

5-1-2017

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Recommended Citation

VanHecke, Natalie (2017) "What the Red Witch Requires," *Forces*: Vol. 2017 , Article 58.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces/vol2017/iss1/58>

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WHAT THE RED WITCH REQUIRES

Natalie VanHecke

ANNORA WAS WHAT ONE WOULD CALL A RED-WITCH. IT WASN'T HER FAULT, SHE WOULD SAY, BATTING HER EYELASHES SWEETLY AS SHE PEERED UP THROUGH HER IVORY HAIR. WITCHES SIMPLY DIDN'T CHOOSE THEIR NATURE, THEIR DISTRICT OF MAGIC. HOW THEY USED IT, HOWEVER, WAS A MATTER OF A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT MANNER. She hummed a little at the thought, twirling her fingers above her cauldron and dropped a ball of her raw magic into it. The red glow caused the cauldron to bubble and she withdrew her wooden staff from her back. With the red crystal that was cradled at the top of her staff, she tested the murky liquid in her cauldron. The bubbling of her cauldron ceased and a wicked giggle burst from her mouth. After putting her staff on a nearby counter, she reached her gloved hand into the boiling waters; from them, she pulled a small gem.

"This is yours, sir. Your strength will become something of which every man can only dream he possesses; you will surely win the tourney." She held out the gem to the customer who had come to her an hour beforehand. When he reached for it, Annora lifted her hand away from his grasp. "But first, your payment."

The man grumbled a complaint, but offered her the palm of his hand. She fetched her staff and a small knife. She grabbed his hand and sliced it open, the red droplets of blood dripping onto the wooden floor of her shack. She touched the tip of her staff's crystal to the center of his injury. His gasp of pain sent shivers down her spine as a deep shade of blue leaked into the crystal. Annora set her staff back onto the counter, setting the gem on his palm. "I wish you good luck, sir. If you wouldn't mind, I ask you recommend me to your companions."

He nodded. "I will recommend you to my companions for your assistance. You were quite helpful."

"Now, if you don't mind, I'm a very busy witch, and I haven't got all day." She motioned him towards the door. He dipped his head and obliged to her request. Annora's dark smile only appeared once the man was gone. She turned to her staff, her hands hovering over the crystal that was now as blue as the deep seas. Murmuring a few words, she soaked the power up into her hands and waved it

towards her chest. She pushed it inside of herself and took a shuddering breath. “Mm. Much better than the last one.”

The bell on the door to her shop jingled and she turned to face her customer, who stiffened when she saw her. A smile played on her lips. “Don’t mind the white hair and fancy red outfit, darling.” Annora motioned to the velvet hat and her knee-length witch robes of the same shade. “It’s simply tradition. Now, how may I be of assistance to you?”

“I-I heard that you used to have black hair!” The young girl blurted out and motioned to her white braid, causing the witch to laugh.

“I did, once. People rumor that the black drained out of my hair because I was so evil, or it drained out of it because I was so pure. There are rumors all about me, darling. My ageless face, my youthful body, my wicked ways,” Annora purred. “I will admit, I used to be quite the nasty young witch, but long ago I saw the wrong of my ways and have since become a new person. But, let’s not discuss me any longer, for you came with a request, did you not?”

“I-I’m in love with a man I cannot be with.” The girl shuffled her feet. “He’s to be wed to a monstrous woman. How do I make him mine?”

“Oh, darling, how glad I am you decided to visit my shop instead of another’s. Affairs of the heart always were my favorite. Come now, come inside.” She ushered the young girl farther into her shop. “Do try not to be too alarmed, after all, the townsfolk weren’t lying when they called me a witch.” She waited for the girl’s nod before she continued to the cauldron, the girl in tow.

“I have several methods I could use. What would you wish upon the girl your prince is to be wed to?”

“I want her out of my way. B-But I wish her no harm!”

“That can be done with ease.” Annora flashed a vicious smile at the girl. When she formed a red sphere of magic in her hands, the girl gaped at her. “Fortunately, I know a bit of powerful magic; it’s a skill I’ve always been able to wield. I find you intriguing, child, so I will ask you not to laugh when I admit I use it to help those who are lonely and desperate. People of all ages flock to my cauldron, begging, ‘Please, Annora, please give us spells.’ Do I help them? Well, how could I refuse such a desperate plea!” She threw the sphere into the cauldron and went over to her shelf of ingredients. “Soul of a dragon, heart of a newt, a few other items...” She pulled a piece of hair from the girl’s head and dropped it into the cauldron along with the ingredients. With the head of her staff, she stirred the mixture. “Now, why don’t we discuss your payment.”

“O-Of course.” The girl stammered. “What is it you ask of me?”

Annora hummed in thought as she stirred. “I only ask for a single drop of your blood and a single lock of your beautiful golden hair.

“Th-That’s all?”

Annora waved her free hand, conjuring up a scroll. “Just sign on the bottom line, darling and we’re all set.”

Annora supplied the girl a quill from her countertop. The girl hastily signed the scroll before returning it to Annora’s grasp. With a wave of her hand, a red aura surrounded the scroll and placed it high on one of her potion shelves.

The only light in the small shop came from the red glow of the cauldron as it dulled to a pink. A spell poured from Annora's mouth and the liquid inside the cauldron exploded. Amongst the pink smoke, Annora found her treasure and snatched it. She handed the girl a necklace with a vial strung along it. "Pour part of this in your beloved's wine, part of it in your wine, and part of it into the wine of the woman he is to marry."

The girl nodded and held her hand out to the witch, who sliced it open with her blade. Annora held a vial underneath the cut to catch the blood and used the same knife to cut off a piece of the girl's hair. "Goodbye, darling."

After the door closed behind the girl, Annora let out a wicked laugh. "She'll never meet her soulmate now. After all, you can't have a soulmate without a soul!"

"I suppose humans will believe anything you tell them." Her murmur was dark as she dropped the hair into the vial of blood and poured it into her cauldron. Annora dipped her staff into it and a purple orb appeared in the air. She retrieved the orb and pushed it into her chest with a deep breath. Her shop door flew open as she was drawing her hands away from her breasts. A young man clad in iron armor stood in her doorway. "I knew it." He snarled. "You Red-Witches are all the same."

"S-Sir, I'm afraid I don't understand." Her lower lip wobbled and she took a step back. "Y-Yes, I am a Red-Witch. But I don't make my deals like other Red-Witches do. I don't deal in souls; I simply take a lock of hair and a bit of blood to use in my future recipes."

"We both know that's a lie, Lady Annora." The Hunter snapped.

The façade dropped and she laughed. "It's been a very long time since I've seen you, Lord Rhysand. Not all Hunters have such an ageless face. If I didn't know better, I would say you have a bit of witch blood."

"That's enough, Mother." He drew his sword. "I've come to put an end to your wicked ways."

"Did you now? You came to kill your own defenseless mother? What shall I tell your father?"

"Don't bring him into this!" He snarled, taking a step forward. "And you are far from defenseless."

"You're right." She snatched her staff from the cauldron and pointed it towards him. "I'm not afraid to kill you, Rhysand."

"Good." The flash of Rhysand's snow white hair was all she saw before he was beside her. She raised her staff in defense, blocking his blow as a flow of spells echoed from her mouth. Fireballs and balls of energy flew towards her son. He was up against her, inside her shields in moments. There was a brief glimpse of silver and then she was grabbing his shoulders with a gasp. The iron dagger plunged deep inside her chest, pushing all the way through to poke out her back. "Goodbye, Mother. You shall never harm another soul, nor harness it for your own good."

He dropped her to the ground when she fell against him, limp and lifeless. He stared at her for only a moment, fighting a grimace at her bloodied body. Then he was gone.

There was a groan and Annora sat up with a quiet laugh. The fun had only just begun.