



A SWORD IN THE SUN.

SHANNON PAGE • BOOK TWO OF THE NIGHTCRAFT QUARTET

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Book 2 of the Nightcraft Quartet

Shannon Page

A SWORD IN THE SUN:
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*For Karen
Who has always believed in Callie
And in me.*

— CHAPTER ONE —

When one's world has been torn apart, it is natural to reel a bit, unsteady. To search for meaning. To try to figure out who—if anyone—one can trust.

I stood over my kitchen stove, brewing a low-grade strength potion. Nothing much more than vitamins, really, except formulated for my witchly constitution. And safe for the daughter growing inside me...no matter that her father was human.

Petrana, my rebuilt golem, stood beside me. Watching. Learning. "Bring me the mortar, would you?" I asked her.

My golem stepped lightly over to the far end of the counter, picked up the heavy stone bowl, and carried it back to the stove. "Here you are, Mistress Callie."

"Thanks." The scent of fresh ground rosemary wafted from the bowl. Petrana had done a good job with it. I reached in and picked out a pinch of the herb, scattering it over the bubbling potion. Its fragrance melded with the lemon balm, verbena, and goat's milk already brewing.

The cursed ring on my right hand glowed almost imperceptibly. It was thanks to that, in a roundabout way, that my golem was so much improved from her former huge, shambling presence. We had tried to remove this ring that Gregorio Andromedus, my

mentor, had tricked me into putting on. The resultant magical rebound had blown Petrana half apart, and my whole hand had stung and ached for days.

But I'd put her body back together, reshaping her in the process, with new-sanctified mud from my backyard. Then I'd reanimated her spirit with my magic—taking care to keep any influence from the ring out of the effort.

I hoped that was what I'd done, anyway.

Petrana was lithe now, more woman-shaped, her limbs much better articulated. You would never mistake her for a human, not without a glamour over her, but it pleased me to watch her function. It even seemed that her mind was sharper. Of course, that had been happening anyway, as she lived with me and did tasks for me, as I taught her and trained her. It was just more obvious now.

"What does the rosemary do?" she asked. Even her voice had a bit of inflection.

Taking the initiative to ask a question was another improvement.

I turned to her and smiled, brushing a strand of hair out of my eyes. I had spelled it to keep it tame and tidy and out of the way, but it was behaving worse and worse as my pregnancy progressed. As if it knew I didn't dare use strong magic on myself. "It's an antioxidant and strengthens the energetic channels of magic," I explained. "But I can take only small amounts: since my child has human parentage as well as witchkind, it can be toxic to her in larger doses."

"I see." Petrana nodded. "It might improve the flavor as well?"

"Sure," I said, stirring, "but that's a secondary concern. I'll be taking only a few swallows of this at a time."

"I see."

After I'd stirred the potion fifteen times clockwise and seventeen times counterclockwise, I handed the wooden spoon to Petrana. "You take over for a bit," I said, stepping back from the stove and

rubbing my aching lower back. “No need to count, now. And I need to sit down.”

“Do you need me to get you anything, Mistress Callie?”

“No, no. Just work on the potion, thanks.” I pulled out a kitchen chair and eased myself down into it, grateful to be off my feet. I wasn’t *that* pregnant, but I was far enough along to feel the changes in my body. And my energy.

Of course, grief and betrayal played a role in my energy level as well...

I pushed the thought aside. Wallowing in my emotions wasn’t solving anything.

The trouble was, I didn’t know what *would* solve anything. I had been so jazzed when I’d thought of quietly searching for Gregorio’s “two other instances,” which could refer to two other witches who’d had children by humans, or the witch-human hybrid children themselves. But my initial excitement had quickly worn off as my research turned up nothing.

I had a good-sized supply of witchkind DNA samples (well, blood) upstairs in my lab from my experiments to find the “infectious agent” that had killed my best friend Logan and sickened several other witches. Of course, the culprit had turned out not to be an infection at all, but essence thievery by a rogue warlock. Nevertheless, I hadn’t disposed of the samples, so I’d gone through them carefully over the last week, searching for any traces of human DNA.

And found nothing.

It was entirely possible the instances were not in our community. The trouble was, I couldn’t ask Gregorio about it. I couldn’t begin to let him suspect that I was doing anything other than complying with his orders to be a good, well-behaved witch, keeping my astonishing secret from all of witchkind.

It rankled me. I’d never been good at being well-behaved.

I didn't see any way out of it, though—except for finding others in my position. Even then, it was a long shot. Gregorio Andromedus was the leader of our Elders, an ancient and insanely powerful warlock. I, on the other hand, was a young witch, barely forty-five—the equivalent of early twenties by human reckoning. Not only that, I was the junior-most member of my coven. A coven I'd alienated even before I'd decided to move out of the communal house to live on my own for a while—so I could breathe, live more freely...and see more of the human man I'd been dating.

No, I had to work quietly if I was to have any hope of learning what I sought to know, of finding allies to recruit. And I had to keep pretending to be meek and compliant all the while, even as my mind was reeling with the revelation of my daughter's parentage.

Witches aren't supposed to be fertile with humans. We're barely fertile with each other; our kind has been so winnowed—you might even say inbred—over the millennia as our ancestors selected for magical strength and longevity. In the process, the natural fertility of our humankind forebears was heavily compromised. But if we could in fact make babies with humans...as this daughter in my belly made plain...well, it would be game-changing.

"I believe it is quickening," Petrana said from the stove.

I looked up, momentarily startled, then realized she was talking about the potion. Not my daughter. "Good," I said, and flicked my fingers toward her, turning the fire under the cauldron to its lowest setting. "We'll let it hang on the edge there for another twenty-two minutes, and then turn it off. In an hour, we can bottle it."

"Yes, Mistress Callie."

"You can stop stirring, too," I added.

She set the spoon down and stepped away from the stove, moving to take her usual position standing near the wall at the back of the kitchen. I'd tried to get her to act more like a human when she wasn't at some task, but had eventually given up. Now I

just pretended she was the magical equivalent of those little round household robots humans buy to vacuum their floors. The ones that freak out cats.

As if I had summoned her with my thought, black-and-white Elnor prowled into the room, whiskers and nose twitching inquisitively. "It's just potion," I told her, though I knew the brew wasn't likely to smell like food to her. "To get me through this evening."

My familiar blinked her yellow eyes at me. Her nose was still working as she finished determining for herself whether the concoction was of interest. Who knew, maybe it would be. She did like goat's milk.

"Would you like me to open her a can of tuna?" Petrana asked.

I heaved myself to my feet. "No thank you, I'll get it." I needed to keep doing things for myself, even if I just felt tired all the time, just wanted to curl up and take a nap. This was only going to get worse and worse as the baby's time came nearer. Indulging myself now was no way to keep me strong.

Elnor twined around my ankles as I walked to the cabinet over the sink. "Careful, milknose," I said to her. "If you knock me down, there will be..." I left my usual faux-threat unspoken. As Petrana had just made clear, there *would* be someone to feed the greedy cat.

Why didn't this make me feel less alone?



Fortified with my new potion and dressed in comfortable, loose-fitting clothes, I headed to the coven house a little before five o'clock, Elnor under my arm. The front gate was ajar, which was strange. I closed it behind me and set the binding spell before standing quietly in the front yard, searching for any signs of intruders. Elnor twitched to be let down, so I set her on the ground. She paced around the yard, sniffing. When she came back to me with the cat equivalent of a shrug, I said, "Huh. All right, then."

I walked up the front steps and let us inside. A few cats, familiars of my coven sisters, sniffed at my heels, then at Elnor. I greeted them and reset the door spell before taking a deep breath and heading farther in.

I was glad to find only Sirianna in the kitchen. She, at least, didn't resent me, disapprove of me, or find me inscrutably weird. "Hey," I said as I dropped my bag on the window seat.

She stood at the stove, stirring something that didn't seem like dinner. "Callie, hi!" She pulled me into a side hug and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek before her hair could embrace me, then returned to the kettle.

"Is Leonora here?" I asked, once I'd gotten free.

"I don't think so, but I've been here all afternoon. I'm not sure."

Even as she was answering, I peered through the kitchen wall to the small converted sunporch that was our coven mother's study. It was empty—well, except for Logan's body. I widened my vision, searching the house for Leonora's essence. Nothing but traces, the residue any living creature leaves in their dwelling. I pulled my sight back to the kitchen. "Nope."

"I don't know, then." Sirianna frowned, her face flushed. "Sorry."

I looked at my coven sister more carefully. "What's the matter?"

She sighed. "I just want to get this right for tonight! I've had to start it three times already. It keeps discomposing just when it's about to set."

My heart clutched with a pang of guilt. I forced my voice to be cheerful, light. *Everything is fine. Nothing is weird.* "Oh, you sweetheart! Is that for the naming?" I leaned over to sniff at the cauldron. It was a special tea, chock-full of divination herbs. It smelled nasty and would probably taste like pond slime, but that wasn't the issue. I took a deep breath, scanning the brew for anything that would harm a hybrid child. Fortunately, it seemed clear.

I needed a better way to take care of myself—and her—through this process. Blessed Mother, I wished I was not holding this ugly secret...

"Yes," Sirianna said, wrinkling her nose, "and it's driving me bats. But *you* shouldn't worry about it! Go on, relax, join the others. Leonora will be here soon, I'm sure. A few sisters have gotten started in the sitting room."

Of course they had. Pre-dinner cocktails were as obligatory to coven life as our midnight Circles. And yet another minefield.

"Okay," I chirped at her, trying for a genuine smile and managing something pretty close to it. I loved Sirianna, and I knew she loved me back. Though I'd have much rather hung out in the kitchen with her, my presence was probably distracting her as she tried to get the tricky brew to set. Her magic was far more tenuous than mine; her strengths lay in her grasp of history, her teaching skills, and her pure, kind heart.

So I hugged her and headed for the sitting room, where Flora and Peony were tating doilies, their doddering cats stretched across their laps. "Hi, sisters," I said, finding a chair.

"Greetings," they both said, and scanned me from head to toe. Peony particularly scrutinized me for any signs of exhaustion, ill health, or low essence.

One thing I had learned right away: being a pregnant coven witch meant having twelve anxious mothers, no matter how else they felt about me.

Niad looked up from a leather easy chair by the window. Her ice-blond hair was pulled back into its usual tight bun; not a strand dared escape. "Oh, there you are." Well, eleven, anyway. Niad was never going to pretend to care about anything I did.

I gave her a weak smile anyway. Given our history, I didn't have to be faux-bubbly with her, which at least made things easier. "It's lovely to see you, Niad." I gave my words a measured amount of politeness.

"Likewise," she said, returning my tone exactly.

Flora returned to her tating; Peony frowned at both of us before asking me, "What have you eaten today, Calendula Isadora? You look peaked."

"I feel fine," I said, too quickly. Flora's head rose again, and now both elder sisters were scrutinizing me once more. "I even took some strength potion just before I got here."

Peony's eyebrows arched. "What strength potion? Where did it come from?"

"I brewed it myself."

"Calendula!" Flora chided, setting her tating down and starting to get up, annoying her cat.

I waved her back to her seat. "It was simple, easy, and I had help—" I blurted that last part out before I could stop myself. *Not helpful.*

"Help from whom?" Peony demanded.

I shook my head. "Just...Petrana."

Both witches sighed, and I was pretty sure I heard Niad stifling a snicker. "You know she uses your magic—" Flora started.

"Yes and no," I said, echoing their sigh as I resigned myself to having the battle after all. "She is animated via my magic, but she has a life force of her own, which regenerates without any input from me."

Peony shook her head and bit her lip; Flora continued to gaze sternly at me.

"Besides," I added, "it was the simplest potion ever, I promise. It wasn't any more strenuous than making soup."

"Goat's milk soup," Niad said with a laugh.

Our elder sisters both glanced at her and then turned their faces back to me. It was eerie how they did this. Even after all this time, I couldn't get used to it. They weren't twins, or even blood-related, but they had been coven sisters for nearly a hundred and fifty years. They were thick as thieves, rarely seen apart, voting in

lock step on any item that required the counsel of the entire sisterhood. They even looked more alike every year, with their thin, beaky noses, upswept blue-black hair, and shapeless black dresses trimmed in the lace they were endlessly tatting.

“Pregnancy is the most sacred, and the most perilous, time in a witch’s life,” said Peony. A witch who had never been pregnant herself.

I nodded, so not wanting to have this argument yet again. “I understand.” I tried to make my voice meek. *They really do care, I told myself.*

The front door opened just then, thank the Blessed Mother. I heard Leonora come in as the strong presence of her magical essence filled the house—the house of which she was lady and mistress. Elnor’s ears perked up as she sensed the presence of Grieka, Leonora’s familiar. Our coven mother must be returning from her regular Tuesday visits to other San Francisco covens.

Our conversation stopped as she swept through the first floor of the house, ensuring that everything was as it should be. Then she joined us in the sitting room, her ermine-rimmed robes brushing cats and doilies as she made her way to her usual chair. Today, her steel-gray hair was arranged in a multitude of small braids, which were then woven together in a complicated pattern pulled to the nape of her neck. I wondered who had done it for her, or if she’d just used magic; it was precise and beautiful. “Greetings, sisters,” she said as Grieka settled on her ample lap. “Shall we have a libation before dinner?”

Though Leonora hadn’t addressed anyone directly, Niad slowly rose to her feet and went to the tray of brilliantly colored bottles on the sideboard. She poured Leonora’s Framboise, two glasses of Bénédictine for Flora and Peony, and an absinthe over cracked ice for herself. She turned to me. “A sherry for you, Callie?” The bottle was already in her hand, poised over a cordial glass.

“No thanks, not right now.”

She gave me a theatrically aghast look. “Really? You know that a growing witchlet needs wine to grow her power.”

“I’m fine. I’ve taken all I need at home.” It was the best I could do without outright lying.

“Oh, how very sociable of you,” she said with a sniff. She poured a measure of sherry into the glass anyway, downing it before returning to her chair with her absinthe.

I smiled at her and placed a hand on my belly. “I’m afraid all my appetites are just so hard to predict these days. So when I find I have a craving for something, I go ahead and satisfy it, without worrying about whether the timing will suit others.”

Peony and Flora both nodded at this, though Peony frowned slightly. Looking for the barb? Leonora said, “That is most wise, my daughter. So long as you are listening to the needs of both your body and that of your witchlet, I expect all shall be well.” Her gaze turned toward Niad. “Niadine Laurette, perhaps Calendula would care for a glass of water or a cup of chamomile tea.”

As enjoyable as it was to see Niad try to control the horror and disdain that threatened to take over her face at the thought of having to *go to the kitchen* to wait on me, I really didn’t want water or tea either. “I’m fine, Leonora, Niad,” I said. “Really. Maybe I’m even a little nervous about tonight.” I patted my belly gently, nudging Elnor as I did; she shifted and settled more comfortably. “I’ll have something with dinner.”

“Very good,” Leonora said, sipping her Framboise before setting the tiny jeweled glass on the side table by her chair.

The three older witches conversed among themselves as I let myself relax. Niad finished her drink and poured another. By now Elnor was on the floor trying to lure Grieka into a tail-batting game. Fletcher, Niad’s familiar, strode into the room. I hadn’t seen him in a while. He was a scrawny all-black tom who didn’t seem as closely bonded with his witch as most of our cats were.

Can’t imagine why.

Niad returned to her chair and gazed at me across the room. "Heard from Jeremy lately?"

"Not for a little while. Have you?"

"Why should I have?" she asked, all innocence.

I shrugged. "You were acquainted with him before I was. You're old friends, aren't you?"

A crafty smile slunk across her face. I should have known better than to bait her. I *did* know better; sometimes I just couldn't help myself. "As may be, but not such...intimate friends as you and he are."

I stifled a sigh and tried to sound bored as I forced down the memory of the last *intimate* thing Jeremy and I had done together: performed a cautery on Flavius Winterheart, the warlock who had been convicted of stealing witch essence. That had been sickening enough. Now, I had my doubts about his guilt, which made it potentially ten times worse. And I could not think about this—not here, not now. "You know how difficult ætheric communication is from such a distance."

"They don't have the internet in the Old Country?" she asked, her eyes widening in mock surprise.

"Not that I am aware of."

Jeremy had checked in a few times, but his ætheric messages had been stilted and awkward, above and beyond the rigors and uncertainties of their transmission. He still believed he was the father of this child, and I supposed he still entertained the notion that I would agree to sign a contract with him. That we would become witchkind's equivalent of husband and wife, at least during the years of raising her.

I hated lying—to anyone—but as his father Gregorio had made utterly, painfully clear, I didn't have any choice in the matter. I had to go along with this terrible charade.

I wished I knew a way out of it.

"Hm," Niad said, taking another sip of her drink and glancing down at her cat. Fletcher was trying to join the game between Grieka and Elnor, but they were having none of it.

Like familiar, like witch.

"I'm not sure why the Old Country's rulers would have allowed anything like the internet in," I said, stupidly continuing the conversation when I wanted nothing more than to be out of it. At least, that's what I thought I wanted. Apparently my traitorous mouth felt otherwise. "Why would they want to open mechanical portals to a system created by humans?"

"You're right, I suppose," Niad said, still smirking. "I guess none of the fancy warlocks and witches there have lovers over here in the new world."

"Or if they do," I said, "they don't mind waiting for handwritten letters to come in the mail."

"Oh!" Niad cried, sitting up with a bright smile, the very picture of interested delight. "You've gotten letters from him, then?"

"Here, kitty kitty," I said, leaning forward and wiggling my fingers for Elnor. After a final bat at Grieka's tail, she came. I scooped her up into my arms and got to my feet. "If you'll all excuse me," I said to the room in general. "It's astonishing what a growing fetus does for one's bladder capacity."



After the formal dinner in the coven house's elegant dining room, we forwent our traditional Tuesday midnight Circle with our ancestress Nementhe in favor of a more unusual ritual, one I had never participated in. I stifled my nerves as the entire coven gathered in the back garden, obscured from the street by the house. Here, among the magical herbs, potent stones, and small creatures of the night, was where we performed rites that were bound with soil, or darker things.

Creeping Jenny had grown over the disturbed patch of dirt out of which I had initially created Petrana, though the ground still bore the indentation of her body.

A few feet to the side of that, under the cold light of the full moon, we sat in lotus position in a Circle on the ground. As ever, we arranged ourselves by age, from Leonora at the head all the way around to me, the youngest, at her left hand. The force of the Circle never failed to move me. All this concentrated female power, all our petty differences set aside.

Usually the senior witch begins any ritual, but since we were naming my daughter, I was tonight's leader. I cleared my throat and tried to clear my mind. I opened the phial of my preserved menstrual blood, dabbed three drops onto the ground, and began the chant. My sisters joined in; Elnor settled on my lap, though it seemed like there was less room for her there all the time. Had I eaten *that* much stew? Maybe I shouldn't have had that second dinner roll. It had seemed like a good idea at the time... I put a hand on my cat's soft fur and tried once more to clear my mind as I continued chanting, my voice melding with the others.

A silver light began to glow, enveloping us as the earth answered our call. The droplets of blood vanished into the soil, and I recapped the phial. I would lock it back in the menstrual closet with all the others later. I continued the chant, seeking for my daughter's name among the many possibilities. Her second name would be Leonora, following general coven tradition. Her first name should be a botanical, as were all the witches in my mother's line. Within those bounds, there was much to choose from.

I felt a chill as the moonlight seeped into my bones, bringing the silver earth-light with it, joining the blood in my veins, probing my womb, seeking to know my daughter. I stifled the urge to shake off the uncomfortable, invasive magic. I closed my eyes and clutched Leonora's hand, feeling her send silent reassurance. Long before she had created our coven, I knew that she had borne several

daughters, and that they had all been named in this manner. The tradition was cold comfort. I did not understand why this particular magic could not be gentler. After all, as Peony had pointed out, “Pregnancy is the most sacred, and the most perilous, time in a witch’s life.”

But I continued the chant, not breaking the rhythm, though my teeth chattered and my knees and hips ached from sitting so long in lotus. If the old sisters didn’t even twitch, I certainly wouldn’t. After a numbingly long while, my throat raw from the repetition, I suddenly smelled the distinct aroma of rosemary. My eyes snapped open as I broke off the chant. A large sprig of the dark green herb sat inside the circle. The plant grew on the other side of the yard, near the fence. None of us had moved.

Leonora gazed at the rosemary. “So it is done!” she cried. “The first daughter of Calendula Isadora shall be called Rosemary Leonora.”

“Rosemary...Rose, for short,” I whispered.

Leonora turned to me, raising an eyebrow. “Rose? The barkeep?”

Someone—Niad, no doubt—snickered softly. Rose’s Bar was a favorite hangout of the younger witchkind crowd.

“It’s a perfectly nice name,” I said, my voice stronger. “And perfectly common. Ordinary.” I hated being called Calendula Isadora. It always made me feel like I was in trouble. Or that I should be wearing a long, elegant gown over a corset. And a snood.

“As you wish,” my coven mother said after a slight pause. “Rosemary Leonora is now named, and our Circle doth ratify this choice. Amanū essūlā!”

“Amanū essūlā,” echoed Honor, our next oldest sister after Leonora. This bound the naming. The rest of us joined in, sealing the spell with the salt of our joyous tears.