

Chapter Three

Ermentrude Arrives

A loud croak sounded from the bell above the shop door, instead of its usual soft, musical jingle.

Wilf hadn't expected anyone to venture down the narrow street to the store. Pulling the clean Newcastle United shirt down over his head, he crossed the back of the store, while running his fingers through his close-cropped hair, trying to smooth it back into place. The stool's legs grated over the wooden floorboards as Wilf pulled it out and sat down. He nudged his deflated ball to the far edge of the counter.

A woman stomped down the central aisle towards him. He glanced at the purple silk slippers she wore. Shoes that delicate shouldn't sound like soccer cleats marching across a metal basement hatch. She stopped at the counter.

His gaze lifted from the woman's feet to her face. Her leaden complexion and doughy face were enough to make him recoil. But the enormous wart at the end of her long, beaked nose was his undoing. He gasped.

The woman pinched in her lips and her eyes flared. Wilf took in the rest of her appearance from the severity of her hair bun to the red carpetbag, the size of a professional tennis player's racket bag, slung over her shoulder. He furrowed his brow. She reminded him of someone, but he couldn't quite remember whom.

"Beautiful, isn't it? Not many are blessed with a wart of such magnitude," she said.

The hairs on his arms all stood to attention at the sound of her scratchy voice. He looked at the blackened nails poking out from the ends of her fingerless gloves. Thankfully, she wasn't offering to shake hands.

"Have we met?"

"Not that I can recall," she said.

"That's a terrible sore throat you have." He tried to avoid meeting her hypnotic, brown eyes. They seemed like mud pools wanting to suck him into their fathomless depths.

26

"Sore throat?"

His stool rocked of its own volition and forced him to stand.

"Ermentrude Wakefield is the name." She glanced around the small store. "You may call me Witch Wakefield."

Wilf stepped back, braced against the wall, and shoved his ringed hand into his pocket. His heart raced. The Wizard Council had dispatched this witch to collect him. Well, it didn't make any difference who they sent. He wasn't leaving Hong Kong.

"Now, I don't normally deal with wizards..." her face wrinkled the way Myra's did when she took his soccer kit out of its bag for washing. "...But this time I have to. So, show me the rest of the place. We'll need your father's journal, and then we'll be on our way. There's sure to be a portal nearby we can use. I can't abide taking passengers on my broom. Although, I'd rather not have to use the warehouse portals up in Sha Tin, but if needs must..."

"There's been some mistake." Wilf could hear the panic in his own voice. "I'm not a wizard. That was my father. He died—I mean evaporated—a few weeks ago."

Her shadow leaned forward. It always surprised him how a

witch could command her shadow. Griselda's had a permanent lean before she left. "I don't have time for games with a junior wizard." She pointed at his pocket. "What are you hiding?"

"Nothing."

Ermentrude stared him down before turning to survey the store. There wasn't much to investigate. It was possible, with a few steps in both directions, to touch a wall. The small counter, protecting Wilf, stood in the middle of the back wall.

"Where's the workshop?" Ermentrude said.

"Workshop? This is it," he said, waving his left arm. "Except for a closet, through that door." He pointed at the paint-chipped, two-paneled door behind him. "And a washroom through the other." The workshop had disappeared; even Myra hadn't been able to find the way in. He'd heard her knocking on all the walls in the store closet, but to no avail. The entrance vanished the moment his father evaporated.

Ermentrude wriggled her fingers towards the main door. It locked, the sign flipped to 'Closed', and the shutters came down with a clatter.

"Hey. You can't do that."

"I'm not talking about what Normals can see." She took off her jacket and hung it on the wall next to the counter. "I want to see the

27
wizard workshop located within these premises." She glanced around warily, as if checking that no one else was listening.

"This is a gift store."

Ermentrude rubbed her square chin. Wilf winced at the wirebrush-raking-over-metal-studs sound coming from the bristles.

"I've always thought wizards were a stubborn lot," she sneered.

"But most don't act habitually stupid." She reached across the counter, grabbed him by his Newcastle United shirt, and pulled him across the wooden surface. "I'm sure your father taught you that a witch's facial appearance corresponds to the amount of power she wields. Your idea of beauty, in my case, fled screaming a long time ago. My features are a direct warning not to misjudge my ability or temperament." She let him go, and he fell back against the wall, knocking the stool over. Her jacket inched away from him.

Ermentrude paced and the displays crowded into a corner to give her room. "I wish they'd sent someone else. Why do I always get the hopeless cases? There isn't time for this. I should be..." She stopped in front of Wilf. "Well, we'd better get started, since they did send me, and I'm here." She raised her fingers at him and wriggled them. "Where was the workshop before it disappeared?"

"That closet," Wilf said, pointing. The words sprung from him in a gush before he could stop them.

Ermentrude pushed past him and stepped into the closet.

Wilf followed and peered around at the empty shelves. The store was in a perfect location for a wizard's consultancy but not so good for the passing tourist trade.

"Typical," Ermentrude said. "Hiding in plain sight. So like a wizard." She raised her hand, tapped the back wall, and then caught Wilf's right hand. "So you do have your father's ring," she said, placing Wilf's hand on a black wood knot.

"Just a minute..." He tried to pull away, but Ermentrude held his hand in a firm grip.

Groans sounded from deep within the wall, and the knot

expanded into a yawning, black hole. The air shimmered, and a staircase with a carved handrail popped into place.

“Look at the workmanship.” She ran her hand over the runes around the entrance. “You don’t see skill like that anymore.” Wilf raised his foot to step over the threshold, but Ermentrude knocked him back.

“Don’t you know anything at all about decent magic?” she asked, and tutted, “What do the runes say?”

28

He watched the symbols shimmering into existence around the entrance. “Umm, how should I know?”

“Run your fingers over them, and then tell me what comes into your mind.”

He’d always thought magic folk were half-mad. This particular witch was fully certifiable. “No,” he said. “You’re not tricking me into performing any type of magic.”

Ermentrude’s bag lifted its handles off her shoulder, placed itself on the floor, and opened. A scream jumped out and hit Wilf full in the face.

“Torturing my patience is never a good idea.”

His ears rang from the deafening noise.

“Think of it more as a ritual than real magic.” She softened the pitch of her voice. “It’s very important that I get into that workshop. You’ve heard of the Pulch Virus that’s attacking witch magic?”

“No.” He shook his head.

“Your father’s been trying to develop a vaccine to prevent the Virus. He contacted us on the day he evaporated, saying he’d made a breakthrough.” Ermentrude took a step closer to Wilf. “I’m here to collect Reginald’s journal; it’s the only record of his findings.” Sweat poured out of Wilf as the hot waves of Ermentrude’s frustration hit him.

“Do you want a large number of deaths on your conscience?”

“There must be another way.” Wilf wiped the sweat away before it ran into his eyes.

“Why don’t you do this little thing for me, and then you can go back to playing with your ball?”

A whoosh of air inflated the ball on the counter. It bounced on the wooden surface and then dropped to the floor.

Wilf’s throat tightened as he tried to drag air into his lungs. The thought of using magic always had this suffocating effect on him. He placed his hands on the wall for support. Ermentrude didn’t care what happened to him. He couldn’t breathe.

“I’m not performing any kind of ritual, or magic, or any other way you want to describe it,” Wilf said, and coughed. He needed water.

“But this is nonsense. You’re probably already using magic,” Ermentrude said, producing a water bottle with a wriggle of her fingers. She held it out to him. “Do you excel in class well beyond your classmates?”

“No,” Wilf said, eyeing the bottle with both longing and disgust.

29

“What about sport?” The soccer ball rolled over, stopped by his feet, and bounced up and down like an excited puppy. “Are you exceptional there?”

Wilf sucked air in through his gritted teeth. “I practice a lot.”

“There you are,” Ermentrude said. “You’ve tapped into your

magic to outperform. We all do it.”

“I don’t use magic.” Wilf retreated a few steps from Ermentrude and the ball. “How dare you accuse me of cheating? I’m naturally good at soccer. Everyone says so.”

“Do they know you have magical ability?”

“Of course they don’t.”

“I rest my case,” Ermentrude said. “Oh, I’m not saying you’re doing it on purpose. I can believe you never intended to, but it’s part of who you are. If you want something badly enough, it’s natural to use everything at your disposal. You have magic...”

“I know the rules.”

Ermentrude laughed so hard she doubled over. Tears ran down her face. “That’s a good one. You refuse to use magic, but you know the rules.” She wiped her face on a lace handkerchief that appeared in her hand. “It’s been at least 40 years since I heard that one used and someone believing it.”

She shook her head. All mirth expunged from her face. “Now, you look here, Wizard Wilf. Whether you deny it or not, you’re a wizard. I don’t know why your father allowed you to go around in ignorance; presumably, he thought you’d come around when you’d passed through the trying years. Although, seeing as you’re a wizard, I’m not exactly sure when that is.”

“You’re telling me I don’t have a choice?”

“Just about as much as deciding what color your eyes are, initially, because you can certainly change them later on, if only temporarily,” Ermentrude said, and smiled.

He hoped she didn’t think her smile was reassuring.

“You’re a danger to yourself and others, not being trained. Magic will start to leak out. Who knows what you might do.”

This had to be a trick. Although, if Ermentrude was correct, it might explain why his father had become more insistent he learn magic over the past year.

Wilf glanced around the small closet, then down the staircase leading into darkness, and finally at his soccer ball.

Perhaps, Reginald had known all along that Wilf used magic every time he played soccer; and Myra probably also knew. She’d become so emphatic about them departing for Kureyamage. If she

30

was afraid he could be dangerous without training, then perhaps she was trying to save him.

The alarm sounded on his phone. He needed to leave for practice.

“If I open the workshop, you’ll take Dad’s journal and leave?”

Wilf asked.

“I can guarantee that once that book is in my hand, I’m out of here,” she said, and smiled.

Wilf wished she’d stop smiling; it wasn’t helping.

“Swear it,” Wilf said.

“Well, I don’t rightly hold with folk going around swearing, but just this once,” Ermentrude said. “I bloody well promise to leave as soon as I have the journal.”

“That’s not quite... But it will do.” Wilf ran his fingers over the runes and waited for inspiration. Nothing happened. He turned to Ermentrude.

“A little patience,” she said.

The ring’s ruby flared and his voice became the low monotone

his father used when incanting spells. "A drop of blood on the second and fourth rune, and then step left foot first." Wilf shivered as the shooting star on his hand pulsed.

"Blood rituals. You wizards are so dramatic. Well, don't just stand there quivering like newly-made bat jelly. I said ritual, not blood fest." Ermentrude produced a jeweled hatpin and held it out towards him. "Get on with it."

"My blood? Won't yours do?" He stared at the sharp, eightinch-long pin.

"It's a transfer ritual. It will only need to be done once, but it must be a blood relative."

"But..."

Ermentrude stabbed his finger. A bead of blood bubbled up. Wilf could feel the rest of his blood leaving his head and racing for that small opening.

"Oh, no, you don't," she said.

Ermentrude's voice drifted through the increased drumming sound in his ears. His hand moved onto the second and fourth runes. Mesmerized, he watched the blood dripping from his finger until, with a loud "Tut" from Ermentrude, a bandage covered the wound.

"Now remember, left foot first," she said.

Through his bleared vision, he witnessed the last of his willpower run screaming for the door. He stepped forward and a

31
rush of energy surrounded him. When the air stilled, he turned to look at Ermentrude.

"Good." Her expression resembled that of a cat that's caught its first mouse. "Let's check out your inheritance."