

MORGANA MAGE

IN THE
ROBOTIC AGE

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Chicken
House

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For Mam and Dad



Chapter One

Morgana often wished that she wasn't a witch, but at times like this she simply longed to be a better one. It wasn't that she particularly wanted to fly, but she did hate being laughed at, and she could hear the sniggers breaking out around her. Well, just above her, really, as all the other kids were floating in the air on the various objects they had managed to levitate. Morgana remained stubbornly earthbound. She had picked a clichéd old broomstick on which to try getting afloat, thinking it might be nice and light.

‘Come on, you stupid broom,’ she muttered, eyes screwed shut.

In desperation she tried a little leap into the air to get things started, but only managed to trip over her own feet and fall on her face.

Everyone was roaring with laughter now. Unable to concentrate on their spells because they were cackling so hard, most of the other kids came crashing back to earth. Only her best friend Esther was composed enough to stay airborne in her old tin bath.

Morgana’s mum looked helplessly at the pile of a dozen or so children she was supposed to be teaching, and let out a sigh.

‘OK, everyone, I think we can leave it there for the morning. But we have some hard work to do after lunch. This afternoon we’ll move on from levitation to flight – we’ll try and really take off.’ She shot Morgana a look that was half pity, half exasperation. They both knew she had no chance of succeeding at that exercise.

Esther glided down to her side. Morgana could tell she was going to try and say something comforting.

‘Don’t bother,’ said Morgana. ‘I’m just hopeless.’

Before Esther had a chance to disagree, Mr Roche appeared behind her. ‘Still no improvement, I see,’ he said. He cast a withering gaze over Morgana, the raven perched on his shoulder directing an even more searching stare over her.

‘Well, at least she’s attending class,’ said Ms Garcia. She didn’t look at Morgana, though her stoat peered at her from a pocket in her cloak. ‘Even if there is still no evidence of any magical ability.’

‘Mum!’ said Esther. ‘That’s not fair!’

Morgana knew she shouldn’t storm away from the village elders, but if they were going to discuss her as if she wasn’t there, she might as well leave them to it. And as rude as she might seem, she knew she could get a lot ruder if she stuck around.

She stomped past the vegetable patch and frightened some of the sheep as she marched by the paddocks. She was still furious as she reached the village, if you can call fifteen rickety cabins a village. She burst into the family cabin with such force she almost knocked over the broom that was

sweeping the floor by itself, and sat in a huff at the table.

She didn't even look up when her mum entered the cabin a few minutes later and took a seat beside her. 'You could apply yourself more, Morgana,' she said, as Morgana's wooden bowl, loaded with lunchtime stew, floated in from the campfire outside and plopped gently in front of her. 'If you had been here for the last lesson . . .'

'It wouldn't have made a difference, Mum. The magic in me just isn't strong enough.'

'Magic doesn't come from within you,' said her mother, her voice stern now. 'You know that much at least, Morgana. The magic is in the world around you – in the air, in the light, in the water, in the fire. You could connect yourself to the elements as strongly as anyone else if you would open yourself up to them, try to understand them. You will have a natural link to one of the elements and that will open the door to the others – you just need to figure out which one is special to you. And you need to practise.'

'I'm already trying my best,' Morgana mumbled.

She stuck her spoon in the stew and stirred it glumly. ‘Everyone’s so mean about my magic, though. Either judging me or laughing at me. It’s not very motivational.’

‘See, this is why I’m trying to help you,’ said Morgana’s older brother Turlough, who had just arrived, wrestling with a squirrel he was trying to persuade to sit in the hood of his cloak. ‘You should take advantage of having a brother who’s in line to be a village elder.’

Elders of the community were any witches or warlocks who had familiars. Animals chose magic folk as companions very rarely, but Turlough convinced himself every other week that some creature had taken a shine to him. This squirrel was the latest, now getting tangled in his brown curls as he tried to escape. Morgana was impressed that her brother managed to continue:

‘I’ll help you improve your magic. Everyone will treat you better when they see you’re just like the rest of us.’

But what if I’m not like the rest of you? thought Morgana. She knew her brother wanted to protect

her, help her be happy. But the only way he saw of doing this was making her like everyone else. Even her own brother couldn't accept her as she was.

Her father came in from feeding the animals.

'I'm going to have to head down to the city for some potion supplies this afternoon,' he said. 'I was thinking perhaps Morgana could come down with me?'

Morgana raised her head from the table eagerly, but tried to keep her face as composed as possible. She knew it wasn't something she should be excited about: if anything, a trip to the city would generally be considered a punishment, as it meant having to spend time surrounded by the city folk who hated them, and their unnatural machines. But the city had always fascinated Morgana. She knew it shouldn't, but it did. She had already been planning to try to disappear into the forest to avoid the humiliation of the afternoon's magic lesson. She had a favourite tree that gave her the best view of the city below. She could spend hours gazing down, imagining a life where it didn't matter that no spells worked for her. She could

hardly believe that she was going to get to visit it for real – if her mum would agree, that is.

‘Well . . . isn’t she a bit young?’ Morgana’s mother glanced at her doubtfully. Morgana had to clamp her mouth shut to stop herself protesting. She was eleven, and Turlough had visited the city when he was ten. ‘And there are flying lessons this afternoon . . .’

Morgana’s dad shrugged. ‘She’ll have to go there eventually,’ he said. ‘Needs to know what we’re up against. Besides, it’s not like she’ll be going on her own. I’ll be with her the whole time.’

Mum pursed her lips, sighed and nodded her agreement.