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Icespell

Written by

C. J. Busby

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IceSpell



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For Philip, who always laughs at the right bits

A TEMPLAR BOOK

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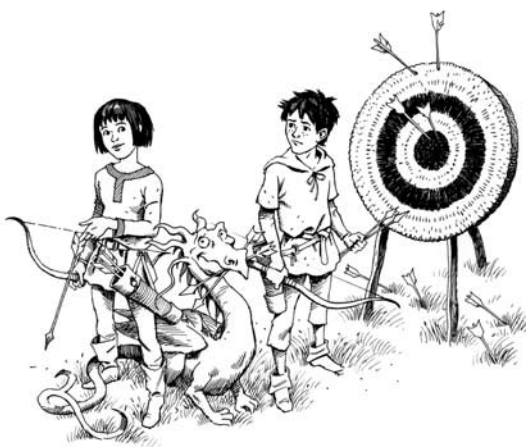
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An Enemy in the Armoury



There was something lurking in the darkness at the far end of the armoury.

Max froze. His hand just inches away from his sword, he peered into the gloom, trying to see beyond the shadows. He could have sworn he'd heard a scuffle, seen a gleam of movement. But now everything was still, and the only sounds were the

distant clash of swords in the practice yard and Sir Gareth shouting at the novice squires.

Most of Camelot was out in the sunshine, enjoying a chance to get some swordplay in before the Annual Festival of Chivalry, which started in three weeks. Max had been sent in to fetch a spare target for archery practice – but they were stored right at the back of the armoury. In the shadows.

Max started to move forward slowly and carefully, his hand on his sword, trying to look like he was ready to fight. In reality, his sword skills were not renowned, and he was pretty sure he'd come off worse against anything except a stray chicken. Or possibly a frog.

"Wh— who's there?" he called into the darkness, trying to keep his voice level but not really succeeding. He could see a darker shape within the grey of the shadows – a rather tall and menacing shape. Definitely not a chicken. Max drew his sword, then took a swift step backwards as the shape rose up out of the shadows and launched itself towards him

with a roar. Max toppled over a pile of armour and fell sprawling onto the ground, his sword clattering across the room.

He looked up to see that the dark shape was actually a tall, thin boy with a dark tunic and spiky black hair, who was now standing over him and laughing.

"Well, well, Pendragon. Glad to see you're as clumsy and pathetic as ever. Merlin might be teaching you magic but he obviously can't do anything about the fact that you're a hopeless loser."

Max scrambled to his feet but the boy had already sidestepped him and was on his way out of the armoury, still laughing.

"Eat dung, Snotty!" Max yelled after him, but if the boy heard he made no sign. Max clenched his fists. Adrian Hogsbottom, better known as Snotty, was his worst enemy. Ever since they'd first met, they'd hated each other – and the rivalry had got worse since Snotty and his father had started plotting against King Arthur with Lady Morgana le Fay. Max shivered just

thinking about Morgana – the kingdom's most powerful sorceress. He and his sister Olivia had helped foil two of Morgana's plots to bring down her half-brother, the king, and make herself queen in his place, and Max was pretty sure it was only thanks to Merlin's protection that he was not at this moment a piece of oozy slime at the bottom of the kingdom's biggest manure heap.

Thinking of Morgana's plots made Max narrow his eyes. What exactly had Snotty been doing, lurking at the back of the armoury? As far as Max knew, there were only archery targets down there, and a few piles of broken armour and swords waiting to be mended. There was no reason for Snotty to be anywhere near the place.

Max dragged out the target he needed, and then had a good look round, under the benches and behind the piles of rusty shields and broken lances. He even balanced on an old trestle table to see if there was anything up on the shelves that ran round the top of the room, but everything seemed undisturbed, still

covered in layers of old dust. He shrugged. Whatever it was, it looked like Snotty had been interrupted before he could do anything.

Max picked up the target and headed off into the sunlight. Behind him, the room settled back into silence. Deep in the shadows, hidden from view by an old rusty bucket, lay a small pile of glittering white powder that Max would instantly have recognised as a spell. Nestling in the centre of the pile was a small jagged chip of grey flint. It was placed carefully next to the easternmost wall of the armoury, and hence in the absolute easternmost corner of Castle Camelot.

***

Thud!

Olivia's arrow hit the centre of the target and stayed there, quivering. It was her third bullseye.

"Hurrah! Well done! Right in the red bit!" cried Adolphus, Olivia's pet dragon, who was bouncing around the target waving his blue-green forked tail, flapping his wings and generally making a nuisance of himself as usual.

"Show off," muttered Max, as he headed off to retrieve the arrows. His own were rather less impressively scattered around the edges of the target. One was buried in the trunk of an old beech tree several feet away.

"Just a bit off target, that one," observed Max's pet rat, Ferocious, poking his head out of Max's tunic and surveying the scattered arrows. "Remind me never to get within a hundred feet of anything you're aiming at, Max."

"Yes, yes, very funny," said Max, wrenching the arrow out of the tree and trudging back to Olivia. "I don't see why I still have to do stupid target practice anyway. I'm going to be a wizard, not a knight."

"Well, you know what Father told you," said Olivia. "You *still* have to have basic knight's training. Even wizards need to use a sword sometimes."

Max grimaced. His father, Sir Bertram Pendragon, was every inch a knight, from the tips of his magnificent moustache to the toes of his oversized feet. He was as strong as an ox, surprisingly nifty with

his sword, and renowned throughout the kingdom as the Knight Who Can Quaff the Most Ale in a Single Swallow. Max, on the other hand, was slight for his eleven years, with untidy brown hair, a singular lack of coordination, and a healthy fear of horses. He was pretty sure all the knightly skills in the family had been passed on to his sister. Although she was two years younger and hadn't had much training, Olivia was already a better rider, considerably better at archery, and was fast becoming better at swordplay too.

Max threw himself down on the grass and stretched out in the sunshine.

"That's it. I've had enough of archery, I've had enough of whacking the dummy with a lance and I've definitely had enough of sword practice. My shoulder hurts."

Olivia plonked herself down next to him.

"You do realise I've only got three weeks left till the Festival of Chivalry, Max? You promised to help me train."

Max groaned. Olivia was entered for the

Squire's Challenge, the most prestigious competition for novice squires in the kingdom. Normally she wouldn't even have been allowed to enter, being a girl, but she had nagged Sir Bertram mercilessly till he gave her permission, and King Arthur had bent the rules to let her have a go. If she won, Sir Bertram had promised she could train to be a knight. He had been pretty certain he wouldn't have to keep his promise – all the best squires in the kingdom would be competing, and Olivia had only been training for a few months.

Max, however, thought she had quite a good chance. His younger sister was quite ruthless when it came to fighting, and she was a fearless rider. What she lacked in training she more than made up for in cunning and brute force.

"Sorry," he said, not sounding sorry at all. "Can't help. Got a lesson with Merlin."

Just saying this made him feel six inches taller. He might not be very skilled with a sword, but Max did have quite a talent for magic – and now he had Merlin himself to teach him. Merlin was the most

powerful wizard in the kingdom, but he looked like any other of King Arthur's many knights, with dark plain clothes and a long sword buckled to his belt. Until you caught a glance from his bright hawk-like eyes and felt the power behind them.

Max had been having lessons with Merlin for the past few weeks, and he was buzzing with all the magic he'd tried and the spells he'd learned.

"Are you going to tell him about Snotty?" asked Olivia. Max had told the others about his encounter with his worst enemy. All of them had experienced Snotty's plotting before, and they were all highly suspicious.

"That boy is definitely up to something, mark my words," said Ferocious darkly. "We need to let Merlin know."

"But I couldn't see anything," said Max. "I think I probably disturbed him before he could do whatever it was he was planning. I don't know if it's even worth mentioning."

Olivia grimaced. "He's a poisonous toadwart

and if he was lurking in the armoury, then odds on he was about to do something foul. Morgana's going to be here for the Festival of Chivalry – I bet they're planning something."

Max nodded. "We need to keep an eye on Snotty. I'm sure he is up to something. But there's a week before Morgana gets here, and nothing's going to happen till then."

But Max was wrong. Something quite spectacular *was* going to happen. And when it did, it would be all his fault.

Merlin's Magic



Merlin's chambers were simple and plainly furnished, with a long, narrow window looking out onto the moat. Max stood at the window, looking down at the greenish water. It seemed hardly any time since the day he'd been transformed into a frog in this same room, and Snotty Hogsbottom had dangled him out of the window before casually dropping him fifty feet down to the

moat below. Max shivered, remembering the killer pike that was probably still down there looking for tasty frogs to swallow whole.

The heavy oak door to the chamber flew open and Merlin strode in, pulling off his long dark travelling cloak and unbuckling his sword.

"Sorry, Max, I didn't mean to be late. We had a bit of an alarm call down in the south and I went to investigate. Everyone's a bit jumpy these days, with all these rumours of an enemy sorceress."

He winked, and Max grinned. Merlin was well aware that the recent plots against the king were the work of Morgana le Fay, but she'd managed to make sure she had an alibi each time, and King Arthur was very reluctant to accuse his half-sister. Instead, the story was that some 'unknown sorceress' had been behind the plots.

"Right," said Merlin, rubbing his hands. "Time for some magic."

Max felt the familiar thrill of lessons with Merlin. He never knew what would happen next, and

he was constantly surprised by what he could do. Spells for seeing from afar, spells for linking one bit of magic to another, spells for detecting other spells. But today, something even more unusual was clearly in store, because instead of being down in the cellars, with the cauldrons and spell ingredients, they were in Merlin's rooms, and there was no magical apparatus ready at all.

Merlin smiled, his eyes bright in his weathered face.

"Today," he said solemnly, "we are going to do magic without any potions or spells."

Max looked at him, rather taken aback. He'd never even *heard* of magic without spells or potions. Everyone did magic with potions. You took ingredients, you put them in a cauldron, you said the right words – and there was your spell. You could make it work at once, or embed it in an object, or keep it in the form of a powder or a liquid, to use another time. Even when witches or wizards looked like they weren't using a potion, there was always one

somewhere, a sprinkle of dust on their hands, a droplet of spell on their fingers. It was why they went round with huge numbers of pouches and bags and bottles attached to their belts or secreted in their clothes. You never knew what spell you might need at short notice.

But Merlin was different. Merlin looked like a knight, not a wizard, and suddenly Max realised why that was. It was precisely because he *didn't* have the usual clattering collection of potion bottles and packets of powder tucked into belt pouches or hanging round his neck, bulking out his clothes. He looked like a lean, plain, simple knight – no tricks. Yet Max had seen his magic, knew he could remove spells with a twitch of his finger. Why had he never thought about how odd that was before?

Merlin smiled as he saw Max's dawning realisation.

"That's right, Max. No potions. No powders. Interesting, isn't it?"

"But how..." said Max, bewildered.

Merlin beckoned him over to a table near the window, and they both sat down.

"Max – have you ever wondered how you made a spell for turning people into frogs when no one else except me had ever done it before?"

"It was an accident," said Max. "Olivia knocked a jar of bat's-squeak-breath off the shelf and it ended up in my spell by mistake."

Merlin laughed. "It was a mistake, yes – but I'm betting that just when that extra ingredient landed in the cauldron you were thinking about frogs."

Max frowned. He *had* been thinking about frogs. He'd been thinking about what a nuisance Olivia was and how, if only it were possible, he'd turn her into a frog and dump her in the castle duckpond. When the spell had done exactly that to all of them – him, Olivia *and* Ferocious – Max had thought it must have been just a coincidence.

"No such thing as coincidence," said Merlin cheerfully, when Max suggested this. "The spell turned you into frogs because you yourself added the

final twist of necessary magic – and it's distinctly possible that it was that same magic that meant it was the jar of bat's-squeak-breath and not a jar of, say, earwig hair, that ended up in the cauldron."

Max frowned. He found it hard to believe that he'd made the spell happen by thinking the magic into place.

"But lots of people must have *thought* about making a frogspell before. Why did it work for me?"

Merlin looked at him thoughtfully. "It's a good question, Max. But it's not just thinking about it that's important. It's the ability to turn that thought into an extra part of the spell. For animal transformations, it's quite essential – it's why most people can't do them, however powerful a witch or wizard they might be. Morgana, for example, is extremely skilled with cauldron spells and can bind together very powerful magics – but she can't make any magic happen simply by thinking it into existence. Very few people can. I am one of them. I think it

is highly likely that you are another."

Max swallowed. He was pretty sure that Merlin was overestimating his ability with magic. His frogspell had been impressive, but that had just been luck. Nothing else he'd ever done had been out of the ordinary – apart from the odd spectacular mistake. Maybe this was where he'd get found out and sent home in disgrace.

Merlin put a small silver bowl on the table in front of them.

"Now, Max. Think of the invisibility potion we brewed a few days ago. Think of the shape of the magic, once it was made. Then gather that feeling of the magic in your mind and cast it onto the bowl. Make it disappear!"

Max took a deep breath and stared at the bowl. He clenched his fists, and screwed up his eyes, and willed it to disappear...

He shut his eyes even tighter, muttered, "Disappear!" and opened his eyes again...

He opened them extra wide and goggled at the

bowl, he stuck his tongue out and turned red with the effort of willing it away...

After five minutes, the bowl still looked exactly as it had at the beginning, not even a hint of a haze of invisibility.

Merlin watched Max's efforts solemnly, but his mouth twitched at the corner.

"Perhaps we need a... ahem... practical demonstration first," he said, in a kindly voice. "Come with me, Max, and we'll go down to the moat."

The moat was looking particularly green and murky, with tendrils of weed floating on the surface. Max looked at it doubtfully.

"You have been a frog quite a few times now, Max," Merlin said cheerfully. "I think you'll find you can feel your way into that transformation, with a little help from me."

Max was pretty sure he couldn't. He was pretty sure he was only minutes away from being sent home as a fraud. There was no way he could do a frogspell transformation without any frogspell.

Merlin put his hand on Max's shoulder.

"Think, Max, of the shape of the spell, and the feeling of being a frog. Think of the buzz of the magic as it hits you. Think of the shiver of the change from human to frog... And let that magic *flow*."

As he said the last words, Max could feel a tingle of magic from Merlin's hand. He felt it spread, and a tide of answering magic rising from somewhere deep inside himself. Then, like the rush of water from an upturned bucket, he felt suddenly drenched in magic and he slipped head first into the moat.

***

The water was dim and green but felt quite pleasant. This was almost certainly because Max was now a frog. A frog! Without a frogspell potion! He had done it, all by himself!

Well, not quite. Max remembered the tingle of magic from Merlin's hand – but also the answering rush of magic that was clearly his own. Now he thought about it, he'd always known that magic was there – but never realised it could be used like that. He still

wasn't sure he *could* use it without Merlin's help. But at least he had a much better sense of how to try.

Max kicked his back legs and cruised through the murky water, enjoying the feel of it on his skin, blowing a few bubbles that floated upwards like silvery balloons and burst on the surface. Suddenly he noticed a large fish keeping pace with him, a long elegant grey carp with whiskers and an amused expression. It looked rather like...

"Merlin! Is that you?"

"Indeed it is. It's a long time since I've swum in the moat – I'd forgotten how pleasant and cool it is. And how little effort swimming takes when you've got a tail." And Merlin twitched his expertly and shot forward into the gloom.

"Hey! Wait for me!" called Max, and tried to catch up with him, but frogs are not quite as streamlined as fish, and however fast Max swam, the dark bulky shape of the carp was always just ahead. Until it stopped, and half turned, and Max almost shot into its gaping mouth.

At which point he realised that he had not been following the carp. He had been following a pike. A very large and fierce-looking pike. In fact, quite possibly the very same pike that had nearly eaten Max a few months earlier.