



EVA CHASE

MAGIC BOOK ONE
WAKING

LEGENDS REBORN SERIES

Magic Waking

Eva Chase

The day I found my king started with a stomachache.

I stretched on my bed amid the tangle of blanket and sheet, still waking up. The warmth of the sunlight streaming through the narrow window soaked into my skin, but the knot in my stomach didn't loosen. I knew what it meant. My heart thumped.

Today, after twenty years, four months, and six days of searching and waiting—not that I'd been counting or anything—I was going to set eyes on *him* again.

I rolled over and caught sight of a creature I was much less enthusiastic about.

A gloom was lurking under my computer desk. No one else would have been able to distinguish that patch of thicker darkness within the regular shadow, but my magic-touched sight could make out even those mindless scraps of dark intent. I grimaced.

The gloom crept along the wall. When I breathed in deep, its presence prickled at the back of my mouth. Just one couldn't do much damage—and wouldn't bother trying to damage any ordinary human being—but set a whole crowd on the attack and no one would laugh. I'd witnessed swarms like that more times than I cared to remember.

They were the vermin of the dark fae, so I dealt with them the way I'd deal with a cockroach or a rat—extermination.

I sat up in the bed and snapped a twig off the weeping fig in its pot beside the window. A whisper of the living energy nestled inside the wood tingled against my fingers. It would fade by the end of the day, but in the meantime, it held power.

I raised my hand and pointed it at the gloom. My fingers clenched around the twig. “*Darkness begone,*” I murmured in the archaic English of my first existence.

A spark lit within the patch of shadow and spread across its body. In less than a second, it ate away my unwelcome visitor.

The twig had gone dry and dead against my palm. I tossed it into the base of the pot. Technically, I didn't have to be up for another hour, but there was no way I could relax now.

I paced the room and grabbed a pair of jeans and a sweater from a basket of folded laundry. My hair resisted the ponytail I finger-combed it into. Several brown strands slipped free to drift across my face as I ducked to retrieve my sneakers from under the bed.

So what? I was going to see my king today.

No, I wasn't as ready as I wanted to be. I still hadn't figured out how to fix this mess I'd gotten us into—this repeated cycle of lives lived and cut short. I wasn't even sure I could avoid my past mistakes, escape what had happened last time—

My throat constricted. Catching that thought before it could blossom, I balled it up and tossed it away. I'd never been completely ready. But we *were* both still living. At least I'd accomplished that much.

I knelt to pluck several more twigs off the fig's outer branches, stuffed the handfuls into my pockets, and opened my closet.

My wands waited in a shoebox I'd stuffed under winter boots and a spare blanket. I ran my fingers over the smooth sticks. The magic I'd worked on them had sealed their life inside—if I'd left them out in the sun, they'd have started sprouting leaves. I tucked the birch one into my backpack.

To find a pair of gloves, I had to dig through my remaining moving boxes. But it wasn't just glooms and other dark rabble my king would need protection from.

It was also me.

I jammed a thin cotton pair into my back pocket and stepped out of my bedroom, my pulse still jittering.

Priya, my roommate, stood in the kitchen. She was spreading jam on a piece of toast. Her head of sleep-rumpled black hair bobbed up at the sound of my door, and a smile leapt to her face.

“Good morning, Emmaline!” She waved the knife at me with her usual frenetic grace. “Want eggs? I was just thinking I'd fry some up to go with my toast.”

No one else called me “Emmaline” except my mom—I always told acquaintances and teachers to stick to “Emma.” But Priya had seen my given name when we'd been filling out the lease and declared it one of the most beautiful names she'd ever heard. Somehow I hadn't had the heart to tell her I found it incredibly stuffy. In her cheery voice, it did sound kind of pretty.

I was already smiling back at her despite the twist of impatience inside me. Priya's boundless enthusiasm made it difficult to be irritated at her, which was probably why we were tentatively becoming friends. I hadn't been in the habit of making many of those—in this life or those prior.

"Thanks, but I think I'll stick to toast," I said. "Leave the jam out?" Food derived from animals didn't always sit well in my stomach. No need to add to my supernatural indigestion.

Priya chattered about an article she'd read for her politics course and her theories about the latest episode of a TV show we'd been watching while I gulped down my quick breakfast. Normally, I'd have contributed more. As I swallowed my last bite, Priya tilted her head.

"Something's bothering you," she said. "What's up?"

I might not have been perfect at hiding my emotions, but I had centuries of practice at lying. After all, there weren't many situations in which I *could* be truthful about being the reincarnation of a legendary sorcerer. People tended to get twitchy about even one part of that equation.

Downplaying worked better than flat-out denial. "It's nothing major," I said with a shrug. "Lab report due for a prof who seems like a tough one."

Priya nodded, accepting my explanation unquestioningly. No amount of practice stopped the little jab of guilt I felt at seeing that.

"I'm sure you've got it in the bag. You work *too* hard."

"New school, new expectations," I said. "I'll worry less once I'm into the swing of things."

I tugged on my gloves as soon as I stepped out onto the street. Thank the light the October weather was just nippy enough that wearing them didn't look totally bizarre. My gaze flitted over the streets the whole way to campus, my skin prickling at every shift in the breeze. I couldn't be sure of anything about *him* except he'd be the same age as me. He might not even be a *he* in this incarnation. Unlike me, with my regular flipping back and forth, he usually arrived male, but I could never be sure.

When my eyes hit him, I'd know him, no matter what.

At the edge of campus, a broad lawn stretched toward the sprawl of three- and four-story buildings, the older old-fashioned brick ones skirted by modern concrete additions. The view sent a jolt through my chest, even though I'd seen it dozens of times now.

It was the same image that had swam into my head and prompted me to transfer here for junior year—after skimming through page after page of internet search results before figuring out where my capricious psychic ability was pointing me.

My nerves jumped every time someone new walked by me, but I went through classes, lunch, and more classes without any revelations. I ducked into the change room to prepare for fencing practice with more than a little relief. Feinting and parrying would burn off some of my tension.

“Advanced learners, split off into pairs to spar,” Coach ordered after the warm-up exercises. I nodded to the guy standing next to me. We stepped to the side and began a conversation between our training blades. With each tap and dodge, a grin crept farther across my face behind the dark mesh of my protective mask.

Once upon a time, I could have been called clumsy, especially when asked to handle a weapon. That was exactly why I’d decided to take up fencing when I had the chance. After many lives worth of drills, the moves were starting to come naturally to me. I was stronger and more coordinated than I’d ever been.

Which didn’t mean I was infallible. My partner lunged, I swung to block his strike, and a low, rolling laugh carried from the doorway several feet behind me. The sound smacked into me, knocking the breath from my lungs. My arm wavered, and my opponent’s saber caught my hand. My fingers twitched apart as I yanked them out of the way. My own saber flipped through the air and nearly speared the guy standing in the doorway.

He stepped back without a flinch. My weapon clattered to the floor. The guy raised his eyes. They were a blue so striking I could identify it even at a distance, so deep it was almost indigo. He gave me a cocky smile and ran his hand over his sun-streaked blond hair. The muscles in his arm flexed against the sleeve of his fitted raglan shirt.

Every muscle in *my* body had frozen. Recognition sang through my every cell on a level beneath thought, beneath memory.

A level the guy in front of me clearly wasn’t aware of yet. No hint of shock crossed his face. I looked no different to him than any of the other fencers in our training gear. While *I* was born knowing who we were, my spell kept my king’s memories locked inside his mind... for now.

“I hope you’re normally more coordinated than that.” He nudged the saber back toward me with his foot. “I don’t want to have to worry about being impaled every time I come into the room.”

An echo of his voice from our first lives rang through my head. *Gods, you’re more likely to impale me than the enemy.* Those words had been spoken in affectionate jest, not this guy’s distant cool. The quiver of excitement that had been racing through me dimmed.

This incarnation of my king was a jackass.

The difference was so jarring I couldn’t help bristling. “My coordination is infinitely improved when people aren’t making sudden loud sounds in the training area,” I said. “And you could simply not come in.”

He hesitated, blinking at me. Before I’d spoken I bet he hadn’t even realized he was talking to a girl. I took advantage of his silence to stride over and retrieve my saber.

Two other figures were peering into the room beside the new guy—the friends he’d been laughing with. A lanky black guy, who had a couple inches on my critic’s already-formidable height, elbowed him with a rakish grin. A willowy girl with pale auburn tresses stood at Mr. Blond’s other side, hugging her cardigan over her gauzy maxi dress. She squeezed his forearm in apparent reassurance, and something wrenched in my chest.

She was his girlfriend, no doubt. Well, why *wouldn’t* he have a girlfriend with those looks? That was a good thing. His off-putting attitude was a good thing. Every reminder I could get to keep my distance, emotionally and physically, was a gift.

I existed to be his mage, to get him out of the snarl I’d created with my magic. Anything more risked us both, as I’d had ample opportunity to discover before.

That pinching in my chest was not jealousy. Not even a little bit.

“Have fun, Darton,” the rakish friend said with a playful salute. “Return to us with all your parts intact.” The girlfriend shook her head at him, and they headed off. The new guy—my king who didn’t yet know he was my king—strode in to talk to Coach. I studied his shadow to confirm no glooms were tailing him and rejoined my sparring partner after Coach ambled over.

Darton. Funny how in every life something of our essence wove even into the names each set of parents granted us. A sound or a syllable carried from our origins.

At least by all appearances, he hadn’t started to wake up on his own. As long as I could keep it that way, I had time to finally set things right.

My blade rapped against my opponent's, and Coach's voice traveled to my ears. "You're here to become a better quarterback?" His tone was skeptical and amused.

"I want to up my game," Darton said. "Coach Michner says my weakest area is dexterity. Fencing sounded like an enjoyable way to work on that. Is that a problem?"

"No," Coach said. "We don't have any requirement that you're devoted to the art. I *will* expect you to respect it—and to show up for practices on time."

A smile curled my lips behind my mask. Darton sounded a tad chastened in his reply.

"Right. Of course."

Coach believed in fencers staying fully suited up for practice so we were as comfortable as possible with the equipment we'd wear in competition, so they walked off to get Darton prepared. I felt his movements through the room with a faint tickling over my skin. My sparring partner disarmed me twice. I'd just paused to take a breath and regroup when Coach headed back our way, Darton in tow.

"Emma is one of our most experienced members," Coach was saying. "Since you two have already 'met,' I'll have her lead you through the basic warm-up."

My back stiffened. He often asked senior members to teach the junior ones, but it hadn't occurred to me he'd come to me, now, with this. Sodding hell. Darton was already eyeing me. If I acted cagey for no obvious reason, I'd draw his attention even more.

If I was careful, the risk of skin-to-skin physical contact was minimal. The other risks, which had to do with the heart pounding away in my chest, I'd just have to deal with.

I drew myself up straighter and tucked my one bare hand deeper into my sleeve. "Sure, I can take him through the paces."

Darton raised his eyebrow at me. "Don't worry. I'll keep up."

He did, which was a relief because it meant I didn't need to get close to adjust his position. It was also an annoyance, because I could hear him getting smugger with each comment he tossed out. He'd been a master with a broadsword way back when. It wasn't surprising he'd pick up fencing quickly. But that didn't mean I had to like how this unaware incarnation talked about it.

"So why do people get into this as a hobby anyway?" he asked when we paused after the first set of exercises.

“You mean if they’re not just using it to make them better at some other sport?” I said.
“Fencing is a sport too, FYI.”

He’d pulled his mask up, so I saw the disbelieving face he made. “You can’t say it’s the *same*. And it’s not as if you’re likely to end up in a sword fight outside this room.”

I restrained myself from asking how often he got into tackling fights with people off the football field and motioned for him to turn so we could start a two-person drill. “Some of us find the practice enjoyable regardless of how ‘useful’ it is. If you commit, you’ll find it’s intensive training for the body and the mind. You’re not going to feel the full effect if you come at it like a tourist.”

To give the guy credit, he took that critique in stride. He followed my instructions through several parrying sequences in silent concentration.

“Maybe I will get more into the training for its own sake,” he remarked. “Now that we’re on to the actual fighting, I can see the fun factor.”

He chuckled and picked up his pace. Did he really think ten minutes of practice was enough to justify pushing a senior student’s limits? My king might have always been talented, but he’d also had some humility.

I matched Darton beat for beat. Back and forth, back and forth—

He broke the pattern. His saber swiped at my padded shoulder.

My pulse stuttered, but I kept my footing as I sidestepped. I whipped my blade around his and flicked it up. His saber slipped from his grasp. It clanged to the floor at his feet much as mine had half an hour ago.

“Hey,” he protested. I lowered my blade, leaving my mask on. Coach was already sending some of the other members off to the change room. We were done here.

“You *never* start sparring without getting your training partner’s okay first,” I said. “And if you don’t want to make a fool of yourself, get the basics down before you start escalating.”

I stalked away before Darton could say anything in response. My legs had gone shaky.

How was I going to keep enough distance with him hanging around fencing practice three days a week? I’d found my king all right, and he was already proving more trouble than glooms and visions combined.

“Since when are you into football anyway?” Priya asked. She leaned back against the bleachers with a knowing smile. We were sitting near the top where I figured the players on the field would be less likely to notice us. The October wind tugged at the jacket I’d pulled on over today’s sweater. For a “windbreaker,” it wasn’t living up to its name.

I hunched my shoulders against the early morning chill. “I enjoy sports.” That was true, in moderation. “I just thought it might be fun to try something new.”

“Like freezing our asses off watching our home team face off against itself?” Priya’s smile widened. The cool weather didn’t seem to faze her at all.

“I heard they’re pretty good.” Also true, from my hasty research last night where I’d dug up whatever I could find out about Darton’s schedule. “I figured I’d check them out before I commit to watching a whole game.”

“Mmm,” Priya said. “Now I think we’re getting somewhere. *Check them out*, huh? I don’t suppose there’s any one particular hunk of manhood down there you’re focusing on?”

I wrinkled my nose at her. “No. They’re all the same to me.”

Technically, I wasn’t here to *check out* Darton on the field. I was just... keeping an eye on him. As long as the soul inside him stayed dormant, the glooms and various other lesser creatures of darkness wouldn’t be drawn to him. But I needed to figure out what his normal looked like and be around often enough to notice when he *did* start to awaken. If he woke up and the glooms caught on first—

I swallowed hard. It was not going to happen that way this time.

Football practice had crappy timing, but it was one of the few places I’d be able to observe Darton without sticking out like a sore thumb. And without catching his attention. I’d already done that far too well in fencing practice yesterday. Thank the light for masks.

Here, at least fifty other spectators were scattered throughout the stands—mostly friends and girlfriends of the players, I guessed. The rakish guy and the willowy girl who’d followed Darton

to fencing club were sitting on the lowest tier with a few other guys who must have been part of Darton's larger entourage.

On the field, Darton broke from a skirmish to dash across the goal line. "All right," the willowy girl shouted with a clap of her hands. "Nice one, Art!"

My head twitched at the nickname. She called him *Art*, did she? I wouldn't be surprised if all his friends did. That was almost funny. And yet, it made my gloved hands clench. I tucked them deeper into my pockets.

I had no claim on him, not the kind she might. I couldn't let myself *want* that kind of claim. Even when I got that wish fulfilled, it only ever made our lives fall apart faster.

Priya tossed her dark hair back from her face. "*I* had a crush on one of the wide receivers for a couple months last year. I went to a bunch of games so I could... *appreciate* his performance. It's nothing to be ashamed about. We're only human after all. If there is a guy down there you think you might like to know more about, you can always pick my brain."

I considered her offer as the players rearranged themselves into a new formation. Maybe Priya did know something useful. She'd been at this school two years longer than I had, after all. I'd just throw her off the scent a bit.

"What's the story with the guy with the bad leg?" I nodded to the running back who'd started limping about fifteen minutes into practice and was now on the bench massaging his calf.

"Marco Castaneda," Priya said. "Sophomore. Everyone thought he was on track to making quarterback until he got twisted up bad in a tackle halfway through last season. He was out for the rest of the year. I guess he got the okay to give it another shot. Either way, he'll be fine. I've heard his real passion is computers, and he's already got a gig lined up with Google."

I laughed at her speedy recitation. "You really do have the deets. Okay. How about linebacker number fifty-one?" The large, dark-skinned guy appeared to be the most boisterous on the team, bouncing off the ground and bellowing a victory cheer whenever his side in the practice exercises "won."

Priya cocked her head. "That's Tommy Franklin. He's a senior but only joined the team last year. The guys were kind of standoffish with him until he started hosting parties at his apartment, but now he's everyone's fave."

"Are you sure you were just 'checking out' and not actively stalking these guys?" I nudged her teasingly, and she bumped her shoulder back against mine in retaliation. The moment felt so

blissfully normal—like I really was just a college junior joking around with a friend I wasn't keeping any deep dark secrets from—that the next question rolled off my tongue without any hesitation at all.

“What about the quarterback, then?”

I didn't think I'd let my voice or my expression change, but Priya's eyes immediately sharpened. She glanced at the field and then back at me. “Oh, is *that* who you're hung up on?”

I gave her my best bewildered look. “Why are you fixating on him? You didn't think I was head over heels for Marco or Tommy.”

“It's a sixth sense.” Priya waggled a finger at me. “I'd ask why *you're* fixating on him, but it's really not that hard a question to answer. Darton Rowe, star quarterback and all-around golden boy. He's good looking, rich, dean's list worthy, and a respected athlete—what's not to like?”

With a resume like that, no wonder he was cocky. “Maybe he's the one *you* have a crush on,” I muttered.

“Had,” Priya said. “And nope. My guy graduated, more's the pity. But I can still applaud your excellent taste in men. I'm pretty sure Darton is single right now, you know. He's got a rep for being a bit, ah, picky, but I bet you could turn his head if you tried.”

She contemplated my face with an intentness that made me squirm. “I'm not interested in turning his head,” I insisted, although the “single” remark had grabbed my attention. I couldn't see how to ask about the girl cheering him on from the stands without giving away my interest.

It shouldn't matter anyway.

Priya arched her eyebrows at me. I waved her skepticism away and swiveled back toward the field.

Practice was wrapping up. The coach had called a huddle, but several of the guys were already taking off their helmets. Darton's hair caught the sunlight even damp with sweat, flaxen strands glinting amid the darker gold. It was almost the same shade in this incarnation as it'd been when I'd first met my king, all those centuries ago. My mouth went dry.

The coach finished talking, and the guys jogged to the edge of the field. The spectators around us started getting up. Darton's friends gathered around him as he gulped from a bottle of water.

I pushed to my feet, swung my backpack over my shoulder, and turned to head to the opposite end of the bleachers, where I could climb down without risking crossing paths with him. The less he saw me without a fencing mask on, the better.

Priya grabbed my arm. “Where are you going?” she said, her voice low. Her eyes gleamed. “You should go down and say hi! Look, he’s coming right this way.”

Darton and his entourage were ambling along with the apparent intention of skirting our side of the bleachers. I shook my head. “I don’t want to say hi, Pri. I’m not into him. Really.”

She gave me a light tug. “Oh, come on. Don’t chicken out on me. I can tell you’re at least curious. He won’t bite.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, given he’d come at me with a blade yesterday. And it was beside the point.

“I’ve got to get to class. Maybe another time.” I made a mental note *not* to let Priya invite herself along next time.

“Emmaline,” Priya pleaded. At the same moment, a guy a few rows below us dropped his phone with a clatter. He swore loudly. Darton, who was just coming around the stands with his friends, glanced up. My pulse stuttered. One flick to the right and his gaze would hit me.

I spun around and jerked against Priya’s grasp—just as she let me go of her own accord. “All right, all right, have it your way.”

The unnecessary force I’d put into breaking free propelled me backward. I stumbled, and my back slammed into the rusty guardrail. It must have weakened over the years after holding up however many drunken sports fans, because it didn’t hold *me* up. With a squeal, the bar popped out of its frame. I tumbled past it over the edge.

The twenty-foot drop to the ground didn’t give me a whole lot of time to think, so it was a good thing I’d had centuries to hone my instincts. My heart lurched, but my lips spat out a few quick words. One of the twigs in my pocket disintegrated.

The pillow of air I’d called into being caught me. I still hit the ground, but the impact jarred my body without breaking any bones. If I’d cushioned myself any more, it would have been obvious to anyone observing that something unnatural had happened.

My breath had jolted out of me. My head spun. I blinked at the grass beside my face as my awareness caught up with my instinctive reactions.

Well, that was one way to make a quick exit.

Someone was yelling. Multiple people, actually. I pushed into a sitting position, and a rush of dizziness washed over me. Before I could find my bearings to stand, the one guy I'd been trying my best to avoid leaned over me.

"Are you all right?" Darton asked. From the flush on his face, he must have run over. His friends and a few other players were coming up behind him.

I groped for my inner poise. "Um. Yeah."

He offered his hand to help me up, but I was already scrambling to my feet. My legs wobbled. Damn it.

Darton caught my arm to steady me, and I had to stiffen to keep from flailing away like a maniac. Heat washed through my body. Only two layers of fabric lay between his bare hand and my skin. Two thin shields holding off disaster.

I stepped backward, and Darton let go. He was eyeing me with concern. I met those intense blue eyes for as little time as I felt I could get away with while appearing convincingly stable. "I'm okay." I was reaching for an excuse to hightail it out of there when Priya dashed over from the stands. She'd taken the longer, safer route down.

"Thank God!" She came to a stop beside me and looked me up and down. "I was terrified. The school needs to do better maintenance on those bleachers."

"No kidding." I rubbed the elbow that had taken a sizable portion of the impact. My hip was aching.

Priya's attention shifted to the guy in front of me. An unnerving spark lit in her eyes.

"Thank you for racing over so quickly to help," she said to Darton in her most chipper voice. "I'm Priya."

"Darton." He gave her a brief nod, but his gaze slid right back to me. Expectantly. Oh, swine crud and cattle sod. I *really* shouldn't have let Priya come with me.

I could have admitted we'd already met. But maybe he'd never figure that out. If he found out now, it was only going to fix my face more firmly in his memory.

"Emmaline," I said quickly, hoping he wouldn't make the connection to the "Emma" Coach had directed him to yesterday. "And yeah. Thank you. I, ah—I've got a class to get to—"

"Then you'll want this." Darton's rakish friend scooped up my backpack, which had rolled a few feet away, and handed it to me with a sly grin. "I'm Keevan. Kudos on the impressive fall. You took it like a champ."

I wasn't entirely sure that was a compliment. "Thanks."

Darton frowned. "Are you *sure* you're okay? If you need a hand getting to the campus medical center..."

I couldn't help being touched by his refusal to let the situation go, as inconvenient as it was. The guy wasn't a total ass. Nevertheless, I didn't want his hands anywhere near my vicinity. That kind of touching was severely inadvisable.

"One-hundred-percent injury free." I took a step to the side to show off my now-steady feet. "Guess I was lucky."

"Really lucky," Darton's maybe-girlfriend murmured.

Darton's frown turned puzzled. The back of my neck prickled.

My voice. The fencing mask would have muffled it a little, but that didn't mean he *couldn't* notice the similarity. I had to get out of there before he put two and two together.

"Well, ah, hopefully we won't meet this way again." I offered a brisk wave of my hand and took off.

I'd only made it two steps before Priya caught up with me. She leaned in conspiratorially. "At least you did get to talk to him. He knows who you are now. That was a pretty memorable entrance."

"Yeah." That was the problem. Even if Darton didn't connect the girl who'd fallen from the bleachers to his sharp-tongued fencing partner, he'd recognize me now. My responsibilities had gotten ten times harder in the space of a second.

The crushed Himalayan salt rattled into the glass bowl. I opened the baggy of dried ague root and poured it over the rough crystals. The faintly tart odor tickled my nose. I kneaded the powder and salt together. The damp afternoon breeze drifted over me, but the hedge at the edge of the campus grounds held the worst of the wind away from my spell-making.

The pages in the leather-bound book spread open beside me fluttered. They were crisp and yellowed, knowledge recorded more than a hundred years ago in some other life I only retained a few hazy memories of. I'd retrieved it from my storage locker an hour ago. My recollection of my lives after the first might be hazy, but the magical beacons I'd set in place each time always led me back to my stash of scribblings.

Looking at those stacks of supplies and journals, the oldest of them long since crumbled, always left me cranky. They made a thorough record of my failures. All the lives cut so short because I'd slipped up somewhere. All the lifetimes in which I hadn't been able to untangle the spell that was drawing the dark rabble to us and keeping us locked in this cycle.

Not again. This time, I'd do everything right.

I pulled a wand from my bag and pointed it at the mixture in the bowl. The words in the old tongue rolled from my throat. "*When fae darkness crosses, witness and tremble.*"

A shiver ran through the wand and up my arm. The tingle of life in the stick dulled. Soon, this wand would be nothing more than dead wood, which was why I'd brought backups.

I straightened up and scanned the grounds. I'd picked a spot secluded enough that no one would have seen or heard the details of my preparations, but a group of girls—freshmen, I'd bet, by their giddy nervous energy—was ambling down the drive toward the entrance. A couple of them shot me curious glances.

I had the entire property to circle. No way was I pulling that off without drawing some notice.

Normally, I'd have waited and cast magic like this on a Monday in the wee hours of the morning, after the weekend partiers were finally asleep and before the early birds were up for breakfast. But now that Darton was somewhat aware of my existence, I needed protective measures in place that *didn't* require having him in my line of sight. I was just lucky that it appeared he mostly studied, worked out, and slept on the college's grounds.

I was going to have to come up with other plans for his away games and for Thanksgiving, when I figured he'd probably make a trip home. If we survived that long.

For now, I just needed to avoid looking so sketchy that someone called campus security. I studied the traffic roaring along the road on the other side of the hedge, as if I were waiting for a specific car, until the girls had passed me by. Then I gestured the wand toward myself and muttered a few words to deflect attention.

The wand's core shuddered and crumbled. The last of my words tugged right into my body. It was too late to reach for one of my spares. Sod it. I pushed the thump of my pulse and the light of life that flowed through my blood into the casting. A prickle raced over my skin, and the light around me rippled. I tossed away the dead wand.

No one would give me a second glance now. And if I'd put a day or two of this body's life into the casting, oh well. I wasn't likely to make it to old age anyway.

I grabbed one of the other two wands I had on me and palmed a handful of the herbed salt. "*When fae darkness crosses, witness and tremble,*" I murmured, sprinkling the mixture in a thin trail on the ground. I walked ten paces, sprinkled some more, and repeated the incantation. The wand twitched in my hand with each casting. It wasn't practical to lay the salt in a completely unbroken line, but if I kept the gaps small enough, any passing glooms—or more dangerous creatures of darkness—would trigger the warning.

My second wand died in my hand about halfway around campus. I'd expected to get more out of it—I must not have sealed that one well. I paused to catch my breath. Even when I used the energy in the wands to charge my magic, the focus necessary tired me out after a while. I might as well take a moment to check on a project of sorts I'd started before my encounter with Darton.

A gloom was squirming amid a clump of trees near the campus border, not far from the athletic department's track. "Hello, Carl," I said. Not that glooms had names, but it looked like a Carl to me. The clot of darkness roiled as it pushed against the magical binding I'd laid around it.

I brushed my hand over the sealing spell and frowned. The woven energy was starting to fray, worn down by the gloom's struggle to escape. It might take years, but the spell would eventually crumble and let this shred of darkness go free.

Balls. I'd hoped that new combination of words, herbs, and wood might create a permanent effect. Back to the drawing board. There had to be a way I could re-seal our true enemy that didn't rely on mine and my king's lives maintaining the balance.

There had better be, or I was never going to break this eternal cycle, not without freeing that enemy and bringing on my king's final death.

"I'm sorry, but I don't think we can stay friends any longer," I informed the gloom as I drew out my final wand.

"Darkness begone," I muttered, and Carl contracted into nothing. I turned away, my chest tight.

I'd captured the greatest dark fae of them all once. I'd kept her sealed away from humankind for fifteen hundred years. I *had* to be capable of doing it again, just a little differently.

Of course, it would have helped if I understood how I'd managed to create the first seal. I hadn't exactly been thinking clearly in the moment.

I charted a course past a couple making out against a maintenance shed, around the track and the bleachers where the railing that had broken off was now tied with yellow caution tape, and back to the hedge. Only a handful of salt remained when I reached the main entrance. I tipped that into a small silk bag and tied off the ribbon that closed it.

A tremble ran down my back as I raised the wand to lock the last bit of the incantation in place. I'd pushed myself to lay down the casting quickly, and I was paying for it now. But it was almost done. I'd handled far worse.

"When fae darkness crosses, witness and tremble," I said one last time. The quiver of energy in the wand snuffed out. I shoved some of my own life's power after it. My nerves wrenched—and that was when the vision hit me.

They never came quietly. The world before me tore apart with a rush of spiraling darkness. My stomach lurched. The shapes before my mind's eye whirled as if I were falling... tumbling straight down toward a sprawl of forest.

Toward a small grove of trees surrounded by the patches of vibrant autumn reds and yellows. The vision slowed, and I stared. Blackened patches spread across the branches where

the bark had disintegrated. The leaves that sprouted from them dangled brown and shriveled. The grass that was matted around the trees roots lay limp and gray. A chill permeated the air through the grove, so thick it penetrated the body my mind had left behind.

I shivered, and a fresh rush of darkness loomed like a fog rolling over me, icy cold as it spread down my throat and into my lungs—

I came to on my back on the campus lawn, gasping for breath. For a few seconds, the blue sky stretched above me struck me as impossibly bright, fake as plastic. I dragged in the cool, clear air and coughed.

My visions never offered much help, either. I had no idea where that cluster of trees was or when it would matter. I didn't even know what their existence signified. All I could say in the wake of the dread still crawling over my skin was that whatever had harmed them meant to do the same to me and all other things living.

* * *

When I was growing up—the first time, centuries ago—I'd only ever gotten brief flashes of feeling, barely even an image, there and then gone. So when my first *real* vision came, knocking me off my feet and flooding my mind, I couldn't ignore it. I saw a young man, fair and strong with the sun glowing off his face and the walls of his castle behind him, and I knew it was time to go.

My father wasn't so sure, even though he'd always said I was to volunteer my service to the king's son—eventually. "I thought we would wait until you were a little older," he told me. "The prince won't be king for some time yet. There's no good to come from rushing in."

"It's not rushing," I said. "I need to go, now." The vision had told me that as clearly as if it had spoken words. Whatever purpose I was to carry out, it was meant to begin, and I didn't have much patience for dithering. In that way, at least, I was completely my father's son.

In the end, Father nodded his pale head, squeezed my shoulder—we were never a hugging sort of family—and wished me luck as I packed a few possessions to bring with me.

I set out with total certainty, even though I knew sod-all about the current king and the son I intended to serve. My light fae community in the woods did not mingle much with humankind. Father had told me generalities—that the king was the most respected in generations, that nearly everyone considered him to be fair but firm, and that his son, though only a year older than me,

had already started making a name for *himself* with his willingness to pitch in when ordinary folk were in need. That was the limit of my understanding.

My feet, seeming to know where to take me without any consultation needed, carried me to a town a few hours' ride from the castle. I came across a group of townspeople assembled in a courtyard on the outskirts. The prince's golden hair gleamed in their midst.

He was in the middle of explaining his plan to stop a gang of marauders who'd been thieving along the highways. His hands swept with passionate gestures mixed with the occasional joking remark, and his audience listened in obvious awe. I'd missed most of the explanation—he was just finishing.

The townspeople dispersed with enthusiasm. A few of the locals took note of me, the stranger in their midst, with wary glances. I hesitated at the edge of the courtyard. The prince walked apart from his guard to examine a cart that might have been part of his plan, so I pushed myself forward.

I strode up to him and dropped to one knee, bowing my head. "Your Highness," I said, "if I might speak with you."

The prince let out a sound somewhere between a cough and a laugh. "Of course, good fellow. Speak as much as you wish. But I'd rather you did it standing face to face with me."

His smile, small but warm, told me he meant that, so I got to my feet. "I've heard many remarkable things about you and your father," I told him with a directness that probably should have embarrassed *me*. "I admire the way you look out for your people and the good you've already done for them. I've traveled a long distance in the hopes that I can be of use to you. I'll take on whatever job you'll assign me, as long as it helps you with your work."

He blinked, and I had enough wits to realize my compliments had affected him, even as well as he'd kept his composure. I hadn't realized yet how rarely the over-awed ordinary folk spoke to him directly or how measured his father was with praise.

I hadn't quite decided during my journey there whether I should reveal my magic right away or slowly hint at it. I didn't have many skills that would be useful to a prince otherwise, but magic was the domain of my fae heritage, not my human side, and I'd heard enough stories to be aware that even the best people sometimes responded... poorly to what they didn't understand.

But the prince didn't ask for any proof of my skills. He clapped me on the back, grinned, and said, "With an attitude like that, I'm sure we can find plenty of ways for you to contribute.

For a start, how about we carry these casks of wine to the inn? No one will think much of my generosity if I don't provide a drink to go with the meal I've arranged."

Was it the grin and the light it brought into his eyes? The way he went straight to *we* as if we were already allies? Or maybe the fact that he'd not only come to the town to deal with the marauders, but had also gifted them with a feast as well? All three combined, no doubt. In any case, I'd looked back at him with a grin of my own, and just like that, if I was being honest, I'd already prepared to follow my king-to-be to the ends of the Earth.

* * *

Fifteen hundred years later, I sat up on the grass beside the campus entrance and pressed my hands against my face. So many years had passed since that day, and yet I could still bring the taste of that wine and the tenor of his voice back in an instant.

I'd followed my liege so much farther than the ends of the Earth since then. I'd watched him die and followed him into death a hundred times. And still, the closest thing I had to answers were ominous visions that might as well have been blotches in a Rorschach test.

"It can't keep going like this, Arthur," I said to the ground, to the air, to the soul locked inside the unknowing young man sitting in a classroom right now. "We *have* to end it."

If only I had the slightest idea how.

* * *

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