

## **When Magic Failed**

by Jodi Rizzotto

All I want to do is to ride as fast as I can to the edge of the world and drop off.

Earlier this same day, I had not anticipated disaster. I got up, drank my elixir, and got ready for work. My wrinkles and warts faded away as usual while I braided my shiny black hair. Walking out the door, I blew a kiss to my cat and she hissed at me. Nothing different there.

Icy blasts whipped across my face as I rode my broom toward the office. Usually, I love fresh air, but this wind whispered evil portents. Evil was brewing somewhere. The protective bubble I cast in response stopped my shivering, but did little to calm my mind. Pushing down the urge to change direction and head to the beach, I continued toward my work. Must be spring fever.

After arriving at the large, crumbling castle, I set my broom up against the rack next to many others. Everyone was here today. That could be good or bad. I mumbled my Freshen Up spell to release the wrinkles in my black dress and crept in the back door.

Our entire staff of witches, as well as the receptionists, gathered around our CEO, Madame Bramblerose. Was I late for a staff meeting? I needed to check my email more often. Sarah gestured towards me, her eyes flashing judgment. That girl really was a witch.

“As some of you know, there have been reports from the Eastern Realm that are quite disturbing. None of us should panic, since we have long expected this could happen. Rest assured that Western Coven Magical Assist will do everything in our magical power to continue our service to the community,” Madame Bramblerose said in a gravelly voice. Everyone’s eyes, even Becky Speckleleaf, who usually dozes during meetings, fastened on our leader.

I shook out my shoulders, which had started to clench up. Spells could be affected by tension in a witch's body. What in the seven hells was she talking about?

"In order to continue our expected level of service, witches will work in partners for every spell. Every spell. No exceptions."

Groans echoed throughout the room. Most witches have their own personal style, and don't play well together. WCMA's corporate environment keeps us from killing each other. Most of the time.

"I appreciate your professionalism in these trying times. Your partner assignments have been loaded into your mirrors. Get out there and do your best." She swept out of the circle and into her office, the heavy wooden door slamming behind her. That's the last time we'd see her today. Well, until much later.

"What's this all about?" I whispered to Bonnie, who shared an office with me. She was a country witch, like me, and kept a level head. These city witches weren't used to demon attacks and superstitious village mobs with torches. A few fumbled castings and they ran to their basements to hide.

"Magic is failing," she whispered back, her tan face uncharacteristically pale. "The rate of spell failure is 17.8% and rising. It's begun."

My stomach flipped. Of course, I'd grown up with the threat of Magic Fade, but I didn't think it would happen in my generation. When I was a child, Mama had told me as she tucked me into bed.

"A time will come," she said with lifted eyebrow and low insistent voice, "when all the magic in our world will be used up." I would shiver under my quilt and clutch my stuffed kitty, Scratch.

“What will we do then?” I asked with my five-year-old eyes wide open. This was not exactly the type of bedtime story I’d tell my children.

“We will have to make new magic. Go to sleep now.”

And I laid awake all night wondering.

As an adult, I knew she was right. After all, magic wasn’t a renewable resource, everyone knew that. Magic resided in the rocks, the ancient stones that surrounded us. Rocks were everywhere across the realms, plentiful as weeds. And yet, every time we cast a spell, a little more of our magic was lost. Gone forever.

“Sheep dung!” I swore with a hiss.

“It certainly is,” Bonnie agreed. “Wait ‘til you see who your partner is. I’m with Thomas, who isn’t so bad, if you bring lots of snacks. He burns so many calories doing magic, he gets crabby in a flash.”

Oh no. When I spoke my password into the mirror on the wall in front of my desk, the assignment list popped up. “Bull pies!” I spat out, when I saw the name next to mine. Bramlerose hated me. The Goddess hated me.

“Marion, get your lazy chicken bones out of that chair, and let’s get to work,” a grating, familiar voice called from the doorway. I looked up to see a tall, thin witch with white stringy hair that hung from her head like a poppet. Sarah Nightshade. She would be working spells with me. All. Week. Long.

“I’m coming,” I called, and as I passed, Bonnie gave me a pitying look. No one volunteered to work with Sarah for reasons too numerous to list here.

The rest of my day went pretty much as could be expected. Customers came into our consulting rooms, otherwise known as remodeled dungeon cells. There I spent hours casting spells with my new partner, and surviving her sarcastic remarks.

Most of the time, customers were completely satisfied. I could feel the magic thinning a bit, but I could still access it without too much effort. My partner struggled a bit, and sometimes we had to start a spell over. Of course, she always blamed it on me.

“What’s wrong, pig herder? Forget your cheat sheet back at the farm?”

Keeping in mind that we were dealing with the nonmagical public, I tried to take the high road and ignore her. Most people thought witches were dangerous enough without listening to us bicker.

“This protection charm is weaker than a newborn kitten! Did you miss that day in Charm class?”

“Where’d you learn that healing spell? On the internet?”

All day long, I ignored my partner’s demeaning insults and disgusting personal habits. Do you have any idea how unpleasant it is to be cooped up in a tiny cell with someone who passes gas continually? When they brought us lunch, she shoved her plate in her face and ate the stew without her spoon. Disgusting, yet she’s the one who calls me uncouth. Called me, I mean.

Finally, we reached the last customer on our list. Not a minute too soon. A tiny, tottering crone came in, her face covered in festering warts, no doubt caused by constant exposure to poisonous plants she grew. We had five of those today. Not another beauty spell. That took positive, beautiful thoughts, and I was fresh out. Sarah obviously didn’t have any to begin with.



“My husband won’t sleep in our bed anymore,” she rasped. “He sleeps out in the sheep shed. Embarrassing when our neighbors see him crawl out in the morning. Please help me.” She offered the standard payment in her wrinkled and twisted hand. Where did that old crone get that much gold?

“No problem,” Sarah said, pocketing her money. “Lay down on the table.” The crone creaked over to a low pallet in the middle of the room. Both of us could easily walk around the patient, taking magical items from the cupboards set against the walls. As my partner got the woman settled, I reached into one of the cupboards and took out the herbs we needed, just like hundreds of times before.

Can’t really blame Sarah for putting the jar on the wrong shelf. It’s my responsibility to pay attention. I was in a rush to get out of there, and Mama always said haste makes waste. Or in this case, death.

After mixing the dried leaves with white powder and pouring cow urine over it, I brought the elixir over to Sarah. She sniffed the clay cup and frowned. “Something stinks here. And not just your hair.”

That was it. I was done with that witch. “Who are you to question me? Just because I went to a country school doesn’t mean I’m an idiot!” I roared at her with the pent-up frustration I’d saved all day.

“Chill out, farm girl! Thought maybe the cow pies made you lose your sense of smell. No need to fry me!” She stepped back as sparks flew from my hands.

“I know how to make a beauty potion,” I insisted sullenly, shaking out my hands and putting them into the pockets of my dress. That witch knew how to bring out the worst in me.

After I calmed down, we chanted the spell together, and then she gave the potion to the crone, who drank it down quickly with a grimace. Then the fun began.

Our frail old woman shot up from the table and began spinning in the air. In the air. Not part of our spell. The cell filled with foul smoke and when it cleared, a large demon appeared. Again, not part of our spell.

I'll spare you most of the details because to be honest, it happened so fast I didn't have much time to pay attention. Of course, Sarah and I called on our defensive magic, but wouldn't you know, hers faded out. She just stood there, looking at her hands, and then at me. Would my magic work?

Lightning streamed from my hands, but the demon lapped it up like sugar water. Then I evoked a containment spell. The glimmering cage snapped with one swipe of its huge arms. Sarah tried a freeze spell, but only a few snowflakes fell around us. Magic was failing.

With its sharp teeth and claws, the hell monster made quick work of our customer and my fellow witch. My protection spell held up, or I wouldn't be able to tell this tale. After bouncing against my bubble a few times, it became discouraged. Roaring, it burst through our door, reducing it to a pile of kindling. I ran out after it.

Eventually, the rest of the witches connected their magic and got the demon under control. Then they sealed him up in a jar, just in case we needed it for something in the future. Waste not, want not, as Mama says.

The crone's husband took his refunded money with a smile and headed for the pub. Madame Bramblerose wrote me up for sloppy spell work and suspended me for a week. None of

the other witches would look me in the eye, not even Bonnie. They all hated Sarah, but they didn't actually kill her like I did.

Now I was zooming away on my broom, disgraced and guilty as hell. I should have checked the jar. A demon-summoning spell is far different than a beauty potion. Not only did I mess up the spell, but neither Sarah or I could fix it. Magic was fading. Who was I without its power?

I headed toward the mountains, to my favorite hideout. When I got in trouble in primary school, I had discovered this great place to hide until Mama used her Find My Child spell. Landing on a huge, flat rock, I sat down to watch the rushing water traveling down the mountain's back. It would be so easy to jump over the side and allow the jagged rocks and swirling water to do its work.

The evening sun was setting behind the ridge, so I cast a small ball of light that hovered above me. Its glow was pale and weak. The water roared below me, taunting me, daring me.

If magic failed completely, would I still be a witch? Before magic school, I showed some talent with a brush. Maybe I could be a portrait painter. Wouldn't make much gold, so I would have to move back to the farm with Mama and the boys. Maybe that wouldn't be so terrible.

The endless twinkling field of stars above drew up eyes upward. Even without a spell, I could read their possibilities. Not a mistake. This time was meant for me. Tangy pine air inflated my lungs, muting the rapids' call. When I mounted my broom and headed home, I knew even in a changing world, I would find my way.