

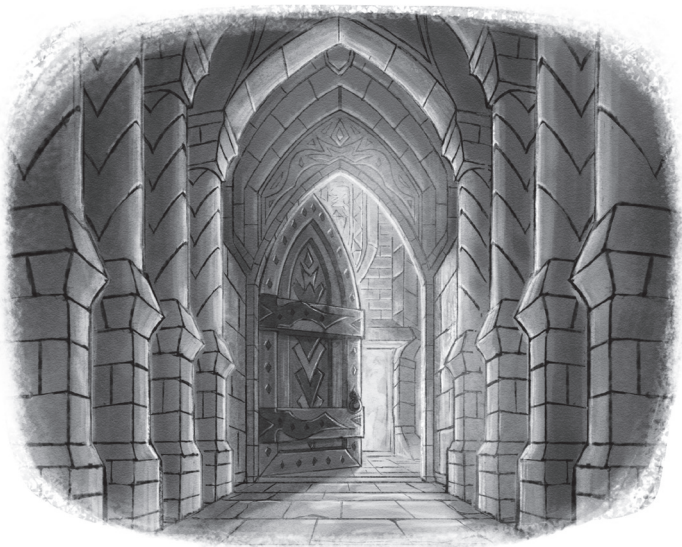
A TALE OF MAGIC...

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ILLUSTRATED BY BRANDON DORMAN



LITTLE, BROWN BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS



PROLOGUE



AN UNEXPECTED AUDIENCE

Magic was outlawed in all four kingdoms—and that was putting it lightly. Legally, magic was the worst criminal act a person could commit, and socially, there was nothing considered more despicable. In most areas, just being *associated* with a convicted witch or warlock was an offense punishable by death.

In the Northern Kingdom, perpetrators and their families were put on trial and promptly burned at the stake. In the Eastern Kingdom, very little evidence was needed to sentence the accused and their loved ones to

hang at the gallows. And in the Western Kingdom, suspected witches and warlocks were drowned without any trial whatsoever.

The executions were rarely committed by law enforcement or kingdom officials. Most commonly, the punishments were carried out by mobs of angry citizens who took the law into their own hands. Although frowned upon, the brutal sport was completely tolerated by the kingdoms' sovereigns. In truth, the leaders were delighted their people had something besides government to direct their anger toward. So the monarchs welcomed the distraction and even encouraged it during times of political unrest.

"He or she who chooses a path of magic has chosen a path of condemnation," King Nobleton of the North proclaimed. Meanwhile, *his* negligent choices were causing the worst famine in his kingdom's history.

"We must never show sympathy to people with such abominable priorities," Queen Endustria of the East declared, and then immediately raised taxes to finance a summer palace.

"Magic is an insult to God and nature, and a danger to morality as we know it," King Warworth of the West remarked. Luckily for him, the statement distracted his people from rumors about the eight illegitimate children he had fathered with eight different mistresses.

Once a witch or warlock was exposed, persecution was nearly impossible to escape. Many fled into the thick and dangerous forest known as the In-Between that grew between borders. Unfortunately, the In-Between

was home to dwarfs, elves, goblins, trolls, ogres, and all the other species humankind had banished over the years. The witches and warlocks seeking asylum in the woods usually found a quick and violent demise at the hands of a barbaric creature.

The only mercy whatsoever for witch-and-warlock-kind (if it could even be considered *mercy*) was found in the Southern Kingdom.

As soon as King Champion XIV inherited the throne from his father, the late Champion XIII, his first royal decree was to abolish the death penalty for convicted practitioners of magic. Instead, the offenders were sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labor (and they were reminded every day how *grateful* they should be). The king didn't amend the law purely out of the goodness of his heart, but as an attempt to make peace with a traumatic memory.

When Champion was a child, his own mother was beheaded for a “suspected interest” in magic. The charge came from Champion XIII himself, so no one thought to question the accusation or investigate the queen's innocence, although Champion XIII's motives were questioned on the day following his wife's execution, when he married a much younger and prettier woman. Since the queen's untimely end, Champion XIV had counted down the days until he could avenge his mother by destroying his father's legacy. And as soon as the crown was placed on his head, Champion XIV devoted most of his reign to erasing Champion XIII from the Southern Kingdom's history.

Now in old age, King Champion XIV spent the majority of his time doing the least he possibly could. His royal decrees had been reduced to grunts and eye rolls. Instead of royal visitations, the king lazily waved to crowds from the safety of a speeding carriage. And the closest thing he made to royal statements anymore were complaints about his castle's halls being "too long" and the staircases "too steep."

Champion made a hobby of avoiding people—especially his self-righteous family. He ate his meals alone, went to bed early, slept in late, and cherished his lengthy afternoon naps (and God have mercy on the poor soul that woke him before he was ready).

Although on one particular afternoon, the king was prematurely woken, not by a careless grandchild or clumsy chambermaid, but by a sudden change in the weather. Champion awoke with fright to heavy raindrops thudding against his chamber windows and powerful winds whistling down his chimney. It had been such a sunny and clear day when he went to bed, so the storm was quite a surprise for the groggy sovereign.

"I've risen," Champion announced.

The king waited for the nearest servant to scurry in and help him down from his tall bed, but his call was unanswered.

Champion aggressively cleared his throat. "I said *I've risen*," he called again, but strangely, there was still no response.

The king's joints cracked as he begrudgingly climbed

out of bed, and he mumbled a series of curse words as he hobbled across the stone floor to retrieve his robe and slippers. Once he was dressed, Champion burst through his chamber doors, intending to scold the first servant he laid eyes on.

“Why is no one responding? What could possibly be more important than—”

Champion fell silent and looked around in disbelief. The drawing room outside his chambers was usually bustling with maids and butlers, but now it was completely empty. Even the soldiers who guarded the doors day and night had abandoned their posts.

The king peered into the hallway beyond the drawing room, but it was just as empty. Not only was it vacant of servants and soldiers, but all the *light* had disappeared, too. Every candle in the chandeliers and all the torches on the walls had been extinguished.

“Hello?” Champion called down the hall. “Is anyone there?” But all he heard was his own voice echoing back to him.

The king cautiously moved through the castle searching for another living soul, but he only found more and more darkness at every turn. It was incredibly unsettling—he had lived in the castle since he was a small boy and had never seen it so lifeless. Champion looked through every window he passed, but the rain and fog blocked his view of anything outside.

Eventually the king rounded the corner of a long hallway and spotted flickering lights coming from his

private study. The door was wide open and someone was enjoying a fire inside. It would have been a very inviting sight if the circumstances weren't so eerie. With each step he took, the king's heart beat faster and faster, and he anxiously peered into the doorway to see who or what was waiting inside.

"Oh, look! The king is awake!"

"Finally."

"Now, now, girls. We must be respectful to His Majesty."

The king found two young girls and a beautiful woman sitting on the sofa in his study. Upon his entrance, they quickly rose from their seats and bowed in his direction.

"Your Majesty, what a pleasure to make your acquaintance," the woman said.

She wore an elegant purple gown that matched her large bright eyes, and curiously, only one glove, which covered her left arm. Her dark hair was tucked beneath an elaborate fascinator with flowers, feathers, and a short veil that fell over her face. The girls couldn't have been older than ten, and wore plain white robes and cloth headwraps.

"Who the heck are you?" Champion asked.

"Oh, forgive me," the woman said. "I'm Madame Weatherberry and these are my apprentices, Miss Tangerina Turkin and Miss Skylene Lavenders. I hope you don't mind that we made ourselves at home in your study. We've traveled an awfully long way to be here and couldn't resist a nice fire while we waited."

Madame Weatherberry seemed to be a very warm and charismatic woman. She was the last person the king had expected to find in the abandoned castle, which in many ways made the woman *and* the situation even stranger. Madame Weatherberry extended her right arm to shake Champion's hand, but he didn't accept the friendly gesture. Instead, the monarch looked his unexpected guests up and down and took a full step backward.

The girls giggled and eyed the paranoid king, as if they were looking into his soul and found it laughable.

"This is a private room in a royal residence!" Champion reprimanded them. "How dare you enter without permission! I could have you whipped for this!"

"Please pardon our intrusion," Madame Weatherberry said. "It's rather out of character for us to barge into someone's home unannounced, but I'm afraid I had no choice. You see, I've been writing to your secretary, Mr. Fellows, for quite some time. I was hoping to schedule an audience with you, but unfortunately, Mr. Fellows never responded to any of my letters—he's a rather inefficient man, if you don't mind me saying it. Perhaps it's time to replace him? Anyway, there's a very timely matter I'm eager to discuss with you, so here we are."

"How did this woman get inside?" the king shouted into the empty castle. "Where in God's name is everyone?!"

"I'm afraid all your subjects are indisposed at the moment," Madame Weatherberry informed him.

“What do you mean *indisposed*?” Champion barked.

“Oh, it’s nothing to be concerned about—*just a little enchantment to secure our safety*. I promise, all your servants and soldiers will return once we’ve had time to talk. I find diplomacy is so much easier when there are no distractions, don’t you?”

Madame Weatherberry spoke in a calm manner, but one word made Champion’s eyes grow wide and his blood pressure soar.

“*Enchantment*?” The king gasped. “You’re... you’re... *you’re a WITCH!*”

Champion pointed his finger at Madame Weatherberry in such a panic he pulled every muscle in his right shoulder. The king groaned as he clutched his arm, and his guests snickered at his dramatic display.

“No, Your Majesty, I am not a *witch*,” she said.

“Don’t you lie to me, woman!” the king shouted. “Only witches make enchantments!”

“No, Your Majesty, that is not true.”

“You’re a witch and you’ve cursed this castle with magic! You’ll pay for this!”

“I see listening isn’t your strong suit,” Madame Weatherberry said. “Perhaps if I repeated myself three times my message would sink in? I find that’s a helpful tool with slow learners. Here we go—*I am not a witch. I am not a witch. I am not a*—”

“IF YOU’RE NOT A WITCH, THEN WHAT ARE YOU?”

It didn’t matter how loud the king yelled or how

agitated he became; Madame Weatherberry's polite demeanor never faded.

"Actually, Your Majesty, that's among the topics I would like to discuss with you this evening," she said. "Now, we don't wish to take any more of your time than necessary. Won't you please have a seat so we can begin?"

As if pulled by an invisible hand, the chair behind the king's desk moved on its own, and Madame Weatherberry gestured for him to sit. Champion wasn't certain he had a choice in the matter, so he took a seat and nervously glanced back and forth at the visitors. The girls sat on the sofa and folded their hands neatly in their laps. Madame Weatherberry sat between her apprentices and flipped her veil upward so she could look the sovereign directly in the eye.

"First, I wanted to thank you, Your Majesty," Madame Weatherberry began. "You're the only ruler in history to show the magical community any mercy—granted, some might say life imprisonment with hard labor is worse than death—but it's still a step in the right direction. And I'm confident we can turn these steps into strides if we just—Your Majesty, is something wrong? I don't seem to have your full attention."

Bizarre buzzing and swishing noises had captured the king's curiosity as she spoke. He looked around the study but couldn't find the source of the odd noises.

"Sorry, I thought I heard something," the king said. "You were saying?"

"I was professing my gratitude for the mercy you've

shown the magical community.”

The king grunted with disgust. “Well, you’re mistaken if you think I have any empathy for the *magical community*,” he scoffed. “On the contrary, I believe magic is just as foul and unnatural as all the other sovereigns do. My concern is with the people who use magic to take advantage of the law.”

“And that’s commendable, sir,” Madame Weatherberry said. “Your devotion to justice is what separates you from all the other monarchs. Now, I’d like to enlighten your perspective on magic, so you may continue making this kingdom a fairer and safer place for *all* your people. After all, justice cannot exist for one if it doesn’t exist for everyone.”

Their conversation had just begun and the king was already starting to resent it. “What do you mean *enlighten* my perspective?” he sneered.

“Your Majesty, the way magic is criminalized and stigmatized is the greatest injustice of our time. But with the proper modifications and amendments—*and some strategic publicity*—we can change all that. Together, we can create a society that encourages all walks of life and raises them to their greatest potential and—Your Majesty, are you listening? I seem to have lost you again.”

Once more, the king was distracted by the mysterious buzzing and swishing sounds. His eyes searched the study more frantically than before and he only heard every other word Madame Weatherberry said.

“I must have misunderstood you,” he said. “For a

moment, it sounded as if you were suggesting the *legalization of magic*.”

“Oh, there was no misunderstanding,” Madame Weatherberry said with a laugh. “The legalization of magic is *exactly* what I’m suggesting.”

Champion suddenly sat up in his seat and clenched the armrests of his chair. Madame Weatherberry had his undivided attention now. She couldn’t possibly be implying something so ludicrous.

“What is wrong with you, woman?” the king sneered. “Magic can *never* be legalized!”

“Actually, sir, it’s very much in the realm of possibility,” Madame Weatherberry said. “All that’s required is a simple decree that decriminalizes the act and then, in good time, the stigma surrounding it will diminish.”

“I would sooner decriminalize murder and thievery!” the king declared. “The Lord clearly states in the Book of Faith that magic is a horrendous sin, and therefore a *crime* in this kingdom! And if crimes didn’t have consequences, we would live in utter chaos!”

“That’s where you’re mistaken, Your Majesty,” she said. “You see, magic is *not* the crime the world thinks it is.”

“*Of course it is!*” he objected. “I have witnessed magic being used to trick and torment innocent people! I have seen the bodies of children who were slaughtered for potions and spells! I have been to villages plagued by curses and hexes! So don’t you dare defend magic to me, Madame! The magical community will never

receive an ounce of sympathy or understanding from *this* sovereign!”

Champion couldn't have made his opposition any clearer, but Madame Weatherberry moved to the edge of her seat and smiled as if they had found common ground.

“This may surprise you, sir, but I completely agree,” she said.

“You do?” he asked with a suspicious gaze.

“Oh yes, *completely*,” she repeated. “I believe those who torment innocent people *should* be punished for their actions—and *harshly*, I might add. There's just one minor flaw in your reasoning. The situations you've witnessed aren't caused by magic but by *witchcraft*.”

The king tensed his brow and glanced at Madame Weatherberry as if she were speaking a foreign language. “*Witchcraft?*” he said mockingly. “I've never heard of such a thing.”

“Then allow me to explain,” Madame Weatherberry said. “Witchcraft is a ghastly and destructive practice. It stems from a dark desire to *deceive* and *disrupt*. Only people with wicked hearts are capable of witchcraft, and believe me, they deserve whatever fate they bring upon themselves. But *magic* is something else entirely. At its core, magic is a pure and positive art form. It's meant to *help* and *heal* those in need and can only come from those with goodness in their hearts.”

The king sank back into his chair and held his head, dizzy with confusion.

“Oh dear, I've overwhelmed you,” Madame

Weatherberry said. “Let me simplify it for you, then. *Magic is good, magic is good, magic is good. Witchcraft is bad, witchcraft is bad, witchcraft is—*”

“Don’t patronize me, woman—I heard you!” the king griped. “Give me a moment to wrap my head around it!”

Champion let out a long sigh and massaged his temples. It was usually difficult for him to process information so shortly after a nap, but this was an entirely different beast. The king covered his eyes and concentrated, as if he were reading a book behind his eyelids.

“You’re saying magic is not the same as witchcraft?”

“Correct,” Madame Weatherberry said with an encouraging nod. “Apples and oranges.”

“And the two are different in nature?”

“Polar opposites, sir.”

“So, if not *witches*, what do you call people who practice magic?”

Madame Weatherberry held her head high with pride. “We call ourselves *fairies*, sir.”

“*Fairies?*” the king asked.

“Yes, *fairies*,” she repeated. “Now do you understand my desire to enlighten your perspective? The world’s concern isn’t with fairies who practice magic, it’s with witches who commit witchcraft. But tragically, we’ve been grouped together and condemned as one and the same for centuries. Fortunately, with my guidance and your influence, we are more than capable of rectifying this.”

“I’m afraid I disagree,” the king said.

“I beg your pardon?” Madame Weatherberry replied.

“One man may steal because of greed, and another may steal for survival, but they’re both thieves—it doesn’t matter if one has *goodness* in his heart.”

“But, sir, I thought I made it perfectly clear that witchcraft is the crime, not magic.”

“Yes, but *both* have been considered sinful since the beginning of time,” Champion went on. “Do you know how difficult it is to redefine something for society? It took me *decades* to convince my kingdom that potatoes aren’t poisonous—and people still avoid them in the markets!”

Madame Weatherberry shook her head in disbelief. “Are you comparing an innocent race of people to potatoes, sir?”

“I understand your objective, Madame, but the world isn’t ready for it—heck, *I’m* not ready for it! If you want to save the fairies from unfair punishment, then I suggest you teach them to keep quiet and resist the urge to use magic! That would be far easier than convincing a stubborn world to change its ways.”

“Resist the *urge*? Sir, you can’t be serious!”

“Why not? Normal people live above temptation every day.”

“Because you’re implying magic comes with an off switch—like it’s some sort of *choice*.”

“Of course magic is a choice!”

“NO! IT! IS! NOOOOT!”

For the first time since their interaction had begun,

Madame Weatherberry's pleasant temperament changed. A shard of deep-seated anger pierced through her cheery disposition and her face fell into a stony, intimidating glare. It was as if Champion were facing a different woman altogether—a woman who should be feared.

"Magic is *not* a choice," Madame Weatherberry said sharply. "*Ignorance* is a choice. *Hatred* is a choice. *Violence* is a choice. But someone's *existence* is never a choice, or a fault, and it's certainly not a crime. You would be wise to educate yourself."

Champion was too afraid to say another word. It may have been his imagination, but the king could have sworn the storm outside was intensifying as Madame Weatherberry's temper rose. It was obviously a state she rarely surrendered to because her apprentices seemed as uneasy as the king. The fairy closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and calmed herself before continuing their discussion.

"Perhaps we should give His Majesty a demonstration," Madame Weatherberry suggested. "Tangerina? Skylene? Will you please show King Champion why magic isn't a choice?"

The apprentices exchanged an eager grin—they had been waiting for this. They hopped to their feet, removed their robes, and unwound their headwraps. Tangerina revealed a dress made from dripping patches of honeycomb and a beehive of bright orange hair that was the home of a live swarm of bumblebees. Skylene uncovered a sapphire bathing suit, and instead of hair,

she had a continuous stream of water that flowed down her body, evaporating as it reached her feet.

Champion's mouth dropped open as he laid eyes on what the girls had been concealing. In all his years on the throne, he had never seen magic so materialized in a person's appearance. The mystery of the strange buzzing and swishing noises was solved.

"My God," the king said breathlessly. "Are all fairies like this?"

"Magic affects each of us differently," Madame Weatherberry said. "Some people lead completely normal lives until their magic presents itself, while others show physical traits from the moment they're born."

"That can't be true," the king argued. "If people were born with magical features, the prisons would be filled with infants! And our courts have never imprisoned a baby."

Madame Weatherberry lowered her head and looked to the floor with a sad gaze.

"That's because most fairies are killed or abandoned at birth. Their parents fear the consequences of bringing a magical child into the world, so they do what is necessary to avoid punishment. It was a miracle I found Tangerina and Skylene before they were harmed, but many aren't so lucky. Your Majesty, I understand your reservation, but what's happening to these children is cruel and primitive. Decriminalizing magic is about much more than injustice, it's about *saving innocents*! Surely, you can find sympathy and understanding in your heart for that."

Champion knew he lived in a harsh world, but he had been oblivious to such horrors. He rocked back and forth in his chair as his reluctance waged war with his empathy. Madame Weatherberry could tell she was making progress with the king, so she used a sentiment she had been saving for just the right moment.

“Think how different the world would be if it had a little more compassion for the magical community. Think how different *your* life would be, Your Majesty.”

Suddenly, Champion’s mind was flooded with memories of his mother. He remembered her face, her smile, her laugh, but most prominently of all, he remembered the tight embrace they had shared just before she was dragged to an untimely death. Despite how rusty his memory had become with age, those images were forever branded in his brain.

“I would like to help you, but decriminalizing magic may be more problematic than productive. Forcing the public to accept what they hate and fear could cause a rebellion! Witch hunts as we know them could escalate into full-fledged genocide!”

“Believe me, I’m no stranger to human nature,” Madame Weatherberry said. “The legalization of magic can’t be rushed. On the contrary, it must be handled gently, with patience and persistence. If we want to change the world’s opinion it must be encouraged, not forced—and nothing encourages people like a good spectacle.”

A nervous tension spread over the king’s face.

“Spectacle?” he asked fearfully. “What sort of *spectacle* are you planning?”

Madame Weatherberry smiled and her bright eyes grew even brighter—this was the part she had been waiting for.

“When I first met Tangerina and Skylene, they were captives of their own magic,” she told him. “No one could get near Tangerina without being attacked by her bees, and poor Skylene was living in a lake because she soaked everything she stepped on. So I took the girls under my wing and taught them to control their magic, and now they’re both perfectly functioning young adults. It breaks my heart to think of all the other children out there who are struggling with who or what they are, so I’ve decided to open my doors and give them a proper education.”

“You’re going to start a *school*?” the king asked.

“Precisely,” she said. “I call it Madame Weatherberry’s Academy for Young Practitioners of Magic— although it’s still a working title.”

“And where will this academy be?” he asked.

“I’ve recently secured a few acres in the southeast In-Between.”

“The *In-Between*?” the king protested. “Woman, are you mad? The In-Between is much too dangerous for children! You can’t start a school there!”

“Oh, I won’t argue that,” Madame Weatherberry said. “The In-Between is exceptionally dangerous for people unfamiliar with its territories. However, there

are many members of the magical community, including myself, who have lived quite comfortably in the In-Between for decades. The land I've acquired is very remote and private. I've installed all the proper protections to guarantee my students' safety."

"But how is an academy going to help achieve the legalization of magic?"

"Once I've trained my pupils to master their abilities, we'll slowly introduce ourselves to the world. We'll use our magic to heal the sick and help those in need. After some time, word of our compassion will have spread through the kingdoms. Fairies will become examples of generosity and we'll win people's affection. The world will see all the good that magic has to offer, their opinions on magic will change, and the magical community will finally be embraced."

Champion scratched his chin as he contemplated Madame Weatherberry's lavish plan. Of all the details she had given him, she was forgetting the most important of all—*his* involvement.

"You seem very capable of doing this on your own. What do you want from me?"

"Naturally, I want your consent," she said. "Fairies want to be trusted, and the only way we'll earn trust is by doing things the right way. So I would like your official permission to travel openly through the Southern Kingdom as I recruit students. I would also like your promise that the children and families I encounter will be spared from prosecution. My mission is to offer these

youngsters a better life; I don't want to put anyone in legal jeopardy. It'll be very difficult convincing parents to let their children attend a school for magic, but having their sovereign's blessing will make it much easier—especially if that blessing is in writing.”

Madame Weatherberry waved a hand over the king's desk and a golden piece of parchment appeared before him. Everything she had requested was already written out—all she needed was the king's signature. Champion anxiously rubbed his legs as he read the document over and over again.

“This could go wrong in so many ways,” the king said. “If my subjects found out I gave a witch—excuse me—a *fairy* permission to take their children to a magical school, there would be rioting in the streets! My people would want my head on a platter!”

“In that case, tell your people you ordered me to *cleanse* your kingdom of the magical children,” she suggested. “Say that in an effort to create a future without magic, you had the young rounded up and taken away. I've found that the more vulgar a declaration, the more humankind embraces it.”

“Still, this is a gamble for both of us! Having my permission doesn't guarantee your protection. Aren't you worried about your safety?”

“Your Majesty, I'll remind you that I made the staff of an entire castle disappear into thin air, Tangerina controls a swarm of bees, and Skylene has enough water flowing through her body to flood a canyon. We can

protect ourselves.”

Despite her testimony, the king appeared more fearful than convinced. Madame Weatherberry was so close to getting what she wanted—she had to extinguish Champion’s doubt before it overpowered him. Luckily, she still had one more weapon in her arsenal to gain his approval.

“Tangerina? Skylene? Would you please give the king and me a moment alone?” she asked.

It was evident Tangerina and Skylene didn’t want to miss any part of Madame Weatherberry’s conversation with the king, but they respected their chaperone’s wishes and waited in the hall. Once the door was shut behind them, Madame Weatherberry leaned toward Champion and looked deep into his eyes with a grave expression.

“Sir, are you aware of the *Northern Conflict*?” she asked.

If the king’s bulging eyes were any indication, Champion was much more than *aware*. Just the mention of the Northern Conflict had a paralyzing effect on him and he struggled to respond.

“How—how—how on earth do you know about that?” he inquired. “That is a classified matter!”

“The magical community may be small and divided, but word spreads quickly when one of us is...well, *causing a scene*.”

“*Causing a scene*? That’s what you people call it?!”

“Your Majesty, please keep your voice down,” she

said, and then nodded to the door. “Bad news has an easy way of finding young ears. My girls would worry themselves sick if they knew about what we’re discussing.”

Champion could relate because he was starting to feel sick himself. Being reminded of the subject was like being reacquainted with a ghost—a ghost he thought had been put to rest.

“Why are you even mentioning such a horrible thing?” he asked.

“Because right now there is no guarantee the Northern Conflict won’t cross the border and arrive at your front door,” Madame Weatherberry warned him.

The king shook his head. “That won’t happen. King Nobleton assured me he took care of the situation. He gave us his word.”

“King Nobleton lied to you! He told the other sovereigns he has the conflict under control because he’s humiliated by how severe the situation has become! Over half the Northern Kingdom has perished! Three-quarters of his army are gone and what’s left shrinks daily! The king blames the loss on *famine* because he’s terrified he’d lose the throne if his people knew the truth!”

All the color faded from Champion’s face and he trembled in his seat. “Well? Can anything be done? Or am I just supposed to sit and wait to perish, myself?”

“Recently, there’s been hope,” Madame Weatherberry said. “Nobleton has appointed a new commander,

General White, to lead the remaining defenses. So far, the general has sequestered the situation more successfully than his predecessors.”

“Well, that’s something,” the king said.

“I pray General White will resolve the matter, but you must be prepared if he fails,” she said. “And should the conflict cross into the Southern Kingdom, having an academy of trained fairies in your corner could be *very* beneficial to you.”

“You believe your *students* could stop the conflict?” he asked with desperate eyes.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” she said with complete confidence. “I believe my future students will accomplish many things the world considers impossible today. But first, they’ll need a place to learn and a teacher to guide them.”

Champion went very still as he thought the proposition over.

“Yes...yes, they could be *extremely* beneficial,” he said to himself. “Naturally, I’ll have to consult my Advisory Council of High Justices before giving you an answer.”

“Actually, sir,” Madame Weatherberry said, “I believe this is a matter we can settle without consulting the High Justices. They tend to be a rather old-fashioned group and I would hate for their stubborn tendencies to get in our way. Besides, there have been *discussions* circulating the country that you should be aware of. Many of your people are convinced the High Justices are the

true rulers of the Southern Kingdom, and you are nothing but their puppet.”

“Why, that’s outrageous!” the king exclaimed. “I’m the sovereign—my will is law!”

“Indeed,” she said. “Any able-minded person knows that. However, the rumors remain. If I were you, I would start disproving those nasty theories by defying the High Justices every so often. And I can’t think of a better way to practice that than by signing the document before you.”

Champion nodded as he considered her warning, and eventually, her persuasion guided him to a decision.

“Very well,” the king said. “You may recruit *two students* from the Southern Kingdom for your school of magic—one boy and one girl—but that is all. And you must receive written permission from your pupils’ guardians or they are not allowed to attend your school.”

“I confess I was hoping for a better arrangement, but I will take what I can get,” Madame Weatherberry said. “You have a deal.”

The king retrieved a quill and ink from inside his desk and made his amendments to the golden document. Once he was finished with his corrections, Champion signed the agreement and authenticated it with a wax seal of his family’s royal crest. Madame Weatherberry jumped to her feet and clapped in celebration.

“Oh, what a wonderful moment this is! Tangerina? Skylene? Come in! The king has granted our request!”

The apprentices hurried into the study and became giddy at the sight of the king’s signature. Tangerina

rolled up the document and Skylene tied it with a silver ribbon.

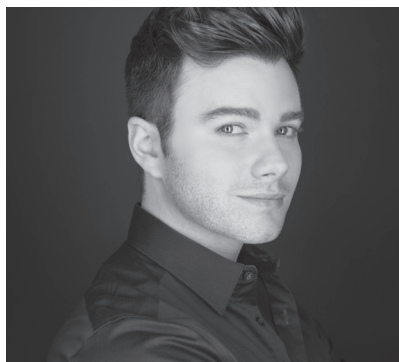
“Thank you so much, Your Majesty,” Madame Weatherberry said, lowering her fascinator’s veil over her face. “I promise you won’t regret this!”

The king snorted skeptically and rubbed his tired eyes. “I pray you know what you’re doing, because if you don’t, I’ll tell the kingdom I was bewitched and bribed by a—”

Champion gasped when he looked up. Madame Weatherberry and her apprentices had vanished into thin air. The king hurried to the doorway to see if they had dashed into the hallway, but it was just as empty as before. Within moments of their departure, all the candles and all the torches throughout the castle were magically relit. Footsteps echoed down the halls as the servants and soldiers returned to their duties. The king went to a window and noticed that even the storm had disappeared, but Champion found little comfort in the clearing weather.

On the contrary, it was impossible for the king to feel anything but dread as he skimmed the northern skies, knowing that somewhere on the horizon, the true storm awaited....

Andrew Scott



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