

Pixie

I took two steps forward, and stopped. My breath got stuck in my lungs and I wrapped my arms tightly around myself, silently fighting to keep it together. I tried to suck in some air but it couldn't pass the thickness in my throat and I felt myself reeling a little. I turned and walked a few steps away from the brick building. It loomed behind me.

I cannot do this.

"Running away, Pix?"

I whirled and saw my best friend Jack. He was the last of us to arrive, which is nothing new. Happily, he was the only one to see me panicking. We were alone for the moment in the courtyard leading into our classroom. His expression softened as he looked me over.

"I don't even know why I'm here," I said. Jack is much taller than me, so he leaned down and put his hands on my shoulders.

"Yes, you do," he said firmly. His gaze seared into mine as he tried to reassure me. "This is your last chance. Maybe...this is the day."

I couldn't look away from his eyes. They were dark as night and read me clearly. I could read him too, though. He was lying to me. He was lying *for* me.

"Even *you* don't believe that," I said.

Jack cursed, and his expression became pleading.

"Don't, Pix," he said, dragging me into the circle of his arms. I shook my head and bit my lip, willing the tears to go away. With my ear to his chest, I let Jack's heartbeat lull me a little bit, and I sniffled.

"It's just a test," he whispered into my hair.

I started panicking again.

"No it's not," I said, pulling away. "It's THE test."

I sighed and wiped at my eyes, shuffling my feet a little. Jack patiently waited beside me with his arms crossed. He watched as I put myself back together. It took me a minute, but I already knew what I was going to do.

"We are ridiculously late," I said. "You go in first while I make myself presentable. I don't want Master Bonnie to see me like this."

Jack didn't say anything at first. I straightened my back, not wanting him to see me admit defeat. There was a pause as I felt him appraising me, but I knew any second now he would go in that building and start his new life without me. I purposefully did not look him in the eye.

"Right," he said, taking a step forward.

I gasped as the world tilted out from under me and I went up in his arms.

"Jack, no!" I protested, trying to wiggle free. I shouted, "put me on my feet!"

"In a moment," he promised, striding toward the brick building. I saw where he was going and wriggled harder. He squeezed me tighter and yelled, "stop flopping about!"

"Stop carrying me like a child!" I yelled back. "You know I hate that!"

I knew he was grinning without even having to look at his face. Normally I would break free but I didn't want to hurt him, and he knew that too.

"Come on, Sweets," he said, resorting to his childhood nickname for me. "Be a good girlie and behave yourself."

I opened my mouth to protest once more, but just like that we were already inside. The dark testing room was nearly pitch black as Jack walked in and set me on my feet.

"Jack, Pixie, was that you making a ruckus?"

Master Bonnie is the oldest and sweetest teacher at the wizarding school. She is a darling and I love her. But today, her wrinkled cheeks and rheumy eyes were uncharacteristically serious. It was Testing Day.

"Sorry, ma'am, but I caught a runaway," Jack said, pushing me forward to join our other classmates. They were stationed at individual tables, and were taking in our entrance with expressions of surprise. And some snickers.

I looked around for Caterine and found her toward the back. Her blond hair was pulled up into a ponytail and her eyes were big and full of worry. She saw me looking and tried to erase her expression, but it was too late. My shoulders slumped. I sighed and found an empty workstation, refusing to meet anyone else's gaze.

"Now that we're all here, regardless of the excuses," Master Bonnie said, "welcome to Testing Day. I have set up a series of 10 competency practicals for you to complete, and at the end, we will see if you are ready to move on to the next level of your training."

I glanced up as she said this, wishing her words were true. Master Bonnie's gaze found mine, and her expression became a little pinched.

"I've been very lucky to have such a good group of wonderful apprentices like you all," she said. "So, if you don't do as well on these practicals as you like...well, that just means I get to keep you with me a little longer, then, doesn't it?"

I shook my head. No, not for me.

After today, I could either move on with my training or move on with my life. This was my last chance to remain at the wizard school in Jinjerang.

I felt the panic rising again as Master Bonnie and three of her assistants started the first practical. They demonstrated how to take a simple candlestick and, pressing two fingers to the wick, *snap*, so that a small yellow flame would appear. Once the students were able to demonstrate they could create and control a simple candle flame, they could move on to the next practical.

I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly, willing myself to relax and concentrate. Around me, I heard many fingers snapping, and saw little flames begin to sprout on the candlesticks all around me. This was one of the most rudimentary skills. Even untrained wizards who had never spent a minute in training could summon a flame to a candlestick. I watched as first Jack, and then some others, including Caterine, were given the go-ahead to move on to the next room. Chewing her lip, Caterine went to the next room, casting a troubled look my way. Jack passed behind me as he went, patting my back encouragingly. The room began to trickle down to only a few stragglers.

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to concentrate. I calmed my breathing, clenched my hands into fists and willed the magic in my veins to *move* and do something. The sad part was that I felt it—the magic. It was like a tidal wave building up in my system. It coursed up and around me, simmering my blood and made my shoulders feel heavy with the need for release. I *wanted* to release it.

I opened my eyes and stared at the candlewick in front of me. Its black tip was centered in my vision. As if it did not belong to me, I watched my hand reach out and gently grasp the tip between my thumb and third finger. Between one breath and the next, I *pushed* like they said we should. I felt the magic within me move a little bit. Snapping my fingers, I blinked, expecting to see a happy flame licking away at the candlestick.

The candle remained unlit.

I stared at in disbelief, and tried again. I snapped my fingers and stared at the wick, willing a flame to be there. I bit my lip, and had to will the tears away

instead. It felt like a rope was twisting and twisting in my gut, stretching taut. I could feel its heat stinging my skin from the inside out.

“Pixie,” said a soft voice.

I raised my eyes from the candle and saw Master Bonnie standing next to me. She was looking at me with a sad smile on her face. Hot tears seeped from my eyes at the awful pity I saw there. I stared at the curving tattoo just below her right eye—the wizard’s mark. It would never be mine. A wave of nausea roiled through my belly and seared my throat.

“It is not the end for you, my darling,” Master Bonnie said kindly. “You have the magic in you, I can feel it. For some reason, we just haven’t figured out how to tap into it yet. Give it more time.”

I shook my head.

“I cannot,” I croaked, my voice trembling pitifully. “This was my last chance.”

I looked at the candle again and shook my head, backing away from the workstation. Master Bonnie and I were alone now, and I was grateful that only she had to see my failure.

Orphans like me were permitted to study at the school until the age of seventeen, but the crown’s willingness to continue financially supporting us ended there. I had celebrated my seventeenth birthday last week. It was time to financially support myself now, and I knew I couldn’t do that and stay at the school too.

“It’s not your fault darling, it’s mine,” she said. “As your trainer, I have failed you.”

I rejected any idea that Master Bonnie had failed me—it was my fault. This made me cry harder. I did not have a mother. But if I did I would have loved her to be as sweet as Master Bonnie. Hearing her blame herself for me was more than I could bear. I squeezed my eyes shut as she rounded the workstation and wrapped her aged arms around me, drawing me into a tight hug. I kept the sobs locked inside as she held onto me. But I couldn’t stop her from feeling how much I was shaking.

“Master Bonnie?”

I pulled away from her and saw that one of her assistants hovered in the doorway to the next room. Master Bonnie clasped my hands in hers.

“I have to go now, Pixie,” she said. “I’m so sorry you cannot come with me.”

I nodded my head because I didn't trust myself to speak. I waited until I saw her disappear into the next room. Then I stumbled back the way I'd come in with Jack, except this time I was alone.

I had dared to hope that maybe today was the day. But deep down I knew it wouldn't be, so I'd packed up my meager belongings and set my things at the foot of my bed in the apprentice quarters. I went there now and slipped into my room, shutting the door firmly behind me. I paused, wondering if I could take my things to the tavern now, or if I should get myself together first. Bertie wouldn't want me to look a mess while serving his customers. How long would it be before someone came along and asked me to leave the schoolgrounds?

I choked as a wave of fresh tears hit me all over again, and I flopped onto the bed and allowed myself to sob in privacy.

