



THE QUEEN AND THE TOWER.

SHANNON PAGE • BOOK ONE OF THE NIGHTCRAFT QUARTET

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AND
THE TOWER**

Book 1 of the Nightcraft Quartet

Shannon Page

THE QUEEN AND THE TOWER:
BOOK ONE OF THE NIGHTCRAFT QUARTET
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*For Mom,
who taught me how to read:
the greatest gift ever*

— CHAPTER ONE —

I put my foot on the shovel, tightened my grip, and dug. Another lump of damp, loamy earth joined the growing pile. Moonlight danced through the trees; a gentle wind rustled the hydrangea bushes at the corner of the yard. Elnor prowled nearby, padding noiselessly on the garden path, hunting moths. Far down the hill, I could hear the squeal of the F-Market streetcar as it made its turn at the Castro, the sound of a party on someone's deck, and the slow wail of an ambulance.

A sudden dart of light as the back door of the coven house opened, then closed. I blinked, letting my eyes adjust.

Niad. Of course. I kept digging. I was starting to get to clay.

Light footsteps pattered down the stairs as she approached. "Oh, Callie, it's you," she said, as though she hadn't seen me come out here an hour ago. "Doing a little midnight gardening?"

"No." I dropped another shovel-load onto the pile and turned back to the hole. Elnor had now come up to its edge and peered down, sniffing. "Research."

I could almost hear Niad's eyebrow raise. "Oh? I must confess, then, to an even more imperfect understanding of molecular biogenetics than I had previously realized."

Stifling a sigh, I leaned on the shovel and looked up at her. She had let her ice-blond hair out of its usual bun; loose waves cascaded down her back, turning to catch the moonlight. My own hair was tightly bound. I didn't want it interfering.

"I'm building something."

"In a hole?"

"No, with the dirt." I looked at the pile. I needed at least twice as much soil as that. It was going to be a long night. "I'm making a piece of equipment."

"With a pile of dirt?"

"Yes."

"Oh well then, carry on," she said, clearly already growing bored. "It's just, some of the sisters were wondering."

"You can let them know everything's fine," I said. "Go to bed, Niad."

"No need—I slept last night." But she turned and went back to the house.

Actually, I was glad it had been Niad; another sister might have offered to help. For the major work we did as a coven, all thirteen of us participated—which was kind of the point of a coven, after all. But, large as this project was, I needed to pour only my own magic into it, or the result would be blurred. The creature would not know who its mistress was.

Nearly an hour later, muscles aching from the exertion, I stood over the mound of dirt, assessing my resources as I thought about the monumental effort that still lay ahead of me. Dinner had been quite a while ago; should I have something more to eat? No, I still felt strong.

I bent down, first just feeling, then shaping the dirt with my bare hands, adding a little water from the hose periodically. Elnor kept her distance as I formed the head first, then the neck and torso, packing the earth tight, reaching underneath to help differentiate the body from the earth beneath it. Then I built legs, complete with stumpy feet, adding a suggestion of toes with my fingernail. And then arms, paying particular attention to the fingers, the opposable thumbs. It would need to be able to use its hands.

Stepping back, I inspected my work. *It needs more of a face than that*, I thought, and crouched over once more to give it some features. Artistic talent was not my strong suit. It didn't matter if the creature was ugly, but you should be able to tell which side was the front.

With that in mind, I fashioned hair out of a handful of desiccated daffodil foliage, tucking the ends into the top of the head and combing it out straight with my fingers. I went back and gave more attention to the articulation of the knees and elbows, then the ankles and wrists, then the fingers. I made sure the neck was thin enough to move, yet strong enough to hold up the large head.

Finally, I stood before my creature again, holding a short stick, considering. After a minute I tossed the stick aside and instead added some mud padding, forming hips and breasts. Witches generally choose to bear daughters, not sons, after all.



A hint of the rising sun tinged the eastern horizon, showing wisps of fog chasing down the hills and hugging the bay. Niad had come out to check on me twice more during the night, pretending to be concerned for my energy, my well-being, my I-don't-even-know-what. "I'll show everyone when it's *done*," I finally told her, my voice tighter than I'd really intended. "And yes, Leonora knows what I'm doing."

I had timed my work to coincide with the dawn, for its positive liminal energy—my creature would be one of light, not darkness. All was now ready. Putting any lingering annoyance at my coven sister out of my mind, along with everything else, I sat cross-legged by the creature's head. Elnor settled on my lap. I let myself ease into the subtle shift of focus that opened one's attention and receptivity to the world around us—far beyond anything we see with our eyes. Elnor channeled and returned that energy, amplifying and honing it. We sat with the energy for a long while. I held the intention in my mind, and my heart, and my belly.

When the eastern glow told me that the sun was near, I reached for the chalice beside me. In it, I had gathered the elements I'd need for this working: lavender, to encourage benevolent energy; chamomile, fig, and rue, for protection; gardenia and rosemary, for courage. I'd mixed these botanicals in a strong elixir of Commanding Oil—from a batch I had made with my own hands, eschewing the coven's supply.

I placed droplets of the mixture on the creature's forehead, then leaned over and dribbled more over her chest, where a heart would be. Then I plucked two black hairs from Elnor's back, laying them at the base of the throat. They vanished into the dark mud.

At last, as the sun broke the horizon, I focused on the figure. I guided all the power within me, and invited all the forces that surrounded me, to bring life to this lump of lowly mud. I had studied and prepared, and I knew I was powerful...but was I actually going to be able to create *life*?

Focus, Callie, I told myself. This is no time for doubt. I wove ætheric energy and my own essence, and Elnor's feline power, braiding it all together into something greater than its elements. I felt the power around me build, responding to my entreaty, to the natural energy that flows through all the world, to the desire to grow and transform and *live* that even the most inanimate object holds. I sent my own power back into the building force, redoubling, folding, swirling it into an ever-growing sphere of intensity. The storm of energy shifted color, from a purple-blue that only my witch sight could see,

lightening through red and orange and yellow, now visible to anyone, sun-bright and hot against my face.

I had to move quickly now—this was liable to attract attention. The house was warded against human notice, but I needed no more interruptions from my sisters. I began a low chant. Words in a language no one speaks any longer. Not to one another, anyway.

Merenoc gee'a folco Essulâ

I brushed my hands through the creature's desiccated hair, imagining it silky and full of life; then I touched her shoulders, arms, elbows, wrists, imagining them supple, mobile.

Eveen fancont o tenc ollan

I brushed my fingertips against her eyes, sending sight into them; her ears, opening them to the sounds of the world; her throat, bringing her voice.

Lian abree mellendoc uchi

I sprinkled crushed sage over her upper body, then touched every pulse point I could reach from where I sat. The scent mixed with the oils in the misty morning air.

Essulâ, Essulâ, Essulâ!

I chanted the last line again, then put my hands on the creature's forehead, willing life into her. My hands were hot from the gathered power; did I feel an answering heat in my creature?

Essulâ, Essulâ, Essulâ!

I closed my eyes once more, focusing, pouring all I had into the incantation, into this one task. This and this alone. The rest of the world fell away. I breathed mud breath, my blood flowed through dirt veins, my toes were pebbles and my lips were crushed maple leaves in autumn.

Essulâ, Essulâ, Essulâ!

I rocked slowly, leaning into my work. The creature was warm under my hands, and she was warmer, and she...moved!

Keeping my hands in place, I observed the shimmer of triumph that passed through me, and let it go. I was not done; this part was the most precarious of all. I continued the chant, all four lines once more, sending life into all her parts and pieces, exploring every channel, opening all her senses to this world. Binding her to me.

She moved again, shifting under my touch, turning her head slightly, testing her limbs. Still I continued, my eyes remaining closed, endowing her with all I had, all I could give. I felt her eyes flutter open, her new-grown eyelashes sending the tiniest breeze to my hands. I felt the rest of her move, nowhere near my actual touch—our bodies

were energetically intertwined, every movement of hers echoed in my own skin and bones.

At last, I knew she was made. I drew my hands away, drew my own energy back into myself. Letting her go was like pulling a splinter from deep in my heart, but also suffused with joy. I was breathing hard, almost gasping for breath—with exhaustion and exultation.

“Calendula Isadora! What is *that*?”

I opened my eyes. Leonora, our coven mother, had paused at the bottom of the porch steps. Her voluminous robes stopped a moment after she did, then swished back around her ample body. Grieka, her familiar, peeked her head out from under one of the layers of skirts. Behind her were three coven sisters: Sirianna, Maela, and (naturally) Niad. I hadn’t even heard the door open, I’d been so focused.

“Research,” I said, turning to look at my creation. She looked back at me—mud-brown eyes expressionless. But alive! “I told you I needed something safe to use in my experiments.”

“You did *not* tell me you were making a golem!” Leonora said, her voice stern as she and her entourage stepped down into the garden.

I got to my feet. “This is—”

“This is a *golem*,” Leonora repeated.

“Yes it is! Golem,” I said to the creature.

“Yes, Mistress,” she said.

Elnor stood by the thing, sniffing at her side, tail up and bushy. The four witches simply stared at it. The sun had now fully risen; sounds of humans at their breakfasts and starting their commutes began to filter up the hill. I grinned and glanced at my coven mother and sisters, ready to enjoy their surprise, admiration, and envy as I explored the creature’s capabilities.

“Stand up, please,” I said to it.

My golem bent both legs, then both arms, putting her palms flat on the ground beneath her. I could almost see her working out the mechanics of it all. Then she rolled to one side, pushed herself up to one hip, and shambled to her feet.

“Oh, my goodness,” Sirianna said, taking a hesitant step forward and staring.

Droplets of mud fell from the golem’s back and hair. She was truly hideous—ungainly, crude-featured, way too large. She was *fantastic*. “Yes, Mistress.”

“You may call me Callie,” I said.

“Yes, Mistress Callie.”

I broke into a huge smile. *I did it, I did it!*

"You...this..." Leonora stopped.

I had never seen my coven mother at a loss for words. Not in the twenty-five years I'd been a member of this coven, or the twelve years I'd been educated here before that.

"How...how did you do it, Callie?" Sirianna's long russet hair twisted and cavorted in the morning sunlight, moving like it had a mind of its own. Which, in a manner of speaking, it did.

"She's been out here digging in the mud all night," Niad put in before I could respond. "And we all felt the flood of energy. She probably burned more power doing this than the whole house uses in a week."

"I didn't take any coven energy," I said, feeling defensive. "I used only my own."

Maela frowned. "It's been six hundred years since any witch made a golem. That I know of, at least."

"This is...highly unusual," Leonora finally managed, gazing at the golem, who stared back at her quite impassively. "You know this is not our magic."

"Magic is magic," I said with a frustrated shrug. "Is this a problem?"

Leonora shook her head and looked at me. "I don't know!"

The admission shocked all of us. Sirianna and Maela both turned and gaped at Leonora; Niad shifted uncomfortably. "Um..." I said.

"It is...quite impressive, I'll grant you that," Leonora said. "And so completely out of bounds. When the other covens learn of this..."

"They'll be horrified!" Niad said, seeming half-hopeful, half-frightened.

Sirianna muttered, "I don't know. I think they'll be impressed." She pushed a strand of hair out of her eyes; it immediately pushed forward again.

"Impressed...yes," Maela said, in the soft, vague voice she used when she was receiving a vision. "It is a fork in the road, I see, and not a small one..."

Leonora gave Maela a cautious glance, before turning to me with something more of her usual stern poise. "What are your plans for it?"

"I told you. I want to try some things that aren't safe to use on natural, living creatures, but I need to see how they work in a functioning system."

"That's what humans are for," Niad muttered, just to get a rise out of me. I ignored her.

"So I thought I'd build one of these," I said to Leonora, then turned back to the golem, feeling myself fill with pride once more. "And I did. It worked."

"Your intention is to use it in these particular experiments, then unmake it and return to your Petri dishes?"

"What? Um..." I took a step back, putting a hand up as if Leonora had proposed to tear the creature apart herself. "I...I don't know. I need to see what she can do."

Niad snorted. "'She'? Watch, now Callie will name it."

"And why not?" I asked, then turned back to the golem. Mud and rock, stone and clay...petro... "Golem, I name you Petrana."

"Yes, Mistress Callie."

"Golems are dangerous creatures, Calendula," Leonora said. "This is not a doll for your amusement. Are you not familiar with the lore?"

"Yes, of course," I said. "But that's only if their maker overreaches—tries to do something evil with them. I didn't make Petrana to conquer anyone or grab power. I just want her to be good—I want to help us all."

Niad shook her head. "And who appointed you savior of *us all*?"

"Niadine, that is enough." Leonora turned back to me. "All that refers to human makers. When a witch makes a golem..."

A cold fear began to fill my belly. Was she going to force me to unmake Petrana? To kill her, just when I had brought her to life? "A witch has *more* control over a golem, not less," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "I read that Goody Blendenbrough's golem saved human children from drowning, even when the townspeople tried to drive the creature away, and Blendenbrough with it."

"That's a story," Niad scoffed.

Leonora watched me another long moment, then gave a brisk nod. "All right," she said. "We will leave it for now. You will keep the creature on the grounds at all times, preferably in the house. Do not let any human see it, ever. You are to use it strictly in your biological research, and unmake it the moment its purpose is served, or when I command you to do so. Is this clear?"

"Yes, Mother," I said. I put a hand on Petrana's now-cool flesh. It still felt like mud, but my hand came away clean.

"You are to see that the creature conducts itself in such a way as to not disturb the work of the rest of the house," Leonora went on. "It should be kept out of the way when not in use."

"Okay, but...maybe she can help out? When I'm not using her?"

"Help out doing what?"

"I don't know." I struggled to think. I really was tired from the night's labors. And hungry. "She's big and strong—she can lift things, do heavy chores?"

"You made a *golem* to help with the *housework*?" Niad snorted.

"Niadine Laurette!" Leonora snapped, then turned back to me. "We shall see. I...will consult with other covens about this." She paused, shaking her head. "Calendula, I just don't know what to do with you."

"Um," I said.

"And I believe it is time for breakfast." Leonora turned on her heel and headed back to the house, my three sisters following.

"Come on, Petrana," I said, and led my *golem* inside.



My room was small enough already; adding an eight-foot-tall mud-creature did not help. I cleared a space in the corner by the closet and stashed Petrana there before breakfast. I wasn't ready to endure the rest of the house openly freaking out about her just yet. Though Niad was only ninety-three (barely out of her first blush of youth, by witch standards), the older sisters generally rallied behind her more conservative opinions. At forty-five, I was the youngest full coven member, and something of a rebel, or at least a nonconformist. Sirianna usually took my side in any dispute, as did the students; Maela often did as well.

In other words, I pretty much always lost.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. The coven system had been created to take advantage of the centuries of experience accrued by older witches: they would, in theory anyway, pass their wisdom along to younger generations in a loving, family-like setting. Our coven particularly, as a teaching coven, was designed to guide and instruct its students and junior full members into witchkind life. Except...witchkind life was only part of the story—a smaller part all the time, in my opinion. The world outside our little confines was changing rapidly. To a four-hundred-year-old witch, the modern human-dominated world probably looked like a passing fad, easily ignored. A youngster like me saw things differently.

Or maybe it was because I was a scientist. As I saw it, witchkind in general, and my coven particularly, was in danger of irrelevancy at the very least if we did not adapt. Yes, magic was important, and we were powerful; but history had already shown that humans' sheer numbers could help them win the day.

Not that I thought we should be trying to *defeat* humans—not at all! I liked humans, some of them very much. I wasn't Niad, after all. I just felt that witchkind's separatist, us-versus-them stance wasn't doing either species any good. We could learn from them, and we could teach them things.

Well, we could, *if* we had been permitted to reveal our nature to them. But that was strictly prohibited by the Convocation of Elders. Many of whom remembered firsthand that nasty little business in Salem.

Maybe Niad was right to ally with the older crowd. She certainly enjoyed the benefits of our elders' favor: she was Leonora's second-in-command, with the biggest bedroom, the lightest teaching load, and a generous discretionary allowance. But I knew there was more to life than household perks.

Anyway, it wasn't in my nature to be teacher's pet.



After a tense breakfast and a lengthy nap, I sent a message through the æther to my best friend Logan: *Hey, I need to get out of the house. You free?*

Sure, she sent back a few minutes later. Come by the stand, I'm just finishing up with a client.

I quickly French-braided my hair, tied it off, and slipped out of the house and onto one of the major ley lines leading down to the bay. I emerged behind an unoccupied building on North Point. After glancing around to make sure I hadn't been seen, I walked the few blocks to the Embarcadero and the entrance to Pier 39, enjoying the fresh smell of salt water.

Logan spotted me and smiled, waving me over to her fabric-draped table. I took the red velvet-cushioned guest chair across from her.

She scooped up her tarot cards and set them aside. Her blond hair, bangs and all, was pulled back and tucked into the snood she wore while working; the effect only highlighted her bright, piercing blue eyes. She leaned forward and gazed at me, taking the measure of my aura and energy. "You made the golem last night."

I nodded. "Does it show?"

Now she grinned again. "Not exactly. I can see a huge energy drain, but mostly, you told me you were going to."

"Ah."

"So, did it work?"

"Yes!" I told her all about it, pulling a small zone of inattention around us as a human approached looking for a tarot reading. Confused, the human shook his head, stared a moment, and wandered off toward the other tourist attractions of the pier.

Logan shook her head admiringly when I finished. "I can't wait to see her."

"She's not much to look at," I admitted. But I was still bursting with pride. At least here was someone who appreciated what I'd done.

"Callie, you are too modest." She leaned forward once more with an earnest gaze. "The fact that you created her at all!"

"Tell that to my sisters," I muttered.

My best friend gave me a sympathetic smile. "Yeah."

"Sometimes I think I should just live alone. *You* don't have to put up with this crap."

"So why don't you?"

I shook my head. "Because I'm in a coven, silly."

"Is there a rule that you have to live there?"

"Sure there is—" I started, but then thought about it. "Actually, I don't know if there's a *rule* per se, but...well, everyone does."

"Except for witches who aren't in covens," she indicated herself, "and ones who take a leave of absence to form a union," she waved in the general direction of my parents' Pacific Heights home, "and retired witches who haven't moved Beyond. Oh, and every single warlock, of course. But other than that, you're totally right: everyone lives in covens."

I snickered. "Fine, point taken. But..."

"But what? You even own a house."

"It's rented out."

She just gazed at me.

"Um..." I continued. "I guess my renters did just give notice, didn't they?"

"Yes, I believe you mentioned that." She picked up her cards and began shuffling them idly, trying to hide a small smile. Under the table, I could feel her familiar, a big orange tom named Willson, rubbing against my ankle. I reached down to scratch him behind the ears.

Could I move out? *Should* I move out? Oh, Leonora would absolutely freak.

"I'll even help you move," Logan went on.

"Let me think about it," I said. "I've never actually lived alone, you know? I went straight from my parents' house to the coven."

"I know. And I don't mean to push." She held her tarot deck, letting the cards fall from one hand to the other. "But you've felt stifled there for a while—and it's only been getting worse. I know you need more lab space." Now she gave me a wicked grin. "And then there's Raymond."

"Indeed." I grinned back at her as I thought more. My house was still here in the city; I could get back to the coven house in a heartbeat if I needed to. And more privacy...yeah, that would be *really* good. Then I sighed. "I don't want to just run away from my problems, though. I should really try and work things out there. They're my chosen family, after all."

Logan rolled her eyes. "Niad never chose you, and you didn't choose her." Before I could protest, she went on. "But yes: take your time, there's no deadline here. I just want you to be happy."

I smiled at my best friend. With such a warm heart and a generous spirit, she would have been welcome in any number of covens. The fact that she had chosen to go her own way when she came of age at twenty had felt tragic and baffling to me at the time, but as the years went on, I had to admit that her life suited her. She was shy and introverted, craving her alone time. Her apartment was small, cheerful, peaceful. She had Willson, and work she enjoyed, and a best friend.

Would I enjoy alone time myself? Or would I just get lonely?

I thought about Niad's haughty sniping about Petrana, about Sirianna's aghast face, the students' discomfort, Leonora's stern disapproval. There was real fear underneath all those reactions.

Wasn't I already quite alone, even in a crowded coven house?