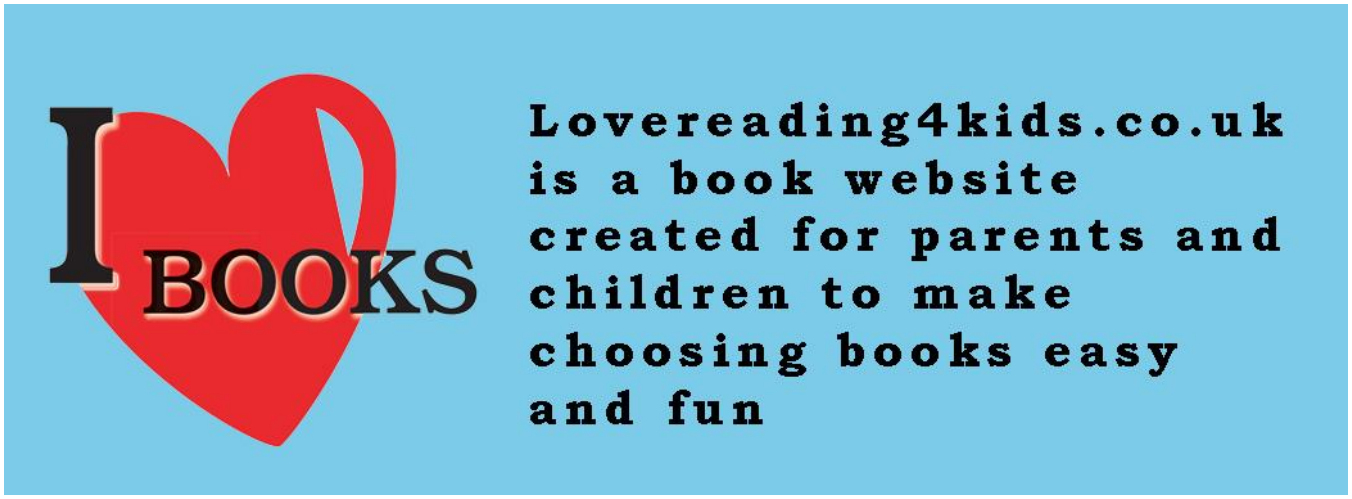

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Spellslinger

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IRON
SILK
SAND
BREATH
SHADOW
BLOOD
EMBER

TWO of SPELLS

1

The Duel

The old spellmasters like to say that magic has a taste. Ember spells are like a spice burning the tip of your tongue. Breath magic is subtle, almost cool, the sensation of holding a mint leaf between your lips. Sand, silk, blood, iron . . . they each have their flavour. A true adept – the kind of mage who can cast spells even outside an oasis – knows them all.

Me? I had no idea what the high magics tasted like, which was why I was in so much trouble.

Tennat waited for me in the distance, standing inside the seven marble columns that ringed the town oasis. The sun at his back sent his shadow stretching all the way down the road towards me. He'd probably picked his spot precisely for that effect. It worked too, because my mouth was now as dry as the sand beneath my feet, and the only thing I could taste was panic.

'Don't do this, Kellen,' Nephenia pleaded, quickening her step to catch up with me. 'It's not too late to forfeit.'

I stopped. A warm southern breeze shook the flowers from pink tamarisk trees lining the street. Tiny petals floated up into the air, glittering in the afternoon sun like particles of fire magic. I could have used some fire magic just then.

Actually, I would have settled for just about any kind of magic.

Nephenia noticed my hesitation and unhelpfully added, 'Tennat's been bragging all over town that he'll cripple you if you show up.'

I smiled, mostly because it was the only way I could keep the feeling of dread crawling up my stomach from reaching my face. I'd never fought a mage's duel before, but I was fairly sure that looking petrified in front of your opponent wasn't an especially effective tactic. 'I'll be fine,' I said, and resumed my steady march towards the oasis.

'Nephenia's right, Kel,' Panahsi said, huffing and puffing as he struggled to catch up. His right arm was wrapped around the thick covering of bandages holding his ribs together. 'Don't fight Tennat on my account.'

I slowed my pace a little, resisting the urge to roll my eyes. Panahsi had all the makings of one of the finest mages of our generation. He might even become the face of our clan at court one day, which would be unfortunate, since his naturally muscular frame was offset by a deep love of yellowberry sweetcakes, and his otherwise handsome features were marred by the skin condition that was the inevitable result of the aforementioned cakes. My people have a lot of spells, but none that cure being fat and pockmarked.

'Don't listen to them, Kellen,' Tennat called out as we approached the ring of white marble columns. He stood inside a three-foot circle in the sand, arms crossed over his black linen shirt. He'd cut the sleeves off to make sure everyone could see he'd sparked not just one, but two of his bands. The tattooed metallic inks shimmered and swirled under the skin of his forearms as he summoned the magics for breath

and iron. 'I think it's sweet the way you're throwing your life away just to defend your fat friend's honour.'

A chorus of giggles rose up from our fellow initiates, most of whom were standing behind Tennat, shuffling about in anticipation. Everyone enjoys a good beating. Well, except the victim.

Panahsi might not have looked like the gleaming figures of ancient war mages carved into the columns in front of us, but he was twice the mage Tennat was. There was no way in all the hells that he should have lost his own duel so badly. Even now, after more than two weeks in bed and who knew how many healing spells, Panahsi could barely make it to lessons.

I gave my opponent my best smile. Like everyone else, Tennat was convinced I'd challenged him for my first trial out of recklessness. Some of our fellow initiates assumed it was to avenge Panahsi, who was, after all, pretty much my only friend. Others thought I was on some noble quest to stop Tennat from bullying the other students, or terrorising the Sha'Tep servants, who had no spells of their own with which to defend themselves.

'Don't let him goad you, Kellen,' Nephenia said, her hand on my arm.

A few people no doubt suspected I was doing all this to impress Nephenia, the girl with the beautiful brown hair and the face that, while not perfect, was perfect to me. The way she was staring at me now, with such breathless concern for my well-being, you'd never have guessed that she'd hardly noticed me in all the years we'd been initiates together. To be fair, most days no one else had either. Today was different though. Today everyone was paying attention to me, even Nephenia. Especially Nephenia.

Was it only pity? Maybe, but the worried expression she wore on those lips that I'd longed to kiss ever since I'd first figured out that kissing wasn't just two people biting each other made my head spin. The feel of her fingers on my skin . . . was this the first time she'd ever touched me?

Since I really hadn't picked this fight just to impress her, I gently removed Nephenia's hand and entered the oasis.

I once read that other cultures use the word 'oasis' to describe a patch of fertile terrain in a desert, but a Jan'Tep oasis is something completely different. Seven marble columns towered above us, one for each of the seven forms of true magic. Inside the enclosed thirty-foot circle there were no trees or greenery, but instead a glimmering carpet of silver sand that, even when stirred by the wind, never left the boundary set by the columns. At the centre was a low stone pool filled with something that was neither liquid nor air, but which shimmered as it rose and fell in waves. This was the true magic. The Jan.

The word 'tep' means 'people', so it should tell you how important magic is to us that when my ancestors came here, like other peoples before them, they left their old names behind and became known as the Jan'Tep, the 'People of True Magic'.

Well, in theory, anyway.

I knelt down and drew a protective circle around myself in the sand. Actually, 'circle' might have been a bit generous.

Tennat chuckled. 'Well, now I'm really scared.'

For all his bluster, Tennat wasn't nearly as imposing a figure as he imagined. True, he was all wiry muscle and meanness, but he wasn't very big. In fact, he was as thin as I was and half a head shorter. Somehow that just made him meaner.

'Are you both still determined to go through with this duel?' Master Osia'phest asked, rising from a stone bench at the edge of the oasis. The old spellmaster was looking at me, not at Tennat, so it was pretty clear who was supposed to back out.

'Kellen won't withdraw,' my sister declared, stepping out from behind our teacher. Shalla was only thirteen, younger than the rest of us, but already taking her trials. She was a better mage than anyone present except for Panahsi, as evidenced by the fact that she'd already sparked the bands for breath, iron, blood and ember magic. There were mages who went their whole lives without ever being able to wield four disciplines, but my little sister fully planned on mastering all of them.

So how many bands had I sparked? How many of the tattooed symbols under my shirtsleeves would glow and swirl when I called on the high magics that defined my people?

Zero.

Oh, inside the oasis I could perform the practice spells that all initiates learn. My fingers knew the somatic shapes as well or better than any of my fellow initiates. I could intone every syllable perfectly, envision the most esoteric geometry with perfect clarity. I was skilled at every aspect of spellcasting – except for the actual magic part.

'Forfeit the duel, Kellen,' Nephenia said. 'You'll find some other way to pass your tests.'

That, of course, was the real problem. I was about to turn sixteen and this was my last chance to prove that I had the calibre of magic worthy of earning my mage name. That meant I had to pass all four of the mage's trials, starting with the duel. If I failed, I'd be forced to join the Sha'Tep and spend

the rest of my life cooking, cleaning or clerking for the household of one of my former classmates. It would be a humiliating fate for any initiate, but for a member of my family, for the son of Ke'heops himself? Failure was inconceivable.

Of course, none of that was the reason why I'd chosen to challenge Tennat in particular.

'Be warned, the protection of the law is suspended for those who undertake the trials,' Osia'phest reminded us, his tone both weary and resigned. 'Only those whose calibre gives them the strength to face our enemies in combat can lay claim to a mage's name.'

Silence gripped the oasis. We'd all seen the list of past initiates who'd attempted the trials before they were ready. We all knew the stories of how they'd died. Osia'phest looked to me again. 'Are you truly prepared?'

'Sure,' I said. It wasn't an appropriate way to speak to our teacher, but my strategy required that I project a certain confidence.

'"Sure",' Tennat repeated in a mocking whine. He took up a basic guard position, legs shoulder width apart and hands loose at his sides, ready to cast the spells he'd use for our duel. 'Last chance to walk away, Kellen. Once this starts, I don't stop until you fall.' He chuckled, his eyes on Shalla. 'I wouldn't want the tremendous pain I'm about to inflict on you to bring any needless suffering to your sister.'

If Shalla had noticed Tennat's childish imitation of gallantry she gave no sign of it. Instead she stood there, hands on her hips, bright yellow hair billowing gracefully in the wind. Hers was straighter and smoother than the dirt-coloured mop I struggled to keep out of my eyes. We shared our mother's pale complexion, but mine was exacerbated by a lifetime of

intermittent illnesses. Shalla's accentuated the fine-boned features that drew the attention of just about every initiate in our clan. None of them interested her, of course. She knew she had more potential than the rest of us and fully intended doing whatever it took to become a lord magus like our father. Boys simply weren't part of that equation.

'I'm sure she'll weather my screams of agony just fine,' I said.

Shalla caught my glance and returned a look that was equal parts bemusement and suspicion. She knew I'd do anything to pass my trials. That was why she was keeping such close watch on me.

Whatever you think you know, Shalla, keep your mouth shut. I'm begging you.

'As the student who has sparked the fewest bands,' Osia'phest said, 'you may select the discipline of magic for the duel, Kellen. What is your weapon?'

Everyone stared at me, trying to guess what I'd choose. Here in the oasis, any of us could summon some tiny portion of the different forms of magic – just enough to train in spellwork. But that was nothing compared with what you could do once you'd sparked your bands. Since Tennat had iron and breath at his disposal, I'd be crazy to choose either of those two.

'Iron,' I said, loud enough to ensure that everyone heard.

My classmates looked at me as if I'd lost my mind. Nephenia went pale. Shalla's eyes narrowed. Panahsi started to object, but a glance from Osia'phest shut him up. 'I did not hear you correctly,' our teacher said slowly.

'Iron,' I repeated.

Tennat grinned, a greyish glow already winding itself from the iron band on his forearm, slithering around his hands

as he began summoning the power. Everyone there knew how much Tennat loved iron magic, the way it let you tear and bludgeon at your enemies. You could see the excitement building up inside him, the thrill that came from wielding high-calibre magic. I wished I knew what it felt like.

Tennat was so eager that his fingers had already begun running through the somatic shapes for the spells he'd be using against me. One of the first things you learn in duelling is that only an idiot shows his hand before the fight starts, but since there was no possible way I could beat Tennat in iron magic, he probably figured there was nothing to lose.

That was the real reason why I was smiling.

See, for the past several weeks I'd watched every single duel Tennat had fought against the other initiates; I'd noticed how even those students with more power – those who should have been able to beat him with ease – always ended up forced to yield.

That was when I'd finally figured it out.

Magic is a con game.

The oasis was quiet, almost peaceful. I think everyone was waiting for me to giggle nervously and announce before it was too late that it had all been a joke. Instead, I rolled my shoulders back and tilted my neck left then right to make it crack. It didn't help my magic any, but I thought maybe it would make me look tougher.

Tennat gave a confident snort. It sounded like his regular snort only louder. 'You'd think someone who can barely light a glow-glass lantern without giving himself a heart attack would be a little more cautious in his choice of opponent.'

'You're right,' I said, rolling up my sleeves to let him see

the flat, lifeless inks of my own six tattooed bands. 'So you've got to ask yourself, why would I challenge you now?'

Tennat hesitated for a second before he said, 'Maybe you've been having death-dreams and you know I'm the best person to help usher you into the grey passage and end your suffering.'

'Could be,' I conceded. 'But let's say for the sake of argument that it's something else.'

'Like what?'

I had a whole speech planned about how I'd banded myself with shadow – the seventh and deadliest of magics, the one forbidden to us all. If that didn't scare him I had a different bit about how the truly great mages among our ancestors could wield the high magics without sparking their bands at all. Just as I was about to speak though, I saw a falcon flying overhead and decided to switch tactics.

'You don't need to spark your bands if you've found your power animal.'

Everyone looked up to see. Tennat's smirk was just angry enough to tell me he was getting nervous. 'Nobody bonds with familiars any more. Besides, how would someone with as little magic as you ever attract a power animal? And a falcon? No way, Kellen. Not in a thousand years.'

I noticed the falcon was about to swoop down on a smaller bird. 'Dive, my darling,' I whispered, just loud enough for everyone to hear. There was a sudden nervous intake of breath all around me as the falcon's claws took merciless hold of its prey. It occurred to me then that I might have made a decent actor if it hadn't been a forbidden profession among the Jan'Tep.

'All right, all right,' Osia'phest said, waiving his hands in the air as if trying to cast a banishing spell on all our nonsense.

I was fairly sure the old man knew I hadn't acquired a familiar, but I guess it's bad form to reveal another mage's secrets, even when they happen to be lies. Or maybe he just didn't care. 'I recognise that it's traditional for there to be a certain amount of . . . posturing prior to a duel, but I think we've all had just about enough. Are you ready to begin?'

I nodded. Tennat didn't bother, as if the implication that he might not be ready were an insult.

'Very well,' Osia'phest said. 'I shall commence the counting.' The old man took in a deep breath that was probably excessive given that all he said next was, 'Seven!'

The breeze picked up and my loose linen shirt flapped noisily against my skin. I dried my hands on it for the tenth time and cleared my throat to get rid of the tickle. *Don't start coughing. Don't look weak. Whatever you do, don't look weak.*

'Six.'

Tennat gave me a wide grin as if he had some big surprise waiting for me. I would have been more scared if I hadn't seen him give every opponent that same look prior to each duel. Also, I was already as terrified as I could possibly be without collapsing to the ground.

'Five.'

The bird swooped overhead again so I looked up and winked at it. Tennat's smile wavered. Evidently he was capable of simultaneously believing I was a weakling and yet had also acquired a power animal. *Moron.*

'Four.'

His left hand formed the somatic shape necessary for his shield spell. I'd never seen him prepare the shield before the sword. He looked down at his hand to check the form. Tennat was just a little worried now.