

Celeste And The Witch Garden

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An Excerpt

Chapter Seven – *Inside The Flying Teacup*

Owls may have extremely good eyesight, but what wizards are best at is concentration. They have to be, with all the spell-learning, incantations, and wrist-flicking – if you don't concentrate when you cast spells, one wrong wrist-flick can mean the difference between turning your enemy into a warthog and turning a warthog into your enemy. That may sound like no especially bad thing, but you'd be surprised by the number of otherwise excellent wizards who've been killed by a stampede of surprised and not at all happy warthogs, all because of a simple lapse in concentration.

Skoros was concentrating very hard. He'd tracked down five of the orbs, then singled one out as prey. Separating his focus across all the CyberBats and flying them in some sort of formation was tricky at the best of times. Getting them to hunt down a specific and very fast object like an orb was making him sweat through his wizard's robes. But slowly, by grouping the CyberBats together for short periods of time, swooping in, taking bites and nibbles of the orb's outer casing, and then retreating, he seemed to be getting somewhere.

Every time a CyberBat sank its silver fangs into the orb, Skoros jerked in his seat. Information flared into his mind, like a bright and brilliant lightning flash arranged into ten pictures, one on top of the other. At first, when it had happened, he'd gasped, forgotten how to breathe, and then the image in his mind had faded like hope beneath his heel, and suddenly, desperately, he'd wanted to see it again, to feel that jolt of *knowing* things. Now he was doing it like a boy who catches butterflies in a net – swoop, bite, lurch, and then he'd use his mind to *catch* the image, to see it fully before it faded, tucking it away somewhere in the back of his brain till it was useful, as he commanded the CyberBats away again. Retreat, swoop, bite, lurch – and catch another stack of images, another set of squiggles that would mean nothing to anyone else in the Witch Garden. They

didn't exactly *mean* anything to him yet either, but he was the one person – the one in all the Witch Garden – who understood that they meant something to *someone*. To the people who'd built the orb. To *Celeste's* people. He directed CyberBat 16 to swoop – his last attack from CyberBat 4 had driven the orb away from one cluster, only to face another onslaught. Swoop, bite! And there was the lurch again, the flash of brilliant, beautiful knowledge. But wait–

He sensed a change in the orb. It began to weave erratically, no longer seeming sure which way it wanted to go. A sickly smile creaked into position on Skoros' beardless face.

CyberBats – feeeeeeeed! he commanded, and all at once he felt them swoop, land, bite, sinking silver fangs into delicate layers of metal and wire, diodes panicking, flashing lights flickering frantically as the CyberBats hacked and bit and tore at the orb's electronic innards. And in his chair in the secret chamber, Skoros shuddered and convulsed as though he were on fire – which, in a way, he was. Information burned into his mind, bright and clear, and swirling round and round, like a boxful of jigsaw puzzle pieces sliding over each other, searching for the holes that fit. And piece by piece, he began to see the sense of the orb. If the data kept coming, he knew, he could understand it all, right there and then.

Keep it coming, he almost begged his CyberBats. *Just a little longer – keep it coming!*

Suddenly, however, there was a surge of power, and Skoros was thrown forward onto his desk. He felt the orb go dead, dropping to the ground, and taking the CyberBats with it. The data input disappeared. The knowledge tried to follow it, tried to dissolve itself from Skoros' brain before he could reassert his will on it. The plugs that kept him connected to the CyberBats were ripped out of the holes in his head, and he sat there for a minute, feeling like all he wanted to do was sleep. Sleep, and somehow keep the knowledge warm, in the hope it might grow in the nest of his subconscious mind.

Skoros snapped his eyes open suddenly, and gripped the arms of his chair.

'Raaark?' said Razor, somehow making it sound like, 'Are you all there, ya great big loony?'

‘I’ve got to find it,’ Skoros growled. ‘Got to have it.’ He stood up, his hat almost falling backwards off his head in the suddenness of the move. ‘Razor, come.’ He decided the moment was worth an evil chuckle, and he gave one. Then he added, ‘We’re about to take over the Witch Garden, Razor! Very soon, it will be known as the *Wizard Garden!*’

‘Raaark,’ said Razor, rolling his eyes and whistling, as if to say, ‘Yep, he’s gone. Absolutely, positively bonkers.’ But he hopped up onto his master’s shoulder anyway, and had to cling on tight as Skoros broke into a run, out of the castle and onward, while the last memories of where the CyberBats had been hunting stayed with him.

Knew it, thought Harper. Knew this place was no ordinary teacup.

The room he’d flown into was large and round, with three seats at the far end of the circle. Above the seats, there were rows and rows of green, purple, and blue lights, all flashing at different speeds; and in front, were curved banks of weird black mirrors with lots of lines and squiggles moving all over them like multi-coloured worms.

Maybe it’s the invasion of the Worm-People, he thought, not the Beetle-People, after all. Looks like I might have to—

Suddenly, there was a noise like nothing he’d ever heard before, like thunderstorms fighting cats for a set of bagpipes – and a huge red light above him started flashing with a threatening pulse. One of the chairs swung around, fast, and Harper knew it wasn’t the invasion of the Worm-People. It wasn’t the invasion of the Beetle-People, either. It was the invasion of the Things That Were Unspeakably Worse than Either Of Them.

The thing in the chair looked like it could once have been a person – it had the right number of arms and legs, and a head like an upturned egg pretty much where you’d expect a head to be. But the whole thing was skinny and spindly and pale, almost the colour of moonlight on milk. It looked like it hadn’t eaten a meal in a year, yet it seemed, somehow, appallingly strong. It got out of the chair quickly, and Harper noticed its feet didn’t touch the floor. It was floating, flying towards him.

The head, the horrible, upturned egg of a head was pale, too – with just two puncture wounds where a nose should be, and a terrible thin slit for a mouth. But the eyes...

The eyes were big black almonds, with no pupils, that took up most of its face – so when you looked at them, you felt you might get lost, swallowed up and spat out somewhere unimaginably cold.

It spoke.

‘Intruder alert. You are an intruder. You must now leave, or I will be forced to initiate security procedures. Intruder alert. You are an intruder...’

Its lips never moved. Its voice seemed to come directly from its throat and fill the room, and it took Harper a few seconds to realize what it was saying.

There are moments in life, when people who are very scared, have one of two reactions. They decide either to fight or to fly. Harper didn’t know what he was dealing with, but he knew that he was almost certain to be more scared of the thing than it was of him. He chose to fly, turning in a very tight arc, and heading back out of the door. The monstrous creation followed, floating steadily after him, repeating its warnings.

‘You are an intruder. You must now leave, or I will be forced...’

Harper flapped like he’d never flapped before, flapped till his wings ached, and headed for where he remembered the door to the outside world had been. Sure enough, as he got close, the wall dissolved, and he shot out into the warm summery air of the Witch Garden. He didn’t look up at the hideous things in the sky that, apparently, only he could see, and he didn’t look down at the Green Man. He just kept flying, determined to get as far away from the horrible invading *thing* as he could.

‘What do you mean, an intruder?’ Celeste frowned. This mission was getting unnecessarily complicated, and she hadn’t even found a single orb yet.

‘A plump avian,’ Alpha reported. ‘Designation: owl.’

‘Well, what are you doing letting owls on board the scout ship?’ said Celeste crossly.

‘Your analysis is inaccurate. The owl was not “let” on board. It came—’

‘Oh, never mind,’ snapped Celeste. ‘I suppose it can’t do any harm, can it? An owl?’

‘Probability vectors of harm to the mission...insignificant,’ admitted Alpha.

‘Well then, don’t bother me with it,’ said Celeste. ‘I really should have brought my hoverscoot for this mission. Walking’s so...so...dull,’ she finished.

‘Probability vectors of mission being harmed by *dullness* also insignificant.’

‘I’m beginning to think *you’re* insignificant,’ muttered Celeste, and she walked on, struggling through a patch of dense, creeping foliage.

On her broomstick, disguised inside her patch of perfectly ordinary sky, Alditha frowned. It wasn’t that she liked to frown, but some faces were just very good at frowning, and Alditha knew that she had that kind of face. She’d watched the bats attack the orb, nipping in, taking bites, then nipping out so the next of them could have a go. That was when her frown had really started, but as she saw the orb fall out of the sky, the frown had announced its intention to stay for a while, and had settled itself into her face as though she were an old armchair.

She watched as Skoros and his wretched bird came racing along a disused pathway, the wizard stooping to pick up the orb, examining it with a smirk on his stupid beardless face. And she watched as he marched off again, holding the orb like it was some precious jewel.

She’d thought, as she observed all this, about swooping down on him, and clonking him on his arrogant wizardy nose. But that wasn’t, she knew, the right thing to do. Witch-magic wasn’t always about pointing a stick at people and turning them into frogs. That was more wizard-style magic, and she knew that Skoros would relish the chance to turn her into something warty.

No. For now, the beardless wonder had a new toy, which would keep him out of mischief, for a while, at least. She consoled herself with the idea that he’d probably never be able to get it moving again.

Probably.

Promising herself she'd keep a closer eye on what the wizard did in future, just as Harper had told her to, Alditha pointed her broomstick towards home.

Skoros was back in the castle with the orb. Razor had been on his shoulder when he'd found it, and as he'd carried it home. But now, the wizard wanted to be alone with the orb. He'd made the bird hop off and wait outside his secret control room, then he'd gone in and locked the door behind himself.

He hugged the orb tightly to his body, like a round, silver teddy bear.

'You're going to make me King of the Witch Garden,' he cooed to it. 'Yes you are. Yes you are. And when Daddy's got you working again, and made you as bad as me, who shall he send you out to get first, eh?' Without a breath, Skoros' voice dropped from cooing to sharp-edged spite. 'That meddling witch, Alditha, that's who.'

But then he caught his breath, and the intricate clockwork of his devious brain twirled and danced. 'No. Noooooonononono, I have a better plan...'

And alone in his secret control room, with just the powerless orb for company, Skoros laughed at the audacity of his own imagination.

High up in outer space, beyond Planet RY53-6 – or the Witch Garden, as it was known to its residents – the two original orbs soared into orbit. It took them a few moments to get used to the size of the universe again, then they adjusted, and with a silent pop, they expanded to their normal pumpkin-shaped size. They began to whistle, a sound that no-one heard; and then the sound dropped lower, and lower, from a whistle to a moan, from a moan to a grumble, from a grumble to that sense of sickness you get on long space journeys, and lower, and lower, far below human hearing. When the noise was low enough, the orbs glowed bright cherry red, and sent out a pulse. It wasn't a pulse you could see or hear. It was a pulse that would ricochet through the universe and

bounce off everything it hit. It would bounce sideways, through the cracks between realities – the tiny winks between dimensions – and it would do it amazingly fast.

People will always tell you that the fastest things can travel is at the speed of light.

They're wrong. Light needs action to travel, it pours through the universe, full of fuss and energy, like a white rabbit running late for tea.

The speed of dark is faster. All the dark needs to travel is an absence of anything in its way. The dark is almost everywhere already.

The pulse went off into the rippling dimensions, travelling at the speed of dark.

Almost immediately, a thousand cracks away, in a dimension it called home, the pulse was heard. On a fleet of unimaginably slick, dormant starships – the size of flattened-out worlds – a million lights switched on.

The fleet of unimaginably slick – now bright – starships took a moment before reacting, as if to consider the pulse that had turned on the lights, and what it meant. And then they silently began to move forward through the universe.