

*Excerpt – Curse of the Dream Witch*

Milo roused. What time was it? The room was so dark he couldn't tell. All he knew was that he'd had the most terrible nightmare:

He'd been in the forest and the Dream Witch had caught him and brought him to her cottage. Milo shuddered at the thought of it. The outside door was a mouth. Not something that looked like a mouth, but a real mouth. And inside was an earthen stairway that swallowed him into her underground lair. The witch flew him through a fog filled with the howls of evil things, over vast dreamscapes of jungles and castles and lava pits, then into a terrible darkness.

Like this darkness.

Milo rolled onto his side. Strange. He should be feeling his straw mat, the one in his corner near the stove where he must have fallen asleep. Instead, he touched a floor of cold metal that seemed to be cut into sharp triangular slats. Where the slats met, he felt a thick iron pole. He ran his hands up it. Just over his head the pole went through a ceiling.

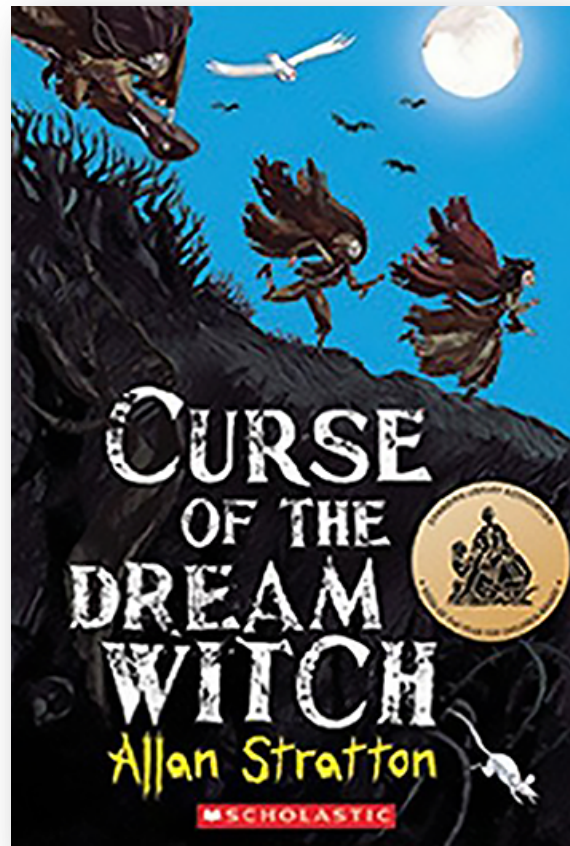
Milo's heart beat fast. Where was he? What was the last thing he could remember from yesterday? He'd been in the forest. And it was dark. And he'd turned to go home. And—and then what?

He tried to remember a return, his parents scolding him, eating supper. He couldn't. All that came next was his dream. His throat went dry. Please let it not be true. Please let me still be asleep.

Milo became aware of a curious sound: Whimpers from somewhere beyond, from the left and the right, above and below. He took two steps across the metal slats and hit a wall of glass. He groped his way to the right and found himself moving in a circle. He was in a glass cage. A bottle. He tried to smash it with his fists, but the glass was too thick.

“Let me out! Let me out!”

At the sound of his cry, the murmuring stopped.



A girl's whisper echoed out of the silence: "You're awake."

Milo pressed his face against the glass and squinted. "Who are you? Where am I?"

"Don't ask," said a boy. "Shh."

In the distance, Milo heard the creak of a great iron door on rusty hinges. A dull light, thick as plum jelly, filtered through the room. Milo gasped. He was in an enormous cave. Facing him, were shelves of children, rising up into the shadows, each child in a glass jar like his own.

"Asleep, my poppets?" a voice growled in the entranceway.

Milo froze. It was the voice from his nightmare. The voice of the Dream Witch.

"Don't try and fool me. I know your secrets," the Dream Witch purred. "Some say the walls have ears. Well, mine really do."

The sorceress advanced, growing taller with each step. By the time she reached them, she towered to the top of the cavern. "I've come for some spice for my spell of the day."

The children shook with terror; their jars rattled on the wooden shelves.

The Dream Witch pulled a hankie the size of a bedspread from her sleeve and smoothed it on the ground with fingernails as long as cornstalks. Then she unfurled her nose from around her waist. It rose in the air and tapped the jars on the highest shelf. "Hmm. A pinch of this? A pinch of that?" The trunk curled around a jar and brought it in front of the witch's eyes. "Hello, my sweet."

"Not me. Please," came the little voice inside.

The sorceress took the jar in her hands and held it over her handkerchief. "Don't worry, I won't take much." She cranked the top as if it were a pepper mill. Tiny shavings fell out onto the cloth below.

"Ow. Ow."

"Hush now," the Dream Witch laughed. "Why do you need toenails? Why toes? It's not as if you're going anywhere."

She put the bottle back on its shelf, tucked the handkerchief up her sleeve, and leaned towards Milo. Her right eye filled the glass wall in front of him. He felt the heat of its red-coal gaze. "Last in, first out," she smiled.

The Dream Witch lifted his jar from the shelf. In horror, Milo realized that the metal slats he was standing on were grinder blades. He clutched the pole at the centre of his jar and hiked up his feet.

“It wants to live, does it?” The Dream Witch shook the container and he fell back to the bottom.

Milo froze as the witch sailed him down a stairway of coal into her private spell chamber, a cavernous room that seemed to rise into an inky night. All around was a jungle of clutter. Leather spell books lay scattered in heaps. Hobnailed boots, cloaks, and conical hats were tossed among baskets of herbs, bundles of chicken’s feet, and boxes of beaks and rotting animal parts. Goat heads and monkey skulls peered from crevasses in the rock wall. Eyeballs stared out of pickle jars. The walls were worse, lined with terrifying murals of the witch’s dreamscapes. Their monsters within prowled the canvases as if eager to leap into the room.

But worst of all was the larger-than-life mosaic of the witch on the far wall. It twitched and wriggled as if alive. In fact, Milo realized, it was alive. Snakes and worms, frogs and toads, newts and salamanders, and beetles and bugs of every description had been painted and pinned on a massive board of petrified oak. The creatures struggled to escape. Beetle-warts spun on their pins; moths and butterflies fluttered helplessly.

The Dream Witch rolled her eyes at the mess. “Order,” she commanded.

The hobnailed boots instantly lined up in formation, and clicked their heels; the dirty clothes suspended themselves, shoulders hunched, chests in; the goat heads lurched upright, and the musty spell books flew into the air like falcons. The flapping covers choked the air with soot and dust as the books rearranged themselves into stacks around the witch’s spell table.

Milo gasped at the table. Carved from a massive oak stump, it was as big as the village square and lit by a candle that flared like a bonfire. The Dream Witch set Milo’s grinder down between a vat of blood disguised as an inkwell and a sheaf of parchments stitched together from the wings of dried bats. Then she unscrewed his lid, spilled him onto the table, and made a cooing sound. Gusts of wind swirled about the chamber. Milo shrank against the inkwell as the witch’s owl descended to her shoulder.

“Look, Doomsday,” the witch cooed to the owl. “We have a new visitor.”

“Am I to be its mouse?” Milo trembled.

“Not yet,” the sorceress grinned.

Milo shuddered. “What do you want from me?”

The Dream Witch plucked a tail feather for a quill. “A little help.”