



WITCHLORE

EMMA HINDS



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

First published in the United States by Wednesday Books,
an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

EU Representative: Macmillan Publishers Ireland Ltd, 1st Floor, The Liffey
Trust Centre, 117–126 Sheriff Street Upper, Dublin 1, DOI YC43

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in the United States of America. For information, address St. Martin's
Publishing Group, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.wednesdaybooks.com

Designed by Devan Norman

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

Names: Hinds, Emma author

Title: Witchlore / Emma Hinds.

Description: First edition. | New York : Wednesday Books, 2025.

Audience term: Teenagers | Audience: Ages 13–18

Identifiers: LCCN 2025021083 | ISBN 9781250369499 hardcover

ISBN 9781250369505 ebook

Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy | Magic—Fiction | Shapeshifting—Fiction

Romance stories | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction | Romance fiction | Novels

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.H568 Hi 2025 | DDC [Fic]—dc23/
eng/20250514

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025021083>

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First Edition: 2025

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PROLOGUE



The day she dies is beautiful. It's May, the summer holidays have just started, and the air over the fields is hazy and still, smelling of wild garlic. The light is so golden, it has that intense quality of a lazy afternoon first thing in the morning. She laughs as she tugs my hand, pulling me through the shaded trees toward the cave.

"I'm not sure." I lag behind, staring at the mine gully suspiciously. The ground beneath our feet is hard and dry but the air coming off the ancient gray stone around us is chilled. With the small hole of the cave a black mark in the green and gray stone, weathered smooth and moss covered, it feels as if all the lush, whispering green trees above us are egging us on toward a secret.

"Please, just try." Elizabeth cups my face and kisses my lips. She tastes like coconut lip balm. "For me."

I can never refuse her, tasting so sweet and smelling like sun cream and sweat. Her blond hair is like the shimmer off a puddle or the ocean, catching every particle of light as she moves her head.

"Okay."

"Great!" She smiles that perfect smile, the one that shows off the slight asymmetric nature of her teeth. "Don't worry. No one's going to see at this time in the morning."

There is nothing inside the cave but a thick black darkness that swallows us. It stinks of wet things, of the mulch under leaves, of the inside of a tree. Reluctantly, I press my right hand against the damp stone, its coldness seeping into my skin, making me shiver.

“Are you ready?”

I should say no, tell her that I can feel something wrong coming toward me, that there is danger lurking under the wet moss, but I don't. She is too excited, too certain, so I only nod. She grins, the bright light outside of the cave only catching one half of her face, an absurd half smile.

“Let's do it,” she says. I can't help my admiration when she holds her hands up in the preparatory triangle, taking a deep breath as her beautiful opal ring begins to glow. She flexes her hands. Watching her do witchcraft is always breathtaking; the way power radiates from her and the air around her smells like toasted almonds. Other witches make me feel inferior with their magic, and watching them only increases my resentment toward them, but not with Elizabeth. I never hate her for possessing the skill I lack. Her hands are so fluid as they move through the spell shapes, polished nails catching the pearly glow of her ring.

Then she starts to chant and something is terribly wrong. The coldness from the stone wall is strengthening like ice in my blood, spreading from my fingertips down into my veins, creeping toward my heart.

“Elizabeth,” I gasp, and my breath is cold against my own lips. I try to pull my hand away from the stone but it's like it's glued there and the harder I pull, the more I feel it: the stretching, gnawing feeling that I associate with a shift. “Elizabeth, stop—”

She looks at me with such excitement and I realize she doesn't know the danger yet, she thinks this is proof that her spell is

working. I've lost my voice, it's been frozen out of me, so I can't tell her that something awful is happening, something neither of us can control or stop, something worse than a shapeshift, more violent and more powerful. I can't do anything and I can't save her from it. The last thing I see before the rushing coldness hits my heart is her eyes; one blue in the light outside the cave, one blackened by shadows. Then light explodes from my chest and I am gone.

CHAPTER ONE



FOUR MONTHS LATER

I stare at the red, healing lines on my right wrist.

“Ouch,” I hiss, as I carefully spread on the antiseptic cream and rewrap my arm. “Ouch, ouch, ouch—”

“How is it?” Beryl asks. She’s standing at the door of the bathroom holding Mr. Pebbles in her arms. Mr. Pebbles is not a cat. He’s a demon. He hisses at me and leaps down to stalk along the edge of the bathtub, glaring at me with yellow eyes. He has no fur, which I find suspicious in a cat, and a habit of trying to urinate on everything I own, which is frankly just disgusting.

“The same,” I say. It’s been four months and it still looks awful. In the first two months, I could not stop scratching it, so now it has that slightly gnarly look—as if it is deliberately taking its time to pull back together.

“You screamed in the night,” Beryl says, pulling at the crystal on a ribbon around her neck. “I tried to get in. Did you lock your door?”

“I was fine.” I live in a halfway house for young adult witches

with “problems” run by Beryl, who is nice but also as sharp as a bowl of marbles. She’s about sixty, with long gray hair that she wears braided in a crown or loose with feathers in it. She loves a tunic and making her own deodorant and looks, to my mind, like the typical midlife white British witch. She’s also kind enough and makes an excellent cup of tea, but since this is a halfway house she is not the only one who lives here, so of course I keep my door locked. People like me don’t do well in shared environments with unlocked doors. Mr. Pebbles hisses. I almost hiss back.

“You’re not meant to do that.” Beryl frowns and takes my other wrist, turning it over, a daily self-harm check. When she sees the skin is cut-free she drops it with a sniff. “Your counselor said no closed doors.”

My counselor at the hospital, Counselor Cooper, is the one who recommended Beryl’s as a good alternative to going back into student accommodation. Given my “challenges.” I could technically leave whenever I want, but it’s better than my parents’ house, which was floated as the other possible option for my mental health recuperation. If their house was a healthy place for mentally scarred shapeshifters, I wouldn’t be in the habit of dodging all their emails. Besides, Beryl’s is convenient for college, even if there is a lot more chat about celebrating the inner goddess and processing trauma through mime than I prefer.

“If you wanted to get in, you could have,” I say. I eye the lapis lazuli ring on her middle finger with dislike. I’ve had quite enough of witches and their damned rings. “But Mr. Pebbles pisses on my bed when I don’t lock it.”

“Hmm.” Beryl twists her fingers in a crooked sequence and the blue stone in her ring glows. Mr. Pebbles is suddenly out in the

hall, licking his bum, a glow of dark blue magic settling around his ears. I look away in disgust. As a witch's cat, Mr. Pebbles is used to being moved by witchcraft. After the summer I've had, it makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. "You said her name again. In the night."

I pause. I am trying very hard, every minute of every day, to not say her name aloud. I should be allowed to scream it in my dreams.

"So?"

"The counselor said, didn't she, that dreams could be connected to"—Beryl gestures at my body—"all of that?"

Counselor Cooper is right. Apparently shapeshifting, especially changing sex when you have absolutely no control over your ability, can be a bit traumatic. This is ironic because my shift is the least traumatic thing to happen to me this summer.

"It's fine," I say.

"How is all this?" she asks, looking me up and down as if deliberately seeking out my broader chest even though she didn't even know me in my old form. She frowns. "I thought the counselor suggested you . . . adjust your clothing to something more masculine? To help you get used to the new form?"

"It's not new, it's been four months, and what's feminine about a T-shirt and jeans?"

I look down. Being a shapeshifter, I'm drawn to the same clothes over and over, as a way to reassure the witches around me that I'm the same person under all this different skin.

"Nothing, but . . ." Beryl gestures toward my ears. I reach up and touch the hoops. They're white gold. They were Elizabeth's and I am never, ever going to take them off.

“Boys can wear earrings and besides, I’m not a boy,” I say, picking up my backpack from the floor of the bathroom. When I told Beryl I was nonbinary she thought I was talking about computers. “I’m going to be late.”

“Have a good first day back at college, Lando,” she says. My stomach lurches. I think a good day might be too much to ask for. I’ll settle for a not-terrible one.

I brush past her and head to the front door, past the conservatory where a witch from a local coven is leading a light-and-healing celebration. Eight witches, all between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one, sitting blissfully in the golden September morning light, their rings glowing with inner peace. Beryl thinks it’s best I do any morning meditation on my own. She says it’s because group stuff won’t suit my rehabilitation plan, but I’m not the only one in here after a suicide attempt. I am the only shapeshifter, though. They’re nice enough, the other witches recovering from eating disorders or drug addiction or depressive episodes, they’re fine to share a kitchen and bathroom with and no one’s particularly rude, but I imagine the idea of having a shapeshifter in their morning ceremonies makes the witches twitchy. Especially when the shifter in question accidentally killed a witch over the summer.

When I arrived, there was one witch who wouldn’t stay in a house with a shapeshifter. I said to Beryl that it was a pretty bigoted response, but she just sighed and said sternly, “We don’t judge here, we try to deal in facts rather than feelings. The facts are that a shapeshifter with no magical control is not less threatening. It makes you unpredictable and, since you are twenty times more powerful than everyone living here, that unpredictability is dangerous.”

I got the message, loud and clear: *We do judge here, just the same as everywhere else.*

I press my key fob against the electronic door, trying to ignore the sensation that I am checking myself out of a prison. Beryl's half-way house is in an old red-brick Victorian building in Chorlton, which unfortunately has the look of a haunted hospital, from the twisted wrought iron gate to the tiny slit windows on the fifth floor. When I first arrived a few months ago, I imagined someone was going to lock me in an attic in a straitjacket and feed me gruel. In reality, it's a leaky old municipal building that's been shoddily converted into a facility for young people. The double glazing is terrible, the bathrooms have no windows, and when someone cooks onions the smell gets into every nook and cranny.

I walk the ten minutes down the road to Chorlton tram station and put my headphones on, just like all the other students waiting for the next tram. No one looks twice at me. It's only when I'm at college that witches know to stare. *Freak. Abnormal. Shifter.*

I let myself settle into the fantasy of another life, just for a moment. Right now, I could be on my way to the Manchester University library, ready to meet some mates for a study session and get coffee together. If only.

I see a witch farther down the tram platform. She's a bit older than me, dressed for a corporate city job. She's trying to balance a coffee cup on one of those tilted seats they put on the platform, more a bum rest than an actual bench. In frustration, she spreads her fingers wide and twists them into a spell, her jade ring glowing softly green. The cup sticks to the surface. Around her, several people give her a suspicious glare, stepping away slightly. She is

holding the spell with her ring hand, her fingers trembling from the exertion while she fumbles in her bag for something. *Not going to be fast enough*, I think and, sure enough, the spell fades, the cup falls, and the people either side of her jump back in annoyance as coffee splatters over them.

“Fucking witches,” a man in a suit mutters, trying to brush coffee flecks off his white shirt.

“Maybe invest in a thermos, love,” an older woman says, handing the blushing witch a pack of tissues.

“If I was a witch, I’d change my nails every two seconds,” a schoolgirl standing next to me says. She’s in the middle of sharing a morning Egg McMuffin with her friend, both of them leaning indolently against the wall in their blazers.

“Get a manicure, it lasts longer.” Her friend shoots the witch a stunningly disparaging look for her age. “Nothing they do lasts. If it doesn’t last, what’s the point?”

I watch the embarrassed witch, her ring still haunted by a residual glow as she throws the remnant of her coffee in the bin. She looks up, clearly feeling me watching, and for a second she frowns and my stomach lurches. I duck my head and cough, looking away, wondering if I’m imagining suspicion in her eyes. You never know what a witch will do with someone they suspect could be a shapeshifter. I remember when my father taught me about magic and witches when I was about five years old.

“Witches are like musicians,” he says. “Their rings are their instruments, magic is their music.”

“So their rings help them make magic?” I stare at my father’s bare fingers, always one moment away from shimmering with white magic. “If a human had a witch’s ring, like—” I think of the humans I know. There aren’t many. “—Donald the postman, could he do their magic?”

“If a person took a maestro’s violin, could they make noise? Certainly. If they studied, might they learn to make music? Possibly. Could they make music like the maestro who has practiced since they were born, has lived for nothing but music, who has dreamed in music as their first language, whose musical culture going back generations has baked it into their soul? I do not think so. That is what witches are like. Magic is the air witches long to breathe, their only connection to an ancient, greater past, when they were leaders. Gods. Now they are mediocre.”

Father doesn’t look sad about it. He looks pleased. Father is rarely pleased.

“But . . . there are powerful witches?” I ask hesitantly.

“There are surprises, prodigies, there always will be.” He shrugs. “But the magic inside them is smaller than it used to be. Much smaller than ours.”

“So we don’t make music like they do?”

“No, Orlando.” He smiles at me, magic glittering across his face as it changes, a father of a thousand faces. “We are the bird, we are the river, we are the tempest, we are our own music, all the time, always singing. We are magic. They can never have it, they can never take it away from us, and for this, they will always hate us. They will never trust us. Remember that.”

When the tram arrives, the two schoolgirls take seats near the embarrassed witch and, two stops later, they are asking her if she has a crystal ball at home or if she dances with the devil. The witch is answering, explaining paganism, and I feel a strange thrum of envy. For better or worse, witches can be themselves in this world. Maybe my father was right and they think more power is the answer to all their problems. I am the proof that is categorically not true. I am a shapeshifter who is learning witchlore and witchcraft, and in May, my girlfriend died and everyone thinks it was my fault. All I have are problems.

CHAPTER TWO



If you ask someone to imagine a witchcraft college, they'll spout off about turrets and gargoyles. In reality, Demdike College is on the other side of a metal door with the word "cock" graffitied on it in the Northern Quarter of Manchester. It's a Merlin Foundation college, one of many around the UK, and some of them, yes, might have pretty spires and arches, but this one is housed in an old mill building near the Port Street Beer House with metal window- and door shutters that are magnets for the Manchester street artists. The sign over the door is small, easily missed, and has the words DEMDIKE COLLEGE printed in Comic Sans over a vague silhouette of a goddess symbol. It's pretty tacky, but witches seem to love any marketing that makes them indistinguishable from a yoga studio.

My parents are the ones who insisted I go here rather than a normal university, where, god forbid, I could study creative writing or sociology and maybe actually have a good time. Or rather, they told me if I didn't come, they'd cut me off. With a choice between being homeless or coming to Demdike, I chose Demdike. Besides, anything is better than living under their roof. Just like the various Bible colleges in Manchester, Demdike only offers a degree in

faith-based studies, four-year courses in witchlore. It's generally for witches who come from covens and families who care about keeping the faith and craft alive, and witches who are actually good at doing witchcraft. Once every fifty years or so, they might get a shapeshifter come through. Unfortunately, for the last two years, that shapeshifter has been me.

It's the first Monday in September and all the schools and colleges are going back, so obviously, the wet end-of-August weather has given way to glorious sunshine that bounces off the red brick and street art in vibrant primary colors. Despite my heaviness at having to face it all again, Manchester in the autumn sunshine—with its gothic façades, industrial edge, and yellowing leaves of the ginkgo trees blowing in the fresh breeze—lightens my step a little. I get lost in listening to music and smiling at hipsters walking their miniature dachshunds along the bustling streets. I stop in at my favorite coffee shop, Ezra's, to shore myself up with some *café*. When I pay, I rest a library book I need to return on French witchlore against the counter. When I move over to wait for my takeaway, a hipster with a goatee who's also waiting snorts at me.

"You know science exists now, right?" he asks, nodding to my textbook.

I glare at him. I want to say, *Yeah, and I'm a shapeshifter, put that in your science and smoke it*, but, just to be a dick, say, "That's discriminatory against my beliefs, you know. I feel oppressed."

He rolls his eyes and looks at the witch working behind the counter who has just used a small spell, twisting her fingers over his cappuccino with a softly glowing peridot ring to produce some latte art of a cat.

"Can you remake that for me, please?" he says. "The proper way."

She catches my eye as she tips the coffee out. Sometimes it's just not worth the effort.

I pick up my coffee, smiling at the flawless latte leaf before it fades into bubbles, and stepping out onto Faraday Street. It's nice and quiet today. Sometimes, there are antiwitchcraft protesters outside college, mostly conspiracy theorists who, along with thinking the world is flat and 5G transmits viruses, think witches are an arm of the shadow government. They're convinced we herald the end of the world and are sitting on a vast stock of power we will one day use to destroy everyone, choosing to ignore the fact that those types of spells and the grimoires that held them were lost long ago or are hidden away by the Merlin Foundation. The ancient times, when witchcraft was on the lips of every monarch in Europe, when witches cast horoscopes for kings and brewed tonics for princes, have gone. Cursing and condemnatory magic has been lost, grimoires burned, and witches executed, old practices falling to the wayside. Spells dedicated to chaos have disappeared into the mists of time, and most modern employers look at witches with their little domestic spells that never last more than a few hours and consider them just part of a bizarre belief system and a source of a few helpful tricks for the office party. Besides, today most witches wouldn't have the power to sustain bigger spells even if they came across them. A shapeshifter would, but that's part of the reason why I've only ever had one witch friend, and why she's dead.

"Is this Demdike College?"

I look up as I reach the front door. There is a tall, dark-haired guy standing on the pavement holding a takeaway coffee. He's dressed like every other handsome student in Manchester, his denim jacket just the right level of distressed vintage, but he's got

a monster of a sapphire ring on his middle finger. It's a dead giveaway. He's either got a really weird fashion sense, or he's a witch.

"Yes, this is it." I look pointedly at the clearly ineffective sign.

"Right." He shifts his backpack on his shoulder. "I wasn't sure."

"Okay." I don't know why he is talking to me. I look him over for clues as to whether maybe I know him. I take in his light brown skin, curly black hair, greenish brown eyes, the kind of casual stance with a straight back that comes to guys who know they're impeccably good-looking. I've definitely never seen him before. I'd remember that dimple in his cheek when he smiles and he is still smiling at me, which is very weird. "You're starting first year?"

"Third-year transfer. Witchlore and Witchcraft."

"Ah. Me, too. Not the transfer bit, but everything else."

I don't have any words of welcome for this new person, so I just stare at his cup. Train station coffee is gross.

"Ezra's," I say abruptly.

"What?" He frowns.

"Ezra's." I point at his coffee cup and then to mine and then across the street. "The best coffee in the city."

"Oh. Thank you." *Still smiling.*

"You're welcome." I find myself smiling back, even though I don't want to, not a bit, and it's at that exact moment that Carl Lord slams his shoulder into me from behind, pushing me out of the way to open the front door of college.

"Watch it, shifter," he snaps.

"Watch yourself, dickface," I say back. *Here we go*, I think dismally.

"Heard about your 'attempt.'" Carl mimes slashing his wrists and I hate that I blush. "Couldn't even get that right, could you?"

“Work it up your arse,” I say.

“You wish.”

Carl Lord is the great gay gatekeeper. He’s handsome in that harsh, brutalist way; shockingly white skin, vivid blond thatch of hair, he looks like he should be on a Soviet poster for farming from the 1930s. He’s from Salford and he calls everyone “mate” and is built like a semiprofessional footballer. This has made him the Most Popular Queer in college and he hates my living guts.

“He’s jealous of you,” Elizabeth used to say. *“You’re a shifter. You’re full of magic.”*

If it’s true that Carl’s jealous of magic I can’t even control, he hides it under a crapload of disdain. Some of my father’s words of warning pop into my head again: *They will always hate us. They will never trust us. Remember that.*

Carl holds the door open and looks me up and down with some of that classic witch distrust. “I heard you’re a lad again.” He shakes his head in disgust as he lingers. There’s no point in telling him that I’m not a lad or a girl because he has never cared. He looks at the new guy. “Coming in, mate?”

“Um, yeah, sure.” The new guy looks between us, completely confused, but I let him walk ahead of me into the rickety old lift. There’s no way I’m climbing into a potential death trap with Carl Lord. I wait until Carl has pulled the brass grille across them both and the lift has jerked upward before stomping up the stone steps. It’s a spiral sandstone staircase with classrooms and small department libraries on every floor, but of course, the room designated as a student common room, with a grubby kitchenette and a temperamental microwave, is on the top floor.

With each step, I think of the reasons I shouldn’t have come back. It’s strange having everyone know my business when, for

two years, hardly anyone knew my name. I was just the shape-shifter. Now they all know who my girlfriend was and about my “fragile” mental health (Counselor Cooper’s term, not mine).

“I’m not ashamed,” Elizabeth says, her fingers tangling with mine as we lie on her bed. Her mum is out at work. I fiddle with her ring, a beautiful opal that, whenever I touch it, sends magical sparks down my spine. “I’m just not ready to come out to everyone yet.”

Counselor Cooper says flashbacks are normal, but I think there’s nothing normal about living in two moments simultaneously, especially when one of them leaves you feeling like you are drowning on air. I bend over at the waist on the fifth floor and put my hands on my knees, forcing myself to breathe deeply. I close my eyes and try not to see the moment she died. It’s like trying not to blink. There she is, golden hair spread out around her, coughing up blood as the spell out of her ring dims down to nothing. *Don’t leave me, Orla.*

It’s an ironic set of last words, really. After all, she was the one leaving me.



I climb the last flight of stairs and push open the door to the common room, which makes it sound fancier and more austere than it is. It’s the useless top floor of the building, all exposed crumbling brick and precarious hanging light bulbs. There are tables spread out with various pieces of secondhand furniture around them, all of them wonky and uncomfortable and smelling of must. The threadbare velvet sofas by the giant floor-to-ceiling windows that look out over Manchester are considered the best seats, having the most stuffing left in them.

Since it’s the first day back at college, it’s busier than usual,

with newly matriculated first-years all reading through their welcome packs, second- and third-years marking their territory, and fourth-years looking world-weary. Carl's already lounging across one of the best sofas as if he owns it, twisting his fingers in a sharp cutting motion so that his pink tourmaline ring glows and his hair changes from black to blue and back again. His mates are laughing appreciatively. I don't look at him, but I feel his eyes, the eyes of everyone on me. It was like this the last time I shifted; I've only done it twice since starting college, so it's still a novelty. Even when I wear the same boots, the same coat, presenting a uniform for people to navigate, their eyes still pillage me, seeking out all the ways I am different. I find a grotty table in a dark corner that has a chair with the seat nearly worn through and avoid looking at anyone at all. It doesn't stop the whispers.

"Didn't even go to the funeral . . ."

"Do you think they were really sleeping together?"

"I didn't know they were lesbians . . ."

I sigh heavily and pull out my headphones again. I don't turn any music on, I just enjoy the way they muffle the theories and questions buzzing around me. Part of me wants to tell everyone that I didn't go to the funeral because I was banned by Elizabeth's parents. Her mum threatened to curse me to hell and back and looked like she'd sell her soul for the power to do it. As for the sleeping-together stuff, well, that's no one's business.

I pull my summer work for my spellcrafting class out of my bag and look down at the various hand positions on the paper. I can get on fine in my lore classes, they're all essay based and are my highest marks, but witchcraft is an absolute nightmare. I try my hardest to pick modules that are all written coursework, history, and theory courses, but everyone enrolled on the Witchlore

and Witchcraft degree is required to take at least one practical craft course a term. This term, it's Twelfth-Century Witchcraft, and the tutor will probably despair of me as much as every other craft tutor I've ever had.

Taking a deep breath, knowing it will come to nothing, I move my hands in the correct motion, telling myself over and over what my parents and every shifter teacher I've ever had has told me since I was about five years old: *Shapeshifters don't need rings. Use your shifting power, direct it to your hands, craft the spell. . . .* It's supposed to be easy, innate, lifting off my skin like mist, traveling through my fingers just like it does for my parents, beautiful and terrible all at once. Nothing happens. What should bring light and magic out of me is just weird hand movements, like I'm doing a daft shadow puppet theater. I can see some girls at another table looking at me and smirking. It's been two years and I'm still the weird shapeshifter who can't control their powers. At least one thing is the same about this year.

"Hi again."

Someone sits down beside me. I look up. It's the new guy. He's smiling at me. Again. I slowly remove my headphones and stare at him.

"It's Orla, right?"

"I go by Lando." I cover my work with my arms. I don't want him to see how I'm still practicing first-year transitions. He frowns.

"I thought it was Orla." He looks over his shoulder toward the group all lounging on the sofas. They're competing, moving their hands rapidly, racing to be the first one to cast a small breeze to make wind chimes sing. Carl laughs when it glows pink, a corresponding color to his ring, proving it's him. I look

at the new guy. I can't understand why he's over here instead of over there.

"That was a nickname my friend gave me last year."

I can hear her voice in my ear. *Don't leave me, Orla.*

"Shapeshifters change their names every time they shift gender?" His voice is eager and not at all scornful, but I don't owe him an answer. Some witches are like this at first, approaching a shapeshifter with excitement, but it always curdles and I don't want to be the odd thing in the window of the curiosity shop that new people stare at.

"I don't change gender." I glare at him. This particular glare has always been enough to push everyone away. I can imagine exactly what he'll say to the others when he swans back over to the sofas. *Crazy shapeshifters, no wonder they're so messed up in the head.* He doesn't move.

"I'm sorry," he says quietly. "I shouldn't have . . . that was crappy of me."

Literally no one at this school has ever said that to me. His apology leaves me speechless. He sticks out his hand with the ring on.

"I'm Bastian," he says. "He/him."

I don't take it. I don't like touching witches' rings anymore, not after Elizabeth.

"Orlando," I say. Everyone knows my pronouns.

"You're a shapeshifter and your parents named you *Orlando*?" He sounds amused. "Is that an homage or a dig?"

"And you're a witch named after one of the classic pieces of German fantasy literature so I think you can shut up," I snap. I think this will surely be enough to send him running, but he smiles slowly.

“Most people think it’s short for Sebastian.” He fiddles with his ring.

“Yeah, well, I read a lot,” I mutter. There’s very little else to do when you grow up with no friends.

“So your parents were fond of twentieth-century queer literature, were they?” he asks.

There are plenty of queer witches (after all, they don’t have the reputation of dancing together naked under the moonlight for nothing) and there’s even a nonbinary witch tutoring practical brews here at college, but they’re twenty-five and they’re not a shifter so they don’t get shit for it like I do. So I hesitate. I check Bastian for the usual signs, piercings or rainbow stickers or undercuts, and don’t find any. He might be closeted, but a closeted boy is probably the last thing I need after what happened last year.

“Why? Are you fond of queer literature?” I stare at him steadily.

“Yeah.” He shrugs. So, not closeted. Just tall and handsome and sitting with me.

“I don’t know what my parents are fond of.”

“I’m sorry.” He looks genuinely sad about it. “They said you were . . .”

An orphan. Nobody at college ever asks what happened to them or where they are so I never have to tell the truth. It’s easier to have no parents than explain the parents I do have. The locked doors, the emotional blackmail, the appalling and weirdly affirming realization that even a hospital-mandated halfway house for mentally unstable teenagers would be better than living with them again.

“Did you hurt your wrist?” he asks.

“No, it’s a fashion statement.”

“Shapeshifters can’t heal themselves?”

“No, I’m not Wolverine.” I scowl at him and put my bandaged wrist under the table, out of sight. His eyes follow it.

“I could heal it for you, if you like.” He lifts his hand and twists it, the stone of his ring catching the light. I stiffen. All witches can heal with brews (bubble, bubble, toil and trouble and all that) and anyone can make a healing tonic or two with ginger and lemon. But a talented few witches can heal with stones. Rings are inherited, passed down generations with different magical properties attached to them. A healing stone is a rare ring, however, so rare that most modern witches would prefer to take a broken bone to the hospital than trust in the volatility of an ancient stone. If he’s confident in his ability, he must be more naturally talented than most of the witches I’ve met.

I examine his ring. It’s a very traditional chunky piece, clearly ancient, yellow gold in a square setting that has lost the sharpness of its edges and runes graven into the sides of it. The sapphire itself is oval and a dusty blue, not cut like a modern gemstone but smooth, like sea glass. It looks so comfortable on his finger, as if eager to perform witchcraft for him. I stare down at my bare fingers. I’ve been trying to learn witchcraft my entire life and I still can’t do the basics. I can’t even control my shifting. I have a sudden flash of memory, my father standing over me as I cried, his face impassive as his body filled with light, the hair on his arms growing long and then disappearing, the disgust in his eyes still the same. *A shapeshifter who cannot control her powers is less than a witch, less than nothing. We are made to be the strongest, not the weakest.* I don’t know what I was made to be, but I knew I couldn’t make him happy and it was my fault. Always my fault.

“No, thanks,” I say. I would be a naive prat to let a strange

witch use their ring on me. He has sexy eyes but he might be a secret douchebag. So many people are.

“Another time, then,” he says.

“Can’t *wait*.”

I am deliberately sarcastic but Bastian doesn’t seem to care. He grins broadly and nods, pulling a library book out of his bag and opening it.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I have this reading to do before my Early Medieval Brewing class in ten minutes.” He frowns. “Did you want to talk about something else?”

“No, I mean, what are you doing—” I gesture to his body, sitting opposite mine, and then to the various spaces at other tables around the room, implying the obvious question: *What the hell are you doing sitting with me?*

“Do you want me to go?”

“I don’t . . .” I go to pull my hair back from my face, that familiar smoothing motion of scooping long curls back into a ponytail, only to find the shortness of my new curls. The back of my head and neck suddenly feels very exposed. “Sit wherever you want.”

“Okay.” He turns back to his book. “I’ll sit here.”

I watch him for a minute, wondering if this is some kind of ploy and he’s going to start asking me if it’s really my fault that my girlfriend is dead, but he doesn’t. He seems to be underlining something with a pencil. I wait. He turns the page.

“Fine,” I say.

After all, what does it matter to me if some new guy wastes his time with the weird shapeshifter? I have a sudden urge to tell him my version of things; it rises in my throat until I can taste the

words on my lips: *It didn't happen like they say.* But I don't speak. No one believes me, after all, and neither will he. By lunchtime, he'll have heard their version and he'll never sit with me again. That's just what happens.