



NOT. CHIPPING.

Clementine Morcerous awoke one morning to discover that her father had no nose.

This was not exactly unexpected. Several mornings previously, the Dark Lord Elithor Morcerous had greeted her with slightly less nose than usual, and a bit of a weaker chin. The difference was so small that Clementine, who was quite small herself, barely noticed it. She did notice something different about him—he was her father, after all—but she thought perhaps he had gotten a rather unflattering haircut.

An unflattering haircut could not explain the next few days, however, as the Dark Lord Elithor's nose became skinnier and skinnier, and his chin weaker and weaker. It

could also not explain why his skin took on the raw-looking texture of freshly chopped wood, or why the ends of his fingers sharpened first into long points, and then shorter and shorter ones. It was as if every day, something were eating away at him—*chipping* away at him, Clementine’s mind helpfully suggested—but the Dark Lord carried on as if nothing were the matter, even when the tip of his finger snapped off as he was ladling out the pea soup at dinner.

It was so light it barely made a *plop* as it landed in the tureen. They ate the soup anyway.

Clementine Morcerous knew that if the Dark Lord Elithor had three gifts in this world, they were:

1. The invention and implementation of magical Dastardly Deeds
2. Math
3. Not Talking About Anything

But the day she sat down to breakfast, rubbed the last bits of sleep from her eyes, and looked up to see her father sitting across the table from her, quite alarmingly noseless . . . well. Clementine decided that was the day they were going to Talk About Something.

“Father,” Clementine said as she watched him spear a piece of melon on the tip of his pointy wooden finger. “I do believe you have been cursed.”

The melon cube paused on its journey to his poor thin lips.

“Ah,” said her father, his thick eyebrows rising. “Do you?”

He then returned his focus to his plate, as if she’d merely made a comment on the weather. His finger had sliced through the melon cube. He picked it up again with some difficulty.

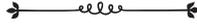
“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it?” demanded Clementine. “*Something* is . . . well . . . chipping away at you!”

Clementine regretted using the word “chipping” as soon as it was out of her mouth. Yet a consequence of Finally Talking About Anything is that words, once set free into the world, aren’t in the habit of going back where they came from.

The only sound in the room was the Dark Lord’s labored breathing, a thin whistling from the two tiny slits left in his face where his nostrils should’ve been. His eyebrows threatened to meet in the middle. He looked down at his plate again, and even the melon seemed to turn a paler green under the force of his glare.

“No . . .” he said softly. “Not. Chipping.” He spat out the words like they were curses themselves and finally looked up at a very concerned Clementine.

“Whittling.”



CHAPTER 1

VOLUME M–Z

or

The Criminal Audacity of Witches: A History

Clementine said nothing more about the matter at breakfast, due in no small part to the fact that she had no idea what “whittling” was. She was wise enough not to ask. After the Dark Lord Morcerous had shut himself up in his laboratory in the tallest tower of Castle Brack—as he did with increasing frequency these days—and Clementine had completed most of her morning chores, she slipped quietly into the Dark Lord’s cavernous library and considered her options, of which there were many.

There were many options because there were many *books*. Books of every kind covered the walls from floor to ceiling: spellbooks and cookbooks, encyclopedias and fairy tales, encyclopedias *of* fairy tales, books about botany

and chemistry and sailing and gravedigging and reading the stars, and books about *other* books. There were even a few slim volumes of poetry her father pulled out to scowl over once in a while, presumably to brush up on his brooding skills when nothing else in life was going appropriately pear-shaped. Clementine admired his commitment to his work.

The library was built deep into the mountain that surrounded Castle Brack, and Clementine could barely see from one end of it to the other in the dim light that came from the enchanted moonstone set into the rocky ceiling. The crystals very courteously brightened up wherever a reader happened to prop open his or her volume of choice. But otherwise, her father kept the library as he liked most things: dark, neat, and—most importantly—*quiet*. Rather embarrassingly, the moonstones on the ceiling decided to twinkle wherever Clementine walked under them, creating a far too cheery path of light all around the library as they followed the lady of the house's every step. She'd given them several stern warnings about such displays of whimsy, but she hadn't the energy to scold them today. It was only early afternoon, but confronting her father seemed to have used up what small stores of gump-tion she had at the ready. Finally Talking About Things was exhausting work. It was no wonder her father usually avoided it.

Clementine climbed up the ladder to the shelf she needed, and winced as one of the rungs creaked sharply under her foot. The furry chimaera's head mounted on the closest wall looked at her reprovingly. Clementine shushed him with her finger.

She had decided to start simply, which was, in Clementine's opinion, the best way to start most things. She slid the large leather-bound dictionary (volume M–Z) off the shelf with some difficulty. It was so unwieldy she had to carry it with both arms, leaving her teetering on the edge of the ladder, and it was so very *dusty* from being untouched for so long—

“*Achoo!*” Clementine sneezed. Actually *sneezed*. In the *library*. In the second that followed, she reflected on several important points: that it was arguably the loudest sneeze that had ever been sneezed in all of human history and she was therefore doomed (and very surprised at herself), and also that she was so off-balance she had no choice but to let go of the dictionary, which she did. As she clung to the ladder, the book clattered to the ground, bouncing off the rungs and the nearby shelves with downright joyful abandon.

Volume M–Z hit the floor with a *thud* that seemed to shake the entire castle.

Clementine froze, contorting her face to hold back another dreadful sneeze. But after a few tense moments, she found she was still alone, and the only reprimand

came from the disapproving stares of the mounted beasts' heads. The chimaera looked positively offended.

Perhaps it was for the best the Dark Lord Elithor was locked up in his study at the moment. Such a disturbance would have annoyed him *greatly*.

Clementine carefully climbed down the ladder and picked up the dictionary. She removed the rest of the dust with her handkerchief and settled down on the comfiest of the ornate straight-backed thrones scattered throughout the library. Like the dead beasts on the walls, they, too, were trophies—thrones of the kings and queens toppled by the Dark Lords Morcerous of old. Clementine's favorite had a dusky-pink velvet seat that was only a *little* bit ruined in one corner by ancient bloodstains. She flipped to "W" and read:

whittle | noun

- a large knife

That hardly seemed appropriate. But just below . . .

whittle | verb

whittled; whittling

- to carve an object from wood by cutting or chipping away small pieces
- to reduce, wear away, or destroy bit by bit

It seemed that “chipping” hadn’t been far off the mark. Clementine had seen some of her father’s more adventurous spellwork go wrong before, but she was fairly confident in his ability (and his own sense of self-preservation) not to put himself in the way of magic that would literally cut off parts of his body. No. Clementine had been right about the chipping, and she was almost certain her father had been cursed. But by whom?

Clementine had an idea, but just to confirm, she needed another kind of dictionary altogether. She supposed it was more of an encyclopedia, but she couldn’t fault the Dark Lord Morcerous of generations past who had named the book for a bit of harmless portmanteau. Clementine carefully placed the dictionary back up on its shelf—making sure to skip the creaky rung this time—and perused the reference section for her second source of information: the *Witchionary*.

The *Witchionary* was one of the longest-kept records of House Morcerous’s generations of Dark Lords, perhaps because it catalogued and chronicled one of their longest-running enemies: witches. From the rare but deadly Good Witches to the pesky, amateur hedgewitches who cropped up like daisies in seemingly every village in the land, witches and Dark Lords had been enemies for as long as there had *been* witches and Dark Lords. Clementine’s father detested witches—especially hedgewitches. Oh,

the peasants might call them “wise women” or “healers” or the slightly less flattering (but equally mysterious-sounding) “cunning folk,” but there was nothing wise or cunning about them at all, he’d assured Clementine.

Some of these so-called witches didn’t even have *magic*, but made their living duping silly peasants into buying their “love potions” and “protective amulets,” which amounted to little more than watered-down herbal teas and bags of rocks. These pretenders did everything they could to undermine the Dark Lord and his authority, from upsetting his careful supervision of the magical artifacts trade to even trying to *intervene* when he occasionally menaced the local populace—as if the villagers weren’t his rightful subjects to torment however he saw fit! Clementine shook her head at the thought of such audacity.

The Dark Lord had many enemies—he wouldn’t be much of a Dark Lord if he didn’t—but few would sink to such cowardly methods as *whittling* to take him down. And Lord Elithor didn’t have any serious rivalries with other lords at the moment, of that Clementine was fairly certain. She knew he’d made a go at manipulating mandrake root prices once, when she was small, and it had worked well enough to tick off a Dark Lord on the other side of the mountains who had a supposed monopoly on the market. Clementine knew this because she’d spent

much of the sixth year of her life under a sleeping curse cast by that very lord in retaliation. Her father, after eventually abandoning the mandrake scheme, explained it all to her when she awoke, along with a stern lecture about touching pointy objects she didn't know the origin of, no matter *how* shiny they were.

No, a proper Dark Lord would strike at Clementine—who was, after all, Lord Elithor's only heir—or have brigands intercept her father's crops on the trade routes, or if he was very powerful indeed, send armies of black-hearted men and beasts over the mountains to lay waste to Lord Elithor's entire estate. The attack would be swift. It would be brutal. Most importantly, it would send a clear message: *Stay clear of my wrath!* or *Your castle is mine, weakling swine!* or *For evilness' sake, Elithor, stop trying to start a trade war, it's bad for business.*

As far as Clementine knew, her father had steered clear of trying to pad his Dastardly Deeds quota with such ambitious plans since the mandrake incident, and had focused on inflicting misery at the local level. And this curse . . . this curse was different. It had been eating at her father for quite some time, and no other Dark Lord had stepped forward to claim responsibility. No army had come charging over the Seven Sisters Mountains and stuck Clementine's head on a spike. Whoever it was seemed content to strike from the shadows and simply . . . wait.

None of the villagers in the valley had magic, and if they did, they wouldn't have lived long enough to use it—not under Lord Elithor's watch. And though the traders and peddlers her father worked with spat into the earth and muttered prayers of forgiveness when they thought he wasn't looking, they were also willing enough to take their cut of the profits. No, the answer was plain and simple: this curse had to have come from a witch, and a powerful one at that.

“Whittling” even started with a “W,” after all.

Clementine paged through the *Witchionary*, skimming entries about witches with green scaly skin, witches who turned into cats and rats, witches who *commanded* cats and rats, witches who flew on broomsticks or plague-ridden winds, and witches who ate children or disguised themselves as beautiful maidens to lure unsuspecting knights to their doom. It was all very pedestrian, and the cannibalism was just in poor taste—no pun intended. (Dark Lords *hated* puns.) But then, on one of the very last pages, in her father's own handwriting, she saw it:

THE WHITTLE WITCH

REAL NAME: Unknown

ALIASES: The Whittle Witch,
the Witch of the Woods

How original, Lord Elithor had scrawled sarcastically next to the second name. Clementine agreed with him.

ORIGIN: Unknown
TRANSFORMATIVE ABILITIES:
Unknown (eternal youth?)
FAMILIARS: Unknown
SPECIALTIES: Simulacra, arbomancy
LAST KNOWN WHEREABOUTS: Unknown

NOTES:
TO BE WATCHED

Clementine stared at the last line of the entry, wondering how her father had come to cross paths with such an elusive enemy. Arbomancy, she knew, was tree-based magic—an unsurprising skill for someone who called herself the Witch of the Woods. “Simulacra,” on the other hand, would require another trip up the ladder for volume M–Z. And the “Unknowns”—so many of them!—stared right back at her, taunting. Who was the Whittle Witch? Why was she whittling away at Lord Elithor? How did her curse even work?

And how much longer could her father go on pretending that nothing was the matter at all?

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The Dark Lord Elithor did not summon
Clementine for her magic lessons that day,
nor did he come down from his tower for
lunch.

* * *

* * *

Or dinner.

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