



HOW TO  
HEAL A  
GRYPHON

MEG CANNISTRA

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How to Heal a Gryphon

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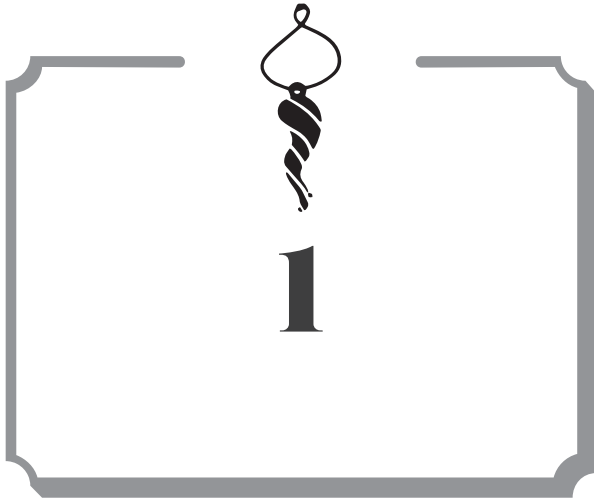
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For my familiars: Gloom, Doom, Fester, and Anthony Jr.

And to Coconut, Kiwi, Blackjack, Ooh La La, Coalie, and Maple.



It's not my fault I'm late. But when you're a guaritrice-in-training, you can't be tardy. No excuses.

You can't leave your shirt untucked or have a single hair on your head out of place. You can't be too loud or talk back. Most importantly, though, you can't use your powers for anything but helping people.

Even if being a guaritrice doesn't interest you at all.

I push the sweaty curls from my forehead, struggling to bike up the winding cobblestone road that leads to the tallest tower in all of the Amalfi Coast. Guaritori-in-training aren't allowed to sweat, either. At least that's what my brother,

Rocco, claims. Not that I actually believe him or anything.  
*Everyone sweats.*

The church bells chime the hour just as the road becomes level and the blue-green sea peeks out from underneath the cliff side. The salty air hits my face, and I take a big deep breath, filling my lungs with the sweet sea breeze. I stand on my pedals and glide alongside the cliff. My backpack wriggles in the handlebar basket, a small squeak escaping it.

“Shhh, little one. You’ll be home soon.” I pedal faster, feeling sorry about the cooped-up creature. But my backpack was the only place I could think to hide her for now. “Once class is over.”

The Torre di Apollo sprouts up from the cliff like a sunflower. An impossibly tall tower cutting straight through the sky and kissing the clouds. Bougainvillea crawls up its side, the bright magenta flowers exploding color against the creamy sandstone.

I take a right, flying past tufts of wild lavender and groups of tourists snapping pictures at the tower’s base.

“Slow down, Giada,” Signora Alfonsi calls as she collects flowers to make into soaps and lotions for her shop. “You’re going to break your neck!”

But I don't listen. I've never fallen in my life. But if I did, my family could fix a broken bone with their *ossa rotte*, thick as the best sauce and guaranteed to mend even the worst fracture. Signora Alfonsi knows that, but it doesn't stop her from fussing every time I fly by her on my bike.

I dodge a bunch of people with nosy cameras. Christmas is one of the busiest times of the year. Tourists love the Amalfi Coast, even if most of them don't know the full truth like everyone who lives here. For non-*streghe*, the stories about healers and magic are myths. Fairy tales you read in children's books. It's easier that way. If they knew magic was real—that *guaritori* really can cast out the *fantasmi* causing your migraines or remove the balding curse from your husband's head—we'd never be able to get anything done. It'd be more crowded than it already is. All the people trampling in from all over the world to take in more than just good Italian food and the sites. It could be dangerous, too. With people even forcing us to use our magic. And we can't have that. Not that we don't want to help people. We do. It's just easier for us to do it quietly and behind the scenes, when we have time to create the best potions and spells possible.

I make my way to the back of the tower—the *real* en-



trance. I snatch my backpack from the basket, making sure I'm careful not to jostle it too much, before hopping from my bike and leaving it in the grass.

"Late again, Giada?" Signor Stefano, one of the Torre di Apollo's guards, says. He's posing with an American woman wearing a fanny pack while a man in cargo shorts takes their picture. They stand next to one of the big Christmas trees Signor Stefano and the other guards put up last week. All of the tower's guards dress in long white robes, gold sandals, and laurel wreaths. Like the gladiators with plastic armor and swords that stand outside the Colosseum. A disguise so the tourists aren't alarmed by how many guards are patrolling.

"I'm sure the first ten minutes went fine without me," I call back.

Signor Stefano laughs. "Maestra Vita might think otherwise."

I yank open the heavy oak door and hurry down a long hallway where another oak door stands. This one has a special lock that can only be opened by the guaritore crest, a laurel wreath with a raven's head in the middle. I pull a necklace from a pocket on my backpack and press

the pendant into the lock. The lock glows, the door creaking open an inch.

I barrel through and take the spiral stone steps two at a time, all the way up to the thirteenth floor. The stairwell walls are painted a crisp pure white. Hundreds of glittering lucciole dip and dive between portraits of famous guaritori. Their bright wings fluttering and flickering.

So many of my ancestors stare down at me, the Bellantuonos being the most well-known of the strega families in all of Italy. Papa's up there and so is my bisnonna. Rocco expects his picture to be on the wall by the time he turns eighteen. Which is a little ambitious, if you ask me. No guaritore has ever made the wall before their thirtieth birthday.

There's no way they'll ever put my face up there. I don't want to follow Apollo and heal *people* like all the other guaritori. It's not part of my plan.

I pause on the step in front of Papa's portrait. His unblinking eyes are creepy and don't have any of the warmth his real ones do. I take a deep breath. I have to tell him tonight that I want to honor Diana, goddess of wild animals, and take care of creatures—both ordinary and ex-

traordinary. Worry twists around my heart, but I tear my gaze away from his portrait and hurry up to class.

After a few more stairs, I reach a small landing and dart to a silver door emblazoned with a gold python wrapped around a glimmering lyre. I catch my breath, wiping my forehead with the back of my arm. I take a whiff of my armpit. Yuck. I smell like a whole red onion. Hopefully no one will get close enough to smell me.

My backpack bumps against my back.

*Chirrup, chirrup, chirrup.*

“You gotta be quiet for a bit, okay?” I whisper to my backpack, slipping my fingers underneath the flap and tickling a soft feathered head. “Only a little while longer.” The small creature grows quiet. I pat down the loose strands of hair that fell out of my braid and rub the gold cornicello hanging from my neck. Preparing myself for Maestra Vita.

She’s standing at the front of the class with the blackboard at her side. Maestra Vita’s a tall woman with long brown hair she sweeps into a tight bun at the back of her head. Black-rimmed glasses are always perched on her sloping nose. It’s rare to see her in anything other than a white dress of some sort. Most of the kids in my school

are scared of her, so she teaches the graduating guaritore students for a reason. But she doesn't bother me too much and she's too busy answering a question to notice me. Yet.

"No, there's no restorative potion that can make a person taller. Nor is there one to grow back a limb that's long since deteriorated. This is standard stuff you should already know. It's going to be part of your oath ceremony." She starts pacing at the front of the classroom, hands behind her back. "There are limitations to our magic. We can't *cure* illnesses or maladies. We can't manipulate rooted traits like height. Our magic works alongside modern medicine and shouldn't be used as a substitute. What do we always say?"

The class choruses: "We don't cure, we strengthen."

"That's right," she confirms. "We can take a moment to review ingredients for the recipe again. Your families will have their own methods for brewing restorative potions, of course, but the basic ingredients are very similar."

Maestra Vita takes up a nub of chalk and starts writing on the blackboard. "As you learned way back in your first year of formal training, lizard tail is perhaps one of the most versatile ingredients. Key to fertility balms and tinctures to mend a broken bone, it even helps with balding."

Pens scratch quickly against paper, catching her every word. I duck behind the back row and tiptoe to my seat.

“Don’t think I can’t see you.” I pop up from my hiding spot on the other side of an empty desk to find her staring straight at me, arms crossed over her chest and eyebrows raised to her hairline. “You’re not as stealthy as you think you are.”

“Nothing escapes you now that you’ve got new glasses, Maestra Vita. They look great, by the way.” I smile brightly, but she doesn’t return it.

Finally, she pushes her glasses up the bridge of her white nose and waves a hand. “Sit down, Giada. We’re reviewing restorative healing.”

I sigh. More of the same stuff.

Lessons and apprenticeships are boring when you’ve already done what’s being taught. Mamma and Papa let me work with Rocco before taking the official oath, which kind of goes against the rules. No other family lets their children help out with real healing work until after they turn thirteen and pledge to carry on the tradition. The Bellantuonos—being as renowned as we are—get a pass on some things.

It’s supposed to be homeschooling until nine, then

formal lessons for four years, going through each year with guaritore kids your age. Right after that, you have a yearlong apprenticeship with a guaritore family in a completely different part of the world. But while it's nice being able to help people have babies or ease aches and pains, that's not at all how I want to use my magic.

Rocco was born to be a guaritore. Our papa and mamma couldn't be prouder. He honors Apollo. He's calm and plays by the rules. He listens to patients when they go on and on about their symptoms and all the research they did online. He doesn't get annoyed when patients insist we can cure colds or set a bone with a snap of our fingers. I, on the other hand, get huffy when patients question me or act like they know better than me. Papa says I have the bedside manner of a two-headed toad, which I think is awesome. But my family doesn't.

I slink to my seat and put my backpack on the big dark wooden desk I share with Alessia Marini. She's already thirteen and thinks that means she's wiser than me. A know-it-all. And also my best friend. It's always been Giada and Alessia, Alessia and Giada. Which makes sense since we're two of only a handful of students our age who live in Positano year-round. Most of my schoolmates come

from other cities to train and live in the Torre di Apollo just for the school year.

Alessia ruffles her short curly brown hair with her fingers, her wide hazel eyes set on the sweat stains on my blouse. "I waited for you outside your house, but I couldn't wait *forever*," she whispers. "You were taking sooo long that I was worried I'd grow gray hairs before you were ready to leave."

"I'll bring you some of my papa's Capelli Grigi potion next time. It'll keep the brown strands from turning." I roll my eyes. "And I was busy." I smile, carefully pulling my notebook and pen from my backpack without disturbing the little bambina inside.

Her eyebrows knit together. "Busy doing what?"

"So what did I miss?" I ask, ignoring her question. "Can I copy your notes?"

"Later."

Maestra Vita has written *onions*, *mountain air*, and *fat from a black hen* underneath *lizard tails* on the blackboard. "Let's get more specific. What ingredients could be used in a fertility elixir where the parents wish for only one child? Yes, Marco."

Marco puts his hand down and leans forward in his seat to answer Maestra Vita's question. "Fruit of the mandrake."

"Yes, but remember to use extreme caution and only pluck the fruit. If you dig up the plant, the mandrake will produce an ear-piercing scream that will kill you. Let us not forget about what happened to Paolo and Maria Abbadellis."

Quiet falls over the room. Every guaritore uses Paolo and Maria's fatal mandrake expedition as a cautionary tale of just how dangerous our work can be.

Maestra Vita breaks the silence by writing *fruit of the mandrake* on the blackboard. "What else? You need to know this. Your ceremony's less than two weeks away. Christmas Eve is fast approaching," she reminds us, her back still turned to us. "Fruit of the mandrake is good, but it works in all fertility spells. Give me something specific to only *one* child."

"Ground saltwater pearl," Alessia says.

"Very good. An oyster only produces one pearl at a time. Procure a fresh saltwater pearl and use a marble mortar and pestle to crush it until smooth. What else?"

*Chirrup, chirrup.*



My stomach jumps into my throat. I sneak a hand underneath my backpack's flap to try to calm the little creature.

"What was that?" Maestra Vita asks, chalk pausing against the blackboard. The class is silent. A few kids look for the source of the noise. "Did someone say something?" She turns around, eyes scanning the room for a hand.

*Chirrup, chirrup, chirrup.*

Alessia eyes my backpack and gives me a funny look.

"Your bag's moving."

I put a hand on top of my backpack to stop it from squirming across the desk. "No, it's not."

"Because you're holding on to it now."

"Something the matter, Giada?" Maestra Vita asks, eyebrows arched. The whole class turns to face me.

"Not at all." I straighten my shoulders, hand firmly on top of my backpack. "Just trying to find my notebook."

"Isn't that it right in front of you?" She nods to the unicorn-emblazoned notebook sitting in front of me.

"Ha, uhh, you're right."

*Chirrup, chirrup.*

"Giada?"

"Yes?"

"Is your backpack chirping?"

*Chirrup, chirrup, chirrup.*

"No..."

*Chirrup, chirrup!*

Before I can stop her, the creature wiggles out from my backpack and flutters unsteadily to perch on me. I try to pull her down, but she holds tight, digging her talons into my hair, her back paws balancing on my shoulder. She flaps her fuzzy wings, her furry lion-like tail wrapping around my neck.

"Giada Bellantuono!" Maestra Vita shouts. Her voice echoes through the stone room before bouncing against my eardrums. "Were you hiding a baby gryphon in your backpack?"

"I wasn't *hiding* her exactly. She could've come out at any time, but I knew you wouldn't like that."

Maestra Vita clenches her teeth so hard she might grind them to dust. "Why do you have this gryphon?"

"I found her fending for herself on the way home from lessons last week. I nursed her back to health."

"You nursed her back to health?" She purses her lips.

"She was hurting." I shrug. "Of course I helped her."

"You used your magic?" Maestra Vita pinches the bridge of her nose. She always says out of all her students, I give

her the most headaches. I expect today is no exception. "You're a guaritrice, Giada. You can only use your magic to heal *people*."

"Technically, I'm only training to be a guaritrice. And maybe there should be other guaritori who take care of creatures. It's completely missing from our tradition. Don't you think?" The gryphon—who I've been calling Piccolina since last Tuesday—plucks at my hair with her beak.

"It's simply the way things are."

"Well, that's not very nice."

Piccolina chirps loudly. She leaps from my head and flaps her wings furiously, getting a few feet into the air before tumbling back onto the desk with a loud thud. A few kids start laughing and others gasp.

"Why are you like this?" Isabella asks, turning all the way around in her seat to get a better look. A mean sneer spreads over her freckled face. "This is so mortifying."

Alessia buries her head in her hands, ears pink with humiliation. "Giada!"

I scoop Piccolina off the desk and set her back on my shoulder. "Well, I'm not mortified."

"Leave, Giada!" Maestra Vita bellows. The class quiets, backs straightening, attention on the front of the room.

“You’ve distracted us enough for one day. I’ll be calling your father this evening.”

My eyes widen as her words weigh down on me like a boulder. I squeeze my cornicello. “Please don’t, Maestra Vita! Papa won’t be happy with me,” I beg, my voice soft. Isabella and a couple others snicker, hiding their smiles behind their hands.

“You should have thought of that before causing trouble.” She shakes her head. “Your brother would never behave this way. Rocco was my best student. If only you were more like him.”

Heat rises to my face. I grab my backpack and stomp toward the door. “He’s not all that great, you know.”

Before Maestra Vita can say anything else about my amazing big brother, I slam the door behind me, thumping loudly down the stairs.