



## 1. Airborne

Once upon a time, deep in Far and Wide Forest, there stood a little school for witches called the Poof! Academy. In those long-ago days, so much stray magic wafted about that a tree might pull up its roots and lumber off to another location, or a patch of daisies might start to dance – to bob and weave – without the slightest breath of a breeze. The stream that ran by the school was known, on occasion, to babble off in a new direction, while thunderclouds could stack up out of a clear blue sky as fast as you could snap your fingers.

So Heppy and her best friend, Zelly, weren't surprised when a sudden whip of wind snatched the book Heppy was reading aloud right out of her hands as the two were ambling to school one morning. This was so commonplace, in fact, that Heppy didn't even break her stride as the wind flipped through the pages, then dropped the book back into her outstretched hands. It was the new edition

of *Practical and Impractical Magic*, which had to be revised every so often because, among other changes, some spells eventually became spent. (For those of you readers new to magic, I should probably explain that spells are rather like chewing gum – just like chewing too long takes all the oomph out of gum, overusing a spell can take the potency out of it.)

“It’s still here!” exclaimed Heppy. She was referring to the Hair Dye Spell, which turned your hair black, a witch’s favorite color. Unfortunately, it only worked on teenagers, and Heppy’s thirteenth birthday was still a year – and one week – away. “And you can add strands of sheep’s wool to the potion to make your hair wavy, curly, or frizzy!” she added excitedly.

“But I *like* your red hair,” argued Zelly, who’d been telling her friend this since they were little.

“Easy for you to say,” Heppy said with a crooked grin. (Zelly’s hair was dark brown – almost as good as black – and she had a cute mole on her cheek besides.)

“Am I too bossy?” Heppy asked out of the blue.

“Not really,” said Zelly.

“You mean it?” pressed Heppy, who sometimes wished she were more like her easygoing friend.

“You’re a leader, that’s all,” said Zelly, who admired Heppy’s daring and determination. “And you know what they say, ‘It takes all kinds...’”

“...to make a coven,” Heppy finished wryly.

“Sometimes you make me nervous, though – the chances you take,” Zelly admitted, shaking her head.

“But I always land on my feet, don’t I?” Heppy asked lightheartedly. “Do you know how cats do that?”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“It’s the way they’re able to twist in the air while they’re falling.”

“Yeah, but even cats have only nine lives,” said Zelly. And because they were approaching a clearing, she added quietly, “Better put the book away.”

Now, *Practical and Impractical Magic* was supposed to be kept in a locked cupboard at school, of course, along with the rare spell ingredients and potions that required a teacher’s supervision. But, as it happened, the little witches of the Poof! Academy had long ago learned how to open the cupboard with an Unlocking Spell, and, being more than a little mischievous, they’d all met secretly on the weekend to try out the latest magic.

As the two emerged from the trees, Heppy whisked the handbook into an inside pocket of her cape, and they waded through the thicket of wildflowers in front of their school. The Academy had once been a cottage where someone lived, with bright blue shutters, a thatched roof, and an herb and root garden in back. (Actually, wildflowers bloomed around it most of the year, for the climate was mild, and though thunder and lightning storms often pummeled the forest, the only snowflakes that ever fell had to be conjured by magic.)

All of which is to say, the morning started out like any other...so how could they possibly have known how improbably it would end?

Today Heppy and Zelly saw their classmate Prunella sulking in the doorway. She must have something to complain or tattle to their teacher about, they supposed, which meant that Ms. Snizzlesnoozle – or Ms. Sniz, as everyone called her – was even later than they were. But neither Prunella's snit nor Ms. Sniz's tardiness was especially out of the ordinary. You see, though Ms. Sniz was so old her eyesight was failing, she still insisted on flying everywhere on her broom, and the faster the better. So naturally she had the occasional too-close encounter with a tree or other obstruction. Nevertheless, she always picked herself up and carried on, earning her the admiration of her students. ("How did they know about her frequent accidents?" you ask. From their class field trips on their brooms to collect spell ingredients.)

Even Prunella thought they couldn't have a better teacher than Ms. Sniz. She didn't give homework, never played favorites...and had a habit of falling asleep in her rocking chair during their quizzes – so deeply asleep that they could get away with pretty much any kind of magical mischief without disturbing her. Once she'd even been swallowed by a giant serpent and snored right through it.

Now Heppy was a little relieved her teacher was late because it would give her a chance to slip *Practical and Impractical Magic* back into the forbidden cupboard without having to create some kind of distraction. She'd already

decided not to ask Prunella what was wrong, because she was tired of her constant griping—for all the good it did her...Heppy, I mean. As soon as she and Zelly were within earshot, Prunella yelled, "Someone played a magical prank on me, and I'm telling Ms. Sniz as soon as she gets here!"

As they came closer Prunella huffed, "Something bit my...my fanny when I sat down at my desk. And when I stood up, nothing was there!"

"Maybe it was a houseflea," suggested Heppy. "Maybe the Fumigation Spell is wearing out." (You've heard of houseflies? Well, in olden days they had *housefleas* that were as big as buttons. They lived in thatched roofs and brooms and, like cuttlefish, they were great at camouflage.)

But Prunella just folded her arms across her chest and stuck out her chin the way she did when she wasn't about to listen to reason. So Heppy shrugged a have-it-your-way shrug and Zelly stifled a giggle as they stepped inside...only to be greeted by a scorpion the size of a rat, running straight at them.

"Shut the door!" cried Totty, Lotty, and little Minna—the youngest witches—who were squatting near Ms. Sniz's rocking chair by the fireplace. Only Mehitabelle was sitting at her desk, hands folded, trying as usual to be the model student.

But before they could close it, Totty, one of the twins, yelled, "Go fetch!" and blew a dust ball across the floor toward the scorpion. Obediently, it spun around, grabbed the dust ball with its pinchers, and went rushing back with it. "See?"

cried Totty. "She can fetch! And I taught her other tricks too!"

"What's her name?" asked little Minna, reaching out to pet the oversized bug.

"Don't!" yelped Totty. "She doesn't like to be touched!"

Little Minna jerked her hand back just as the scorpion's tail shot up, ready to strike.

Unperturbed, Totty went on, "First I was going to call her Rover, then Spike, but now I can't make up my mind."

In the meantime, Prunella had stepped inside the door to see what all the fuss was about.

"She can twirl and roll over and even sit up and beg," Totty explained, "but she's not so good at staying."

As the scorpion turned in her direction, Totty's twin, Lotty, shrank back, her left eye twitching, which it did whenever she got anxious. Since they always wore matching smocks, this was about the only way you could tell the twins apart – that, and the fact that Totty loved anything and everything with more than four legs, while her sister loathed them.

"I have a pet spider that can juggle pill bugs," bragged Prunella, who was so competitive she often resorted to preposterous lies.

"But you're afraid of spiders," remarked little Minna, perplexed.

Then, before Prunella could make up an explanation, Mehitabelle let out a

giant sneeze, followed by another and another, because once she got started, she had a hard time stopping. On this day, however, on her fifth “ah-choo,” the schoolhouse lurched violently, the front door slammed shut, and the scorpion high-tailed it up the wall. *That* put a stop to her sneezing. (No, she wasn’t getting sick, but she did have allergies.)

“Earthquake!” cried Heppy. “Duck and cover!”

As the cottage started to shimmy, all seven classmates dove under a large, heavy oak table and huddled together, excited but not frightened, because earthquakes were also commonplace in their forest. In fact, you never saw such happy faces; even Prunella was grinning, for the wilder nature got, the better the little witches liked it.

Strangely, after the initial shaking and shuddering passed, however, the cottage began to roll like a ship on a stormy sea, something that had never happened before. As the classmates clutched the legs of the table, so they wouldn’t go pitching across the floor, the shutters on the windows started slamming open and shut while the wind rose to a dull roar.

“Where’s Spike?” Totty hollered suddenly.

All the classmates glanced around the schoolroom but saw no sign of the scorpion.

“She probably found a nook or cranny to hide in,” Zelly yelled back, trying to sound reassuring over the noise of the wind.

“Nope,” Prunella contradicted her, with her usual lack of tact. “I saw her climbing the wall near a window.” When she added, “She probably fell out,” Totty’s mouth began to quiver and she blinked back tears.

“Maybe I can see her from the window,” shouted Heppy, who wanted to know what else was happening outside.

“This doesn’t feel like an earthquake anymore!” wailed Mehitabelle, who’d been whimpering quietly but couldn’t muffle her dismay any longer. She was the only one of the little witches who didn’t always appreciate Mother Nature at her most rambunctious.

“Maybe it’s a hurricane,” suggested Lotty.

But Heppy didn’t hear her. She’d already let go of the leg of the table and was now sliding toward the wall opposite the fireplace. Grabbing a windowsill, she pulled herself up just as one of the shutters flew open. What she saw beyond the window astounded her – a blur of clouds. And when she stuck out her head and peered down, the forest was so far below her, it looked like a green tapestry. She tried hollering to the others, but her words were drowned out by the tumult. If Totty’s pet had crawled onto the windowsill, she thought, floundering back to the table, surely it had been swept away.

“What did you say?” shouted Zelly.

“We’re airborne!” repeated Heppy.

Six pairs of eyes bugged out and six mouths dropped open.

“I bet Quimby did this!” cried Prunella, an accusation that struck the others as ridiculous. Quimby may have been a child prodigy, but he couldn’t have performed a feat of magic like this – not all by himself. (Quimby was the little wizard who’d joined their class in the summer because there wasn’t an academy for wizards in the neighborhood.)

“Maybe we did this to ourselves,” suggested Mehitabelle.

“Yeah, right.” Prunella rolled her eyes as if that were the silliest thing she’d ever heard.

“What do you mean?” asked Heppy.

“Well, yesterday, after we made the Flying Potion...” Mehitabelle started to explain.

But she didn’t have to say any more before Heppy understood and turned on Prunella. “And *you* tried to grab the bottle away from me!” she cried accusingly.

“Because you always get to do everything first,” retorted Prunella with an air of injury. (Being an inch taller than all her classmates, she thought *she* should be the leader, even if she *was* a year younger than Heppy.)

“Well, you knocked it out of my hand, and the potion spilled all over the floor.”

“But we mopped it all up,” said little Minna.

“Not before most of it sank into the floorboards,” fumed Heppy.

“So?” Prunella demanded defiantly.

“So maybe it was a slow-acting potion, and it didn’t take effect until this morning...and now the school is flying instead of us,” Heppy scolded.

This explanation seemed plausible enough that all eyes turned reproachfully towards Prunella...and probable enough that it wouldn’t occur to any of them until later that the voyage they were now embarked on might have been the work of someone entirely unknown to them – someone with a plan and a purpose of their own.

“Oh, so it’s all *my* fault!” Prunella cried hotly.

“If that’s what’s happened, maybe we can use the Undo Spell to get back home,” Zelly interjected in a normal voice – because while the others were shouting, they hadn’t noticed that the dull roar outside had subsided somewhat, and the cottage was now bobbing more gently, like a boat in choppy waters.

“Yeah...” her classmates agreed, though Mehitabelle didn’t look all that hopeful.

It was still too difficult to stand, so the seven little witches crawled or scooted on their bottoms to form a small circle. Then, holding hands, they chanted the Undo Spell, which undid any magic that you changed your mind about. When they were done, they waited, still holding hands, for the spell to take effect – except for Heppy and Lotty, who had to shake out their cramped fingers, Mehitabelle having squeezed them so tightly. Meanwhile the cottage continued to rock from side to side.

“Maybe if the original spell was slow acting, the Undo Spell is slow to undo it,” suggested Zelly.

“No,” Heppy disagreed. “Undo Spells are supposed to take effect immediately. Otherwise half the time they’d be useless.” A voracious reader, she knew more about magic than her classmates – well, with the exception of precocious Quimby, whose great-uncle Zariff was a famous wizard.

“Maybe we’ve weakened the Undo Spell, we’ve used it so much,” Mehitabelle said guiltily. “If Ms. Sniz knew what we get up to during her afternoon naps....”

“Or maybe we don’t have enough power with only seven of us,” mused Zelly. As every one of the little witches knew, because Ms. Sniz kept reminding them, magic is an inexact science whose outcomes can be unpredictable. Sometimes it took only two of them to work an Undo Spell, other times more, for example.

“I wish Ms. Sniz were here,” little Minna remarked plaintively.

“If she were, we’d all be expelled and never allowed to do magic again,” snapped Prunella.

“Well, then I wish Quimby were here, at least,” sniffled Minna. “He might know what to do.”

“*I am here!*” a strange voice echoed.

That startled the little witches so much they looked around, spooked as if

they'd heard a ghost.

At first no one said anything, only exchanged bewildered glances...until it occurred to one after another of them that Quimby might have turned himself into something in the classroom. But what? Were they supposed to guess? He *was* fond of practical jokes.

"Quimby, this is no time to play pranks!" Heppy chided, though really she was just as pleased as all the others that he was there with them.

"I'm not!" came the echo-y voice from the vicinity of the fireplace.

"Where are you?" asked little Minna.

"On the roof," answered the voice. "When the school took off, I grabbed the chimney so I wouldn't fall."

"Quimby!" Minna cried joyfully, jumping up and stumbling toward the hearth as her classmates lurched after her.

"Can you come down?" Zelly hollered up the flue.

"I think so," he answered. "But maybe you could move the cauldron first?"

So they all helped to drag the heavy cauldron from the fireplace – and not a moment too soon. The next instant Quimby tumbled out, covered with soot.

"Are you OK?" exclaimed little Minna, throwing her arms around him before he could even sit up.

"What were you doing on the roof?" asked Totty and Lotty at the same time.  
(They did this a lot.)

“I was practicing riding my broom with no hands...and it bucked me off!” exclaimed Quimby, sitting up.

“Why would it do that?” asked Minna.

“B...b...because I accidentally left it out in the rain,” he stammered.

Now a collective gasp went up, for everyone knew that, just like black cats, brooms had an aversion to water.

“It could have killed you!” Minna cried in horror.

“Naw. It bucked me off right onto the roof,” Quimby said with a shrug.

“Now, would someone tell me why we’re flying over the ocean?”

“We are?” came the chorus.

Lotty and Totty were the first to reach a window and stayed there, spellbound, as the other little witches gathered around them, Minna hanging tightly onto Quimby’s hand. (Though he was only two years older – she was six and he was eight – she had adopted him as her older brother, convinced that he knew everything worth knowing.) None of them had ever seen the sea before. It was too far to travel round trip by broom in a single day, and spending a night in the forest wasn’t safe – there was just too much magic about. So, for a time, the seven little witches forgot about their predicament, they were so mesmerized by the sight before them – the deep blue of the sea stretching out until it dissolved into sky.