

I knew the dangers of witchcraft. My parents had told me about the time before I was born, when magic plagued our desert kingdom of Bahati. Untrained witch doctors trying to cure warts ended up paralyzing their patients or turning them into crocodiles. Amateur potion brewers tainted their villages' water supplies. Warring witch clans cursed each other back and forth, and their poorly aimed spells destroyed houses, burned crops, and scared away the hogs and gazelles that we all needed for food.

Magic was capable of nothing but wickedness. That's why my parents, the king and queen, had outlawed it twelve years ago, banishing all practitioners who were caught. A witch had not been seen in our kingdom for over a decade. Magic had faded into myth, into legend, into whispers and bedtime stories.

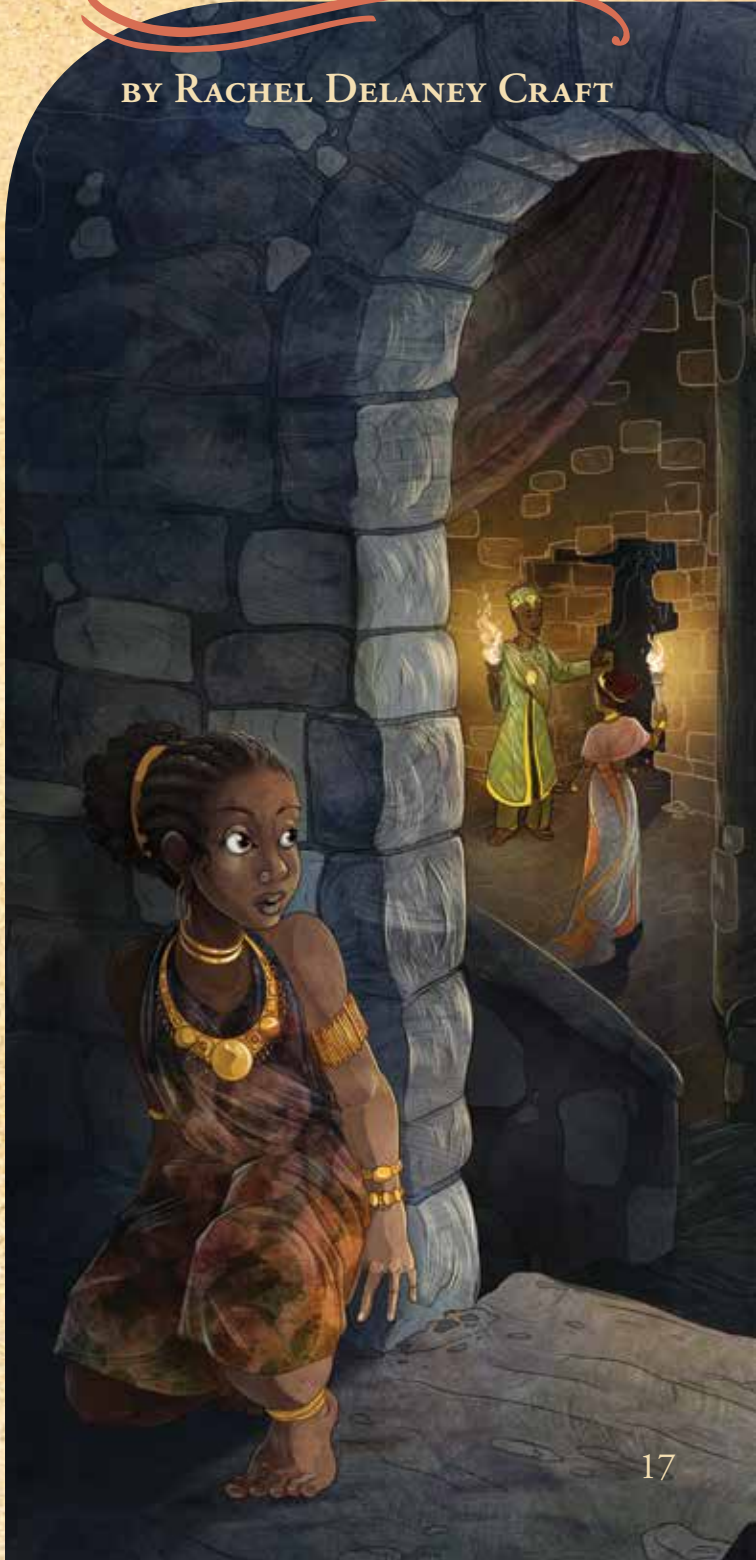
Naturally, then, I was surprised to find a witch living in the palace.

I first saw her after the gathering of the tribes. My parents had a disagreement with the neighboring King Kurundi, who was convinced our land had huge tracts of gold that we were unwilling to share. The truth was we had no gold, but he didn't believe this. He insisted my parents hand some of it over to him—to aid his people, who had suffered a flood last fall—or risk war.

What followed was a week of tense discussions, closed doors, and a palace on edge. My parents didn't tell me what was going on, so I eavesdropped as much as I could. One night, I saw my desperate parents dismiss their bodyguards and tiptoe down the stairs, past the dungeon, through a hidden door that I had never known existed.

Yara and the Witch Queen

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HERE, **IMPLICATIONS** MEANS
WHAT AN EVENT OR DISCOVERY
MIGHT MEAN.



A **VIAL** IS A
SMALL BOTTLE.

I crept after them through a maze of tunnels, until they emerged in a cavern. The light of their torch illuminated a grim little cell with a barred doorway. I couldn't see the person beyond the bars, and I couldn't make out the words whispered between them and my parents. But when the king and queen left, they each carried half a dozen gold ingots in their arms.

I was so shocked, I barely managed to scurry back up the tunnel before my parents saw me. My head spun with the implications. Perhaps this place was just a secret storeroom, I told myself, where they kept emergency supplies. The shape I thought I'd seen behind the bars was probably a shadow cast by the flickering torchlight. The whispers I thought I'd heard were probably the echoes of my parents' voices as they murmured to one another.

But I couldn't shake the purplish gleam of the bars: not metal, like most prison cells, but amethyst. And, as I had learned from my parents' stories, amethyst was poison to witches.

After That, I spent many nights sneaking around the dungeon, trying to confirm—or rather, hoping to disprove—what I'd witnessed. I asked the jailer, but he was cagey.

"I'm giving you an order, as your princess and future queen. What lies beyond that door?"

"There is no door there, Princess Yara."

I put my hands on my hips. "There is, and I've seen it. If you press this brick—"

He moved his large body between me and the brick in question. "I'm sorry, Princess. I cannot tell you—on your parents' orders."

I Grew Skilled at moving silently. I started wearing dark robes, walking about barefoot, hiding in shadows. Having grown up in the palace, I knew every stairwell, every nook, every trapdoor, and everyone's daily routine. I waited until the physician was on her weekly trip to the apothecary, then snuck into her chamber and stole a vial of sleeping draft. A few drops in the jailer's drink one night was all it took to make him nod off.

I pressed the brick, and the hidden door slid open. I crept down the stairs, a lantern in one hand, then through the dripping tunnels that wound down into the earth. My callused feet were used to the cold stone floors, and my thick wool robe kept out the chill air. Still, I shivered.

Then I saw the amethyst bars. A pale flame flickered behind them, illuminating the humped silhouette of the person crouched within. Swallowing my fear, I took a step closer.

The witch turned her head sharply toward me. I gasped, but stood my ground. The amethyst would protect me. I hoped.

The witch fixed me with eyes as dark as black marbles. The rest of her face was worn, like leather that has been scuffed and stained and faded in the sun. Her tattered robes hung loose, suggesting her body had withered to skin and bones beneath.

"What do you want?" she asked. Her voice was gentle and melodic—not what I had expected from an evil magic practitioner.

"I . . . I want to know why you're here," I said, trying to sound braver than I felt. "What

AMETHYST IS A KIND OF
QUARTZ GEMSTONE. NOT
REALLY POISONOUS.



MEWY
PRETTY!



you're doing for my parents. I saw them meet with you a few weeks ago."

The witch sighed. "You are the princess, then. You have grown much. Has it been that long?"

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you what you wish to know," she said, "though I fear you won't believe me. I am Yoruza, the Witch Queen of Bahati. I was the leader of my people. Twelve years ago, I made a bargain with your parents."

Setting my lantern on the floor, I sat cross-legged and peered between the bars.

"When they outlawed our practices," the witch continued, "they planned to execute

many witches. I begged them to spare my people, to let them leave Bahati in peace. In exchange, I agreed to stay here. In case they ever needed my . . . services."

My eyes widened. *Services?* So my parents *had* been using magic, against their own laws! "And how many times have they needed your help?"

The witch shrugged. "A few. When drought struck Bahati and the crops began to die, I brought the rain back. When the palace's east wing collapsed, I held it up until repairs could be made. When the queen had complications in childbirth, I made sure the child survived."

"The—the *child?*" I stammered. I had no siblings, so the witch must have been referring to *me*.

I looked at the sad slump of her shoulders, the weariness in her face, the lonely cell around her. This woman was not evil. She had saved my life. And the king and queen—my parents—had kept her in captivity for over a decade.

When I emerged from the hidden door into the dungeon, the jailer was awake. “Princess Yara!” he exclaimed. “Where have you—”

The pain at my parents’ betrayal, and at seeing the witch queen in such a miserable state, broke within me. I burst into tears.

“How—how could they—” I wasn’t sure how to finish that sentence. I understood *why* my parents had done this: they wanted to protect their people. But how could they go about their lives, dining on silver platters and sleeping on feather beds, knowing how the witch wasted away beneath them? Knowing they had put her there?

The jailer patted my shoulder. “If it makes you feel any better, she’s treated well. Three meals a day from the royal kitchens, same as what you eat. Linens changed daily. And she never has to do hard labor, like the other prisoners.”

I wiped my eyes. “But I’ve seen her. She’s wasting away!”

“I know,” said the jailer sadly. “Witches don’t do well in captivity.”

“Does anyone?” I asked with a sniffle.

“Of course not. But it’s much harder on them than on the rest of us.”

After that, I visited Yoruza more and more often. The jailer looked the other way

as I slipped in and out of the hidden door. When my parents asked how I’d spent my evening, I told them the jailer was teaching me how to juggle. Everyone in the palace knew he used to be in a traveling circus.

At first, I tried bringing Yoruza treats—candied yams, fried plantains, chocolate. But she rarely had an appetite. I brought her fine new clothes, comfortable shoes, woven rush bracelets and opal earrings. But their beauty brought her no joy. All she wanted, she said, was a window. Since her cell was underground, there was no way I could give her one. So I became her window.

I told her of the goings-on in our palace, built into a cliff face overlooking the savannah. I described the sunsets, the rainfalls, the beauty of the land as it moved from spring to summer. When I encountered a pack of painted dogs, I told her how their pups played together, pouncing on tufts of grass and chewing on each other’s soft ears. When the royal blacksmith fell in love with the palace physician, I told her about their wedding, and how the music and dancing lasted long into the night.

In return, Yoruza wove tales of the old days, when witches roamed free. Sure, magic caused problems once in a while. But it also healed the sick, drew water from the desert sand, and lit hunters’ way through the dense jungle. A skilled witch, she told me, could build anything with the right supplies.

But people were wary of witches, she said. Anytime something went wrong without explanation, they assumed magic was the cause. Eventually they grew so restless, the

king and queen feared a civil war between the witches and the mortals. That's when they made the difficult decision to outlaw magic.

"What a shame," I said. I was leaning between the amethyst bars, cutting and combing Yoruzá's tangle of hair. "Can you hand me that pin?"

She reached up with the pin, and I recoiled. "What happened to your hand?"

Yoruzá's littlest finger was pale and thin, more like a feather than a finger.

She withdrew her hand quickly, hiding it in the folds of her robe.

"Is it the amethyst?" I asked.

Yoruzá shook her head, but she didn't meet my eyes. "You have done me a great kindness these past few months, Princess. I thank you for that. But I'm afraid I don't have much time."





Her words sent a chill down my spine.
“Wh-what do you mean?”

With one arm, Yoruza drew back her cloak. Her other arm was lined with feathers, and her feet were glossy black claws.

I gasped. I had heard enough stories to know that when witches die, they become owls. “But you can’t be dying! Are you sick?” Yoruza looked barely older than my parents.

“No. But I cannot stand this captivity much longer.”

I had to do something. Yoruza had saved my life eleven years ago; now it was my turn to save hers. But I couldn’t simply ask my parents to set her free. They were too stubborn, too set against magic. And they would be furious if I helped Yoruza escape.

So I wouldn’t let them find out it was me.

The following Night, when the palace was asleep, I packed a bag. In it I put a clean robe, a pair of leather boots, a canteen of water, and enough food to last a week.

“Yoruza! Yoruza, wake up!” I unlocked the amethyst-barred door and swung it open with a creak. Behind it, the witch shifted groggily.

“Princess? What is it?”

I grinned. “I stole the jailer’s key and asked the blacksmith to make me a copy. You can go. You’re free!”

Yoruza stared at me in stunned silence. My excitement faded; I started to get the feeling that I’d done something wrong.

“Princess,” she said finally, “I made a deal with your parents. I promised I would not leave until their kingdom was safe.”

I shrugged. “Sure, but it’s not really a fair deal. Bahati is never going to be completely safe.”

“A witch’s word is her bond. I cannot break it.”

When I emerged into the dungeon, the jailer gave me a curious look. He nodded toward the sack of supplies in my hand. “When I saw you go down with that, I thought you were going to . . .”

I bit my lip. “Maybe. But she refuses to break her promise.”

“I’m not surprised,” said the jailer. “Honor is very important to them.”

I leaned against the hidden door, letting the cold of the ancient stone seep into my forehead. Strange, that for most of my life this had been simply a wall. Until the day it became a small, secret door—and a very big secret.

This thought sparked an idea. There was no way to ensure Bahati’s safety without Yoruza’s help—or was there?

I opened the door again and trotted through the tunnels. Yoruza was still awake; she looked up at me with furrowed brow.

“There might be a way for you to escape *and* keep your promise,” I said breathlessly. I told her about my idea. “Do you think you could make that?”

“H’m.” She steepled her fingers. “Perhaps. It may take a month or two. And I’ll need some special ingredients.”

“Of course. I can get whatever you need.”

I was imagining things I could swipe from around the palace: cinnamon, silk thread, orchid flowers, perfume. I was a bit



daunted by the three-page list Yoruzza handed me the following night.

“A cauldron,” I said, skimming the parchment. “I can borrow one from the kitchens. What’s this? *Moonlit river water from a crocodile’s territory?*”

“Be careful with that one,” Yoruzza said. “Wait until the crocodile is asleep.”

“All right . . . And what’s *unicorn dust?*”

“Unicorn is what we witches call the rhinoceros.”

My eyes bulged. “Does this mean you want . . . its horn?” I’d heard the horrific stories of witches taking all kinds of animal parts, sometimes while the creature was still living.

“Don’t be absurd,” Yoruzza said. “They did that centuries ago. Witchcraft nowadays is not so barbaric. We have found the dung works as well as the horn.”

I stared at the list. This wasn’t going to be easy.

Several Weeks Later, I secured the last ingredient: a length of twine, painstakingly woven from dried reed grass, which I harvested from beneath Bahati’s tallest tree. I brought it to the witch queen’s cell, where Yoruzza was stirring the potion over the fire.

“Good,” she said, turning. She had shrunk over the past months, until her tattered robe seemed to swallow her. I shuddered at the feathers creeping over her face, the unnatural curve of her nose as it became a beak.

She was weak, exhausted. She needed my help lifting the cauldron and pouring the liquid into a bowl, then she dipped the

twine into the center. When she handed me the bowl, the mixture had hardened into a yellowish wax with a nub of wick protruding from the middle.

“Try it,” Yoruzza whispered.

I lit the candle, then held it out. The flickering orange light fell upon Yoruzza’s face, and I saw something I had never noticed before. Beneath the weathered skin and pale feathers, I saw an expression that could only be described as bittersweet. Though Yoruzza wanted nothing more than to escape her prison, she would be sad to leave. She would miss *me*.

Yoruzza caught the look in my eye. “It works?”

I nodded. It was a candle unlike any other—a candle that illuminated secrets the user did not know.

“And do you think,” Yoruzza said, “it will protect your kingdom?”

When I looked into the flame, I saw the answer to her question. This light would show King Kurundi that Bahati had no gold. It would help my parents—and, someday, me—see the answer to future dilemmas. It meant that Yoruzza was no longer needed. It fulfilled the terms of her bargain.

Yoruzza moved slowly through the tunnel, as if savoring each moment that drew her closer to freedom. She left a trail of speckled yellow and brown feathers in her wake. With each step she grew taller, her back straighter, her muscles stronger. When she reached the secret door, she turned back to me.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I gave the guards sleeping drafts.”

Yoruza's eyes lingered on me. Years of captivity had been peeled away. Her skin had changed from faded brown to smooth, polished black. Her glossy hair sprang in coils around her head, and her eyes shone with joy.

"I will miss you, Princess."

I swallowed. "I'll miss you, too."

"Perhaps, when it is your turn to be queen, my people may return to their homeland."

I smiled. "I hope so."

She opened the hidden door and stepped majestically into the dungeon. To my surprise, the jailer was waiting there—he must have known better than to sip from his drink tonight. He said nothing, just bowed low to the witch queen. She swept past him and vanished into the night.

"That," said the jailer, "is a true queen."

I nodded. I could only hope to be half the queen Yoruz was. 🕷️

