



Chapter Two

WREN WIPED A HAND ACROSS HER BROW. The cool gloom of the Oracle's lair had been a welcome break from the scorching heat of the morning sun.

That's all it was good for, thought Wren grumpily as she followed Wish and Blue down the main pathway of Meadow Court, with Pippin scampering beside them.

'And then he asked if I knew the fire-witch, and I said I was the first one who smelled her! And he said *whoa*, and I said *I know*, and then he said ...' said Pippin. The tiny red squirrel's bushy tail flicked to-and-fro as he told this long, and somewhat complicated, story about his morning's work.

Wren couldn't concentrate. Her thoughts kept returning to the Everglade Witch like a paperclip to a magnet. *Who are you?* she demanded of the nameless, faceless witch in

her head. *And why do I have to defeat you? What have you DONE?*

'Magic is at risk, and it's not just the Eater you need to defeat. It's the Everglade Witch too.' Wren had watched the Tiding her mum had left for her dozens of times, but it still didn't make any sense. For a start, her mum was the only known witch from Everglade, which meant there was an *unknown* Everglade Witch lurking around somewhere.

Secondly, Wren would be the first to admit she wasn't a natural choice to defeat anyone. For a start, she was twelve. Also, she didn't look particularly strong or impressive. And again – she was twelve. It was only last month that Aunt Nancy had allowed her to start using the stove unsupervised. Wren cringed as she remembered the pan she'd ruined. Pans aside, however, Wren had one thing that no one else did.

Fire-magic.

Wren was a fire-witch. Which meant not only was she the natural choice to defeat the Everglade Witch – she was the only choice.

I did defeat the Eater, Wren mused as she chewed on her lip. It hadn't even been two weeks since the Eater had been forcibly returned to the Well of All, courtesy of Wren's fireballs. *But I only did that because I had to, and because ...* her gaze drifted over to where Blue and Wish were laughing at something Pippin had said ... *I needed to save my friends.*

'Don't you think so, Wren?' asked Pippin suddenly. He looked at her with bright, button-black eyes.

'Um,' said Wren. She had no idea what Pippin had been saying. 'Yes. I do think so,' she hazarded, covering her

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ignorance with a bright smile.

‘Really?’ asked Pippin. His ears pricked up. ‘You agree that whimsy smells like purple?’

Everyone stopped and stared at Wren.

‘Whimsy smells like purple?’ she said, blinking.

‘Pippin was telling us about the things he’d sniffed today,’ said Wish helpfully.

‘You weren’t listening!’ said Pippin with a wounded look on his face.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Wren. She crouched beside him and scratched behind his ear, being careful not to dislodge his official Messenger hat.

The hat was khaki and floppy, with slots for Pippin’s ears. It was an undeniably adorable hat, and the first time Wren had seen Pippin in it, she’d let out a high-pitched squeal that had left him preening for hours. He also wore a satchel around his body, held in place by a buckled strap.

‘My incredible sniffing ability doesn’t impress anyone anymore,’ said Pippin with a dramatic sigh. He turned his head slightly. ‘Do the other ear now,’ he commanded.

‘That’s not true,’ Wren protested, swapping ears. ‘We love that you can smell things that no one else can smell.’

‘Even when it sounds like nonsense,’ added Wish.

Wren’s gaze landed on the envelopes poking out of Pippin’s satchel. ‘I thought you were finished work for the morning?’ she asked. ‘There are a lot of messages still in your bag.’

‘I’ve delivered everything I could. It’s hard to find anyone,’ said Pippin, glancing at his almost-full satchel.

Wren frowned. ‘That can’t be right. They should be awake by now.’

Pippin was part of the Messenger Service. It was a new initiative designed to find any freshly awakened magic-kin. During the Eater’s reign of torment he had disrupted the cycle, lowering the level of magic. Most magic-kin had been forced into hibernation to survive.

‘There’s hardly anyone out there,’ said Pippin, adjusting his buckle.

Abruptly, Wren straightened up. Her stomach twisted. ‘Why aren’t they awake?’ she said quietly. *The Eater wobbled the cycle when he came out of the Well of All, and I fixed it by putting him back in,* she told herself. *Magic levels should be rising again. The magic-kin should be awake. They should be easy to find!*

‘Maybe they’re waking up slowly? They have been in hibernation for a long time,’ suggested Wish.

‘They could still be feeling groggy. My mums are like that. They’re never awake properly until they’ve had their second cup of coffee,’ said Blue.

‘I guess that could be why,’ said Wren slowly. *I fixed the cycle, I did. I fixed it,* she told herself firmly. But the tightness in her stomach remained, as stubborn as a stain.

She was distracted from her thoughts by a lion veering towards her. Boots was walking on his hind paws with a large cardboard box held in his front paws. Painted lanterns poked out the top of the box, making it hard for him to see.

‘Watch out!’ shrieked Boots.

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'*Arghh!*' cried Wren as she leaped backwards, landing awkwardly on the grass.

'Be careful, Mrs Cluck-Cluck!' Boots shouted over his shoulder, almost tripping over his tail.

A chicken followed closely behind him. She held a single painted lantern in her beak.

From the safety of the grass, Wren watched as three bear cubs came into view. Each held a corner of a patchwork quilt in their mouths, with their chins lifted to keep it off the ground.

'What's going on?' she asked.

'Don't ask me, I've been working all morning. I'm *very* important. I've even been nominated for Messenger of the Week,' said Pippin, smoothing down his scarlet fur.

'I didn't know there was a Messenger of the Week,' said Wish, his eyebrows raised.

'There is since I started it,' replied Pippin.

Blue snorted.

'Hey! Wren! Hey!' King Ares waved a toothbrush-thin arm at Wren from further down the pathway. More magic-kin animals joined the procession, all of them carrying either blankets, lanterns or cushions.

King Ares darted between legs and tails. Wren had never seen a ferret until she'd come to Meadow Court. Especially not one who wore a tiny golden crown, and a long, golden, crushed-velvet cape.

King Ares gave his cape a flamboyant whisk as he ducked out from under a moose's belly. Unfortunately, he got his timing wrong, and the fabric caught a nearby raccoon in

the face, causing Blue to snort again. Her snorts turned to laughter as the raccoon mistook King Ares's cape for one of the blankets he was carrying and began to tug on it, forcing King Ares to skip along beside him.

Finally, King Ares freed himself and approached Wren. 'Greetings, Wren – Fire-Witch of Meadow Court!' he said, bowing exaggeratedly. A corner was missing from his cape.

'Just Wren is fine,' said Wren. She elbowed Blue, who was struggling to stifle her laughter.

'Do you have any tidbits for the newsletter? New spells? Perhaps you've set something else on fire today?' he enquired, pulling out a notepad and pencil from his cape.

'No,' said Wren, quickly.

'Wren's been busy. We visited the Oracle,' said Wish.

'Oh. Because you're still concerned about that Everglade Witch thing,' said King Ares, giving Wren a pitying look.

'Yes, because it's still concerning,' said Wren, crossing her arms. King Ares, along with most of Meadow Court, was *not* concerned about the Everglade Witch. From his perspective the Eater was gone, and things were good. The Meadow Court magic-kin had never been scared of witches, and since Wren had proved that even *fire-witches* were safe, they weren't about to start now. Wren found their belief in the goodness of witches flattering, yet frustrating.

'Did the Oracle help?' asked King Ares, his pen hovering above the notepad.

'Not really. He breathed fire at us,' said Blue cheerfully.

'And he said Wren's legs were stumpy,' added Wish.

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‘Don’t write that down!’ Wren protested as King Ares scribbled away.

‘I have to write *something* down,’ said King Ares, pausing. He lifted an eyebrow at Wren.

She sighed. ‘Then, write down that I’m working on a plan for defeating the Everglade Witch.’

‘Everglade Witch ... plans ... stumpy legs. Got it!’ said King Ares, tucking the notepad away. ‘I’m glad you’re here, Wren,’ he said. The sincerity in his voice surprised her.

‘I’m glad I’m here too,’ she replied. Meadow Court was the first place Wren had ever felt at home.

‘Problems like the Eater have always been taken care of by witches. It’s handy having one around again,’ said King Ares. He went to pat Wren on the back, but given he was a ferret, he had to settle for patting her on the knee.

‘You’re welcome,’ said Wren. ‘I guess.’

‘Make sure you come to the Migration celebration tonight. King’s orders!’ he said, with a lopsided wink.

‘The Migration is tonight?’ said Pippin, his voice rising.

Wish’s face lit up. ‘*Ooh*, is that what’s going on? I love the Migration!’

‘What’s the Migration?’ asked Blue.

‘You don’t know?’ said King Ares incredulously. ‘I definitely put the notice in the newsletter.’

‘I saw it. I just didn’t know what it meant,’ said Wren. The announcement of the Migration had been between an advertisement for a new and improved hoof-polish, and an article titled, ‘The Versatility of Capes!’

‘We didn’t learn much about magic-kin in Everglade.

Because of the whole hatred thing,' said Blue, shrugging.

'It's bad enough that Everglade lied about witches and kept you locked away behind that Wall,' said Pippin, clasping his paws to his chest. 'But to leave you both so *ignorant*? It's sad.'

'Very sad,' said Blue matter-of-factly. 'Now, tell us about the Migration!' she added, her eyes shining.

'The Migration is when the Sky-Whales return to the stars of their birth. They cross from one side of the night sky to the other,' explained King Ares.

'It's amazing!' said Wish, smiling. 'Their bellies and the underside of their fins are dotted with silver marks, like stars, so at first it looks like a strip of sky is moving. But once your eyes adjust, you can see the shape of them. Sometimes, they *sing*,' he added reverently.

'I would have noticed a singing sky,' said Blue.

'How come we've never seen them before?' asked Wren.

'I guess their route doesn't take them over Everglade,' said Wish. 'They follow the same path each Migration. There were a lot fewer of them last time. I hope they're alright.'

'Thanks to our fire-witch here, the cycle is fixed. Magic should be rising, so there's no reason the Migration shouldn't go splendidly,' said King Ares. He patted Wren's knee once more, then leaned against it, propped up on his elbow.

'Sure,' Wren agreed. 'It will go great.'

She forced her lips into a smile and kept her eyes forward, ignoring the treacherous pull of the undelivered messages in Pippin's satchel.