house. If only I could tell them that nothing will grow!* She had no idea why it was this way, why

things refused to grow on her little plot of land that should have been hers to cultivate. But she knew it wasn't the only reason people avoided them. She had an inkling. Unfortunately, it had all been for him, moving here. And now this isolation, this careful avoidance, it seemed to be *because* of her poor, darling-

“BEETLE!”

She stopped at the foot of the stair, hand resting on her hip, “Get down here! I don't want to have to drive you to school again.”

“I wouldn't mind,” came the muffled answer. “I hate walking.”

“Beetle.” Her tone left no room for argument.

“Coming!”

She heard the running of the sink and the turning of the lock. She sighed and leaned against the wall, egg and toast in her mouth.

Upstairs, Beetle Peters practised his smile in the mirror. *Maybe this time, it'll be better.* It was never quite right. Just a little too lopsided, a little too toothy, a little too...desperate. No, he couldn't think like that. He had to be confident. He smiled again, trying to arrange his lips in such a way that not all the gum from his left side was on full display. Oh. That was worse.

“BEETLE!”

“Coming!” he answered, not taking his eyes off his reflection. “Today's the day,” he murmured, cringing his collar. They were going on a school trip to the Palace. But more importantly, it would be the perfect, most romantic place to ask her.

“Theresa,” he tried his most gallant look, succeeding only at a pale grimace, “I see you've dropped your books. I'll allow you to pick them up because I'm a modern gentleman, and you are a strong woman who is just as capable as I am. That's the best kind of chivalry if you really think

about it. Speaking of which, how would you like to go to dinner with me? I'm a great conversationalist. I can sing the entire discography of *Blondie* completely off-key—wow, kissing already?"

“BEETLE!”

Beetle banged his forehead against the mirror. Hissing in pain, he wiped the glass with the back of his sleeve. He stuffed everything into his backpack but took special care with the bouquet of flowers. He'd bought them yesterday and they hadn't yet died, which was somewhat of a miracle. Beetle took one last look, adjusted his hair, ran the sink to make it seem like he'd been still washing up, and flew downstairs.

Mrs. Peters tapped her foot as her son came barreling down, tripping on the third to last step and stopping as he came face to face with his mother.

“Sorry,” he said, slightly out of breath, “Woke up late.” His pale face was flushed, black tendrils of hair stuck to his forehead; one of his socks was pulled higher than the other. She forgave him.

“Mind you, don't forget breakfast. Take it down to the car.”

Beetle nodded and wrapped up the toast in a napkin before heading outside. Glancing at his thin retreating form, Mrs. Peters caught sight of the flagging tail sticking out of his backpack. She recognized it as the trademark green cellophane of the florist down the street whom she'd visited so many times in vain.

Oh, Beetle she thought he slid into the passenger seat beside her. In the distance, the sparkling mist-laden London began to awaken. High-rise office buildings flicked on, the windows lighting up like switchboards. Honking and shouting began to fill the streets. All-night revellers stumbled out of clubs, heedless of pavement. Ever-irritating cyclists took to the streets on their

midmorning *Tour de France*. In the heart of it all was The Palace standing golden and gated against the rising sun. The pride of the country. A testament to history.

Oh Beetle. She sighed inwardly at her son. He stared out the window, absentmindedly rolling the stem of a wilted flower between his fingers. At length, he turned to her.

“Did you know the Victorians used to use flowers to send messages they couldn’t say outright? For example, the blue hyacinth means “Your loveliness charms me.” That’s so much better than a boring old rose—which incidentally means “pleasure and pain.” Bit of an omen, giving that. Wouldn’t you rather get a bouquet of hyacinths instead? I mean—” he turned red. “I just saw it in a book somewhere and thought it was interesting, that’s all.”

Oh, Beetle indeed.

CHAPTER 3

DIRECTIONS

“Are you there yet?”

“I will turn myself around, so help me.”

The pebble in her ear huffed and fell silent.

Bo stood on the corner of Francis and Windsor, scowling deeply. Cars whooshed past in the grey midmorning, sending plumes of oily water splattering onto the curb. The large map she held in front of her bent and crinkled in the center collapsing in on itself no matter how she straightened it. On it, a two-dimensional London sprawled, sketched out in a spiderweb of crisscrossing lines. Bo hated maps. What kind of dumb idiot put a space in two dimensions? How was anyone supposed to know what went on, over, or under a place? She decided that if she looked at it any longer, she'd go cross-eyed so she lowered the map, squinting into the rain-slicked streets.

“I hate this place,” she said to the pebble. “It smells like fries and a diesel engine had a baby.”

“That’s France you’re thinking of,” said the pebble. “Why don’t you ask someone for directions?” A woman pushing a pram slowed in front of her with a concerned expression.

“Keep walking,” Bo snarled—then, to the pebble: “You better be kidding me, Ren Fa. *Me? Ask directions?*” She fished around in her ear. The pebble squeaked in protest.

“I was only—no Bo, don’t!”

Bo flicked the pebble into a gutter and immediately regretted it. She was on her own from now on.

“Stupid stupid city. Stupid people. Stupid—argh!” In the draft of a passing moped, the map blew straight into Bo’s face. “Stupid map!”

If anyone had been very observant, they would have noticed the face-sized burn mark that appeared between Greenwich and Barking. But they didn’t. They only saw a small girl peel the map off of herself, rip it into many pieces, and proceed to throw a fit.

“Me. Ask directions. We’ll see who needs directions.”

She could practically hear Ren Fa’s protests as she rooted in her pocket for one of the heavy circular things that rested there. The thing happened to be a one of a kind sixteenth century doubloon from the loot of the long forgotten Golly Dodger—a lesser known, slightly more cheerful band of buccaneers. It was heavy and embossed with a faded silhouette. In the watery sunlight, it shone with a dull lustre. It was also one of the last pieces of gold Bo possessed. *Hey you gotta spend money to make money*, she thought. She licked her lips. Then, as was her custom, she tossed it straight up. The coin spun end over end, a single sparkling point against the gloomy sky. On its way down, Bo caught it between her teeth.

Again she heard Ren Fa’s imaginary voice in her ear—“You must save them until you need the energy! Who knows what you’ll be up against?” *I’m up against the land of fish fries and bad oral hygiene*, Bo thought. *I do what I want*. The soft metal filled her mouth with a subtle nougaty taste. She sighed in satisfaction. As the gold hit her bloodstream, Bo felt more alive. Colour rushed to her cheeks. A small patch of scales appeared on the back of her hand.

“Pff. Me, ask directions.”

The little Chinese girl looked down at the large chunk of cobblestone between her feet and stomped on it.

“Wake up!”

At first, nothing happened, for it was just a large piece of cobblestone. But then it *rippled*, squirming sluggishly like someone rudely shaken out of a long nap. The reddish block flinched as Bo stomped on it again.

“Hey, you. That’s right. I’m talking to you. Tell all your little friends I need the quickest way to the Palace, stat.” The cobblestone didn’t take kindly to being told what to do. It let out a deep rumbling noise.

“Oh don’t talk to me about pride. You spend your days being stepped on. Now, are you going to help me or not?”

The stone grumbled once more in a way that reminded Bo of Ren Fa, but eventually obliged. She felt a small vibration pass underfoot as the message was relayed to all the ancient stones and gravel of London. There were answering vibrations, some annoyed, some bored and some just happy to be included.

Finally, with a small pop, the cobblestone to her left raised ever so slightly. Bo grinned and hopped onto it. Another cobblestone to her left did the same, and far away, she saw a raised pathway appearing for her sinuously as a snake, twisting across the streets and the sidewalks and showing Bo the quickest possible route to her destination. Meanwhile, passersby and traffic remained completely oblivious. A smug smile appeared on the little girl’s face. *Her*. Ask directions. Why would anyone do that when they had magic?

