



# WINTER MAEJIC

TERIE GARRISON



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*Maejic is a difficult gift with which to be blessed. Or cursed. I should know, for I have lived with it for eighty years and more. I wonder now whether being the leader of a vital mage community is sufficient recompense for my sacrifices. Would it not have been easier to deny this . . . this . . . this skill and immerse myself in the safer realm of magic?*

*But it is too late—far too late—to change my course. I have a new task ahead of me now, one entirely unexpected and not altogether savory. For a powerful new mage has appeared, and it has fallen to me to train her.*

*Her raw talent leaves me speechless and, all unknowing, she has done things few mages have the power to do. I know I should consider it an honor to teach her. But I begin to doubt that I have it within me. When she first appeared, I suppose I was harsh with her. But in truth, you can scarcely blame me. For, full sixty years too late, I found myself face to face with my soul mate.*

One



“Hey, that’s brilliant!” ten-year-old Traz said to me, his big brown eyes shining. “Do it again!”

I cocked my eyebrows at him mischievously, then looked back at the fire. It took only a moment for the anger I still felt toward Yallick to course through me again,

and as I stared, the flames turned green. And stayed that way this time.

An idea occurred to me, and with scarcely another thought, I held my hands cupped in front of me. I imagined some of the flames flowing into them, and they did. A moment later I held a glowing green ball of light.

Traz's jaw dropped, and his eyes widened. I couldn't help smiling: Traz was hard to impress.

The ball didn't burn at all, although it made my palms tingle. I held it in front of my face and looked through it. Traz still stared at me, and through the green light, his face looked sickly.

Without warning, I tossed the ball at him. Quick as lightning, he raised his staff, and when the light hit it, the ball burst into thousands of bright sparks.

Before either of us could say a word, the door of the cottage opened and Yallick strode in. The grumpy old mage barely glanced at us as he closed the door behind him, took off his cloak, and hung it on the row of pegs.

"I have told you before," Yallick said in his gravelly voice, "that I do not wish for you to play with fire."

Beside me, Traz let out a small noise as he tried to hold in a snicker. I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing myself.

"You," Yallick said, his gaze falling onto Traz, "go outside and gather up kindling. And then bring in some more firewood. You shall be staying here for supper tonight. And you, Donavah," I looked straight into his icy, blue-green eyes without flinching, "please go to your room and continue translating the manuscript I sent you last night."

I gave him a small nod, but waited until Traz passed me on his way out before I actually moved. I had agreed to let Yallick become my teacher, and I was learning a lot, but I still felt uncomfortable around his unpredictable moods. Whenever possible, I tried to exert some small degree of my own will in a vain effort to feel more like a partner than a student.

In my room, I sat at my desk under the wide window that looked out across the back garden. My eyes flicked back and forth between the manuscript of herbal lore, the lexicon, and my translation. Absorbed in the pleasure of unlocking the treasure of knowledge for myself, I completely lost track of time.

A sudden sound of click-clacking outside startled me. If it was already time for

Traz's training session, it must also be time for my afternoon meditation. I still didn't understand why Traz didn't have to meditate. At Roylinn, everyone from Master Foris down to the youngest serving girls and boys had to take morning and mid-afternoon meditation. But once when I'd asked Yallick why Traz didn't have to, he'd said that it was none of my business and directed my attention back to the star chart I'd been studying.

I looked out my window to find Traz and Klemma, the martial arts instructor, just outside. They were working with staffs today, and as usual, Traz used the one he'd found when we were traveling together. Not that we'd known it had any special powers at the time; we'd thought it was just a really good walking stick. Now, each time Traz's staff crashed against Klemma's as he blocked a move or tried to get past her defenses, I winced. But the staff always came through the most aggressive of sessions without even a scratch.

As I watched, Klemma stepped backwards, and Traz danced toward her. He swung his staff low, then up under Klemma's outstretched arms. The tip of the weapon touched Klemma's breastbone, and with a yip of delight, Traz sprang back and raised it into the air.

"I gotcha!" he cried.

Klemma smiled at the boy, small for his ten years. "Indeed you did. Of course, your opponent won't always be obvious about leaving you an opening," Traz's face fell, "but you're catching on very quickly." His smile reappeared. "Very quickly, indeed. Now, again."

They both assumed battle stances. I enjoyed watching Traz train, and I looked forward to beginning my own martial arts lessons, but for now, I needed to find someplace quiet to meditate. I reached into my desk drawer, grabbed two taper candles without paying any attention at all to which ones they were, and went into the front room. No sign of Yallick, so I went outside. And immediately returned to get my heavy cloak. Winter was almost here and despite the bright sunshine, it was cold outside.

I followed a path into the wood that led in the opposite direction from where Traz and Klemma were making all their racket. About a fifteen-minute walk from the cottage, there was a meditation shelter that I loved to use when weather permitted. The shelter had been carved from the bottom half of a huge boulder.

Somehow—I suspected it must be by maejic after Yallick hinted as much—it stayed dry inside, and the wind couldn't get in to put out the candles. Yallick used the shelter for his morning meditation, but had yielded it to me for the afternoons.

As the dry leaves on the path crunched beneath my feet, my thoughts turned to my older brother, Breyard. I hadn't been able to break the habit of worrying about him, not after spending a month trying to rescue him. Why had Yallick sent him away so soon—only a day after we'd arrived at his cottage? Why wouldn't Breyard explain what had happened to him? And what exactly *had* happened? He'd told Traz and me about what it had been like in that awful prison they'd kept him in, and about his sham trial. He even had some vague memories about the execution fight. But about what happened after Xyla, the dragon, had snatched him away, he wouldn't tell me any more. He just gave me a maddening smile and said, "All in good time." Then Yallick sent him away, home to our parents. And he'd seemed glad to go, almost as if he were grateful to escape.

When I reached the meditation shelter, I dragged my thoughts away from their pointless spiral and ducked inside. A wooden seat, carved from a tree trunk, faced out, and in front of it stood a stone table. I sat down and looked at the bare trees interspersed here and there with evergreens.

In this quiet place, meditation was easy. I placed the meditation candles—blue and purple today, as it turned out—in holes in the surface of the table. After I lit them, light flickered on the rock above and around me, twinkling where it struck bits of mica.

I stared into the flames for a moment, then closed my eyes. One deep breath. Another. My mind's eye closed, leaving my imagination blank. I felt the vibration of the life of the forest surrounding me, and matched my heart's rhythm to it. The vibrations flowed through my body, which began to feel as if it had turned into something fluid. I swirled and spun round, celebrating the dance of life and my own place in it.

Eventually, the flow stopped and my eyelids fluttered open. The candlelight still flickered, the forest still surrounded me, and I still sat in the same seat as I had every afternoon since my return to Crowthorne. But power still surged within me as it never had before. I looked at my hands, half expecting to find them glowing, but they looked just as they always had, right down to a thin line of dirt under my

fingernails that I never seemed to be able to get entirely clean.

I blew out the candles and took them with me when I returned to the cottage. Yallick, sitting at the table reading an ancient illustrated manuscript, looked up when I walked inside. He smiled.

“You did it,” he said in his slightly raspy voice.

“Did what?” I asked.

He stood up and walked over to me, looking closely at my face. “You accessed the power.” He touched my cheek with surprising gentleness. “You glow from it.”

I looked at my hands again, confused. “No, I’m not.” I showed him my hands. “See?”

He actually laughed. “No, no, not that kind of glow. But I can see it in your face. Come; sit down and tell me.”

I did as he asked, still completely mystified as to what he was talking about. When I was done, he slapped the table with his hand, making the fruit in the wooden bowl jump.

“Yes! Your skills are markedly improving. I am quite proud of you, Donavah.” I sat there, stunned. It was as if I were talking to my father instead of the maejic master who’d grudgingly agreed to teach me. “Off with you, now.” Yallick shooed me away as if I were the cat. “Go check on Xyla.”

“All right,” I said, rising quickly. Anything to get away from his confusing behavior.

I set the candles on the table, intending to take them back to my room when I returned. Just before the door closed behind me, I heard Yallick mutter almost gleefully, “Ah, blue and purple. Blue and purple.”

What could possibly be the significance of that, I wondered as I walked to the nearby clearing where Traz and I had, following Xyla’s precise directions, created a bed of dead leaves and fresh-turned earth for her.

She now lay on her bed, her eyes closed. I shuffled my feet as I approached, not wanting to startle her. One eyelid opened a fraction. “Ah. Donavah.” Xyla’s voice spoke inside my head, and it was this ability to communicate with animals that was a mark of the gift of maejic. Not that this was necessarily a good thing, as practicing maejic had been outlawed in Alloway centuries before. That had not, of course, stopped the mages, but only forced them—us—into hiding.

I approached the huge red dragon and placed a hand on her jaw. Her skin was incredibly soft and smooth, and I loved touching her. “How are you, Xyla?”

“I am tired, but otherwise fine.”

I scowled. “Still tired? You’ve done nothing but sleep since we got here.” What could be wrong with her? She’d never been like this on our journey.

“I hunt, too. Do not worry about me; I am well.”

I leaned against her shoulder, just absorbing her presence. Then I heard the crunching of footsteps approaching her other side. I was just about to ask who was there, when I heard Traz’s voice.

“Hello, my lovely lady,” he whispered, and I had to strain to hear. “I’m working hard. I’m getting stronger. I’m quite sure I’ll be able to hear you soon.”

I almost gasped in surprise. Did Traz mean he was trying to *become* maejic? Was that even possible? From what Yallick and Oleeda said, you were born with it, you didn’t acquire it. And what happened to his desire to be a bard?

Then I wondered how I was going to get away without the boy discovering that I’d overheard his plan. Before I could figure out what to do, Traz walked around Xyla’s head. He froze when he saw me standing there, and I’m sure I had a guilty expression on my face.

He spoke first. “You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

For a moment I toyed with the idea of pretending that I didn’t know what he was talking about, but I decided that wouldn’t be fair.

I shook my head. “No, of course I won’t. But why, Traz? Why would you want to?”

“What do you mean, why would I want to? I love Xyla, but I can’t hear her. Everyone else, all the mages, they can. They all keep having conversations that I can’t hear. How do you think that makes me feel?”

To tell the truth, I’d never thought about that, and I had to admit I could understand his point. “But, Traz, I can’t hear other conversations, either.” He gave me an exasperated look. “I know, I know. That doesn’t make up for it. Still, why would you want to become maejic? You don’t want always to live in hiding like this, do you?”

He stuck out his jaw stubbornly. “I’ll do it. You just wait and see if I don’t.”





*I sit and ponder the setback we've endured. A red dragon—red!—in our grasp. Yet she slipped through our fingers when we least expected it.*

*No matter. My son has done his work well, and our original plan proceeds apace. The red dragon was nothing more than an aside, and her loss signifies nothing of importance. Success shall be ours, with or without her, for the plan was set in motion five hundred long years ago. We have played the game carefully, and victory is at hand.*

*Tomorrow—yes, tomorrow!—I send forth the messages that will move the final pieces into position. Once the last play has begun, no one will be able to keep us from Securing the Queen's Heart. Ah, such a game of Talisman and Queen it has been! I shall savor the glory of the king's final defeat.*

I arrived back at the cottage just as Oleeda was getting ready to leave. A master at Roylinn Academy, where I'd been studying magic, she was also—unbeknownst to the authorities, of course—a mage. It was she who had sent me to Yallick and she who'd convinced him to take over my tuition.

She took my hands and gave me a peck on my cheek. As she let go, I realized with a start that there had been no shock of vibration.

"How'd you do that?" I asked.

"Do what?"

"The, umm, well, when we touched. It was like normal, not like that first time."

"Ah, that. You will learn how to control it. It only takes training." She smiled in a very unsatisfying sort of way. "I must return to the academy now, or they will begin to wonder what has become of me. Have you any messages for your friends?"

I thought of Marileesa, who must be already practicing for singing at the Summer Solstice celebration, and of Loreen, who was probably broken-hearted over Breyard's disappearance. Well, I couldn't tell them anything without telling them everything, so I just shook my head. "Just give them my love and tell them I miss them." I sighed. "I don't even know when I'll see them again."

Oleeda gave me a sympathetic look. "I know it is hard to be so far from everyone and everything you know. It will not always be this way. Be patient."

"But why?" The words burst out of me unexpectedly. Yallick would've given me one of his disapproving scowls, but Oleeda placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. I continued. "What is all this being patient about? I've been here for weeks and haven't done anything."

Oleeda smiled again. "You have not 'done nothing.' It might seem like nothing to you because it is on your own insides. But those of us watching on the outside, we can see you growing."

I had to restrain myself from rolling my eyes. She sounded like Mama. But even while that was annoying, it was also comforting. And now she was leaving, and I'd be stuck here with Yallick, who definitely was *not* like Papa. Well, not often, anyway.

Oleeda kissed my cheek again. “Well, if you have no messages, it is time for me to be off.”

Traz jogged up just then. “You have my letter to Mama?”

“Of course I do. Tucked safely in the bottom of my pack.”

“Your mother knows you’re here?” I asked in surprise.

He looked at me as if I’d just said the stupidest thing he’d heard all day. “Of course she knows. How else do you think I could stay?”

Oleeda placed a hand on my shoulder. “Not all non-maejic folk oppose us,” she said. “She was relieved to learn Traz was safe, and saw the wisdom of him not returning to the academy, not for a while yet.”

“Never is more likely,” said Traz.

Oleeda smiled. “We shall see. Goodbye, and take care of yourselves until I see you again.”

We walked out with her and watched her mount her horse. With a final wave, she was gone. Just as Breyard was gone. What was it that kept making everyone leave?

\* \* \*

That evening, I sat in the front room with Yallick. It had turned quite cold when the sun set, and the heat of the fire made me feel comfortable, almost drowsy. We were supposed to be having a lesson, but Yallick just sat staring into the flames. Finally, he broke the silence.

“Did Xyla sleep this much on your journey?”

I was startled to hear him voice one of my own concerns. “No. Well, no, I can’t say that.” I thought back. “She stayed hidden during the day while we went into the cities. Then she got captured. So I don’t actually know. Maybe she did sleep a lot.”

“Hmm,” Yallick said, frowning. My heart started beating faster. Yallick being worried had to be a bad sign. On the other hand, what did he really know about dragons? What, for that matter, did *I* know? “We will need to keep watch on her. Maybe it is nothing but an old man’s needless worrying.” He gave me a small smile. “So. I wish to speak with you about your afternoon meditation session. Tell me again what happened.”

I’d been studying with Yallick for only a few weeks, but one thing I’d quickly learned was that he didn’t have much patience with drawn-out explanations.

Besides, I didn't know what he was after. I kept it short and simple. "I took the blue and purple candles." He nodded. "I went to the shelter under the rock. When I started meditating, it took almost no time to find my calm center, and suddenly I felt," I paused as I tried to think of the right way to put it, "I felt as if I'd joined the dance of life."

Yallick closed his eyes, his face expressionless, took a deep breath, and let it out again. "Yes. Yes. Do you know what is happening, and why?"

I thought a moment more. "No. I don't actually understand any of it. But I *think* it has something to do with mixing the candles."

Yallick's eyes flew open. "Indeed. It has everything to do with mixing the candles. What exactly did they teach you about meditation at that school of yours?" He waved a hand as if dismissing Roylinn.

"Well, each year is divided into four seasons, of course, and each season is divided into twelve weeks. There are different candleholders for each season, and a different color candle for each week, repeated in the same order each season."

"Yes, yes," snapped Yallick, watching me closely now, his startling eyes boring into mine. "I know all that. But did they teach you why?"

I didn't understand what he was trying to find out, so I just said the first thing I thought of. "The colors of the candles represent qualities to enhance life."

A long pause. "Donavah, you are nothing if not a diligent student." Something in his tone of voice told me he didn't exactly mean this as a compliment. "You are clearly quite capable of learning what is set before you and repeating it back. But my question to you is 'why?' Why are the colors assigned to certain weeks? Why are they not mixed? Why does there need to be any sort of order at all? Why?"

"I don't know," I said simply.

Yallick clapped his hands together once, leaning forward. "Exactly! You do not know. And you do not know because they do not tell you. They do not want you to know." He shrugged. "Or maybe they do not know themselves." He leaned back in his chair. "Relax, my girl, and I will tell you why.

"You see, back in the deeps of time, maejic was recognized as the superior art. There were, of course, many who could aspire only to the lower spells and did not have the full gift. They called their lesser art *magic*."

"I know all this. Oleeda explained it to me."

“Do not interrupt me, girl!” Yallick’s eyes blazed, and I dipped my head slightly in apology. Then he continued. “The foundation of maejic’s power is in self-control—something which *you* need to acquire—and self-control is strengthened in meditation. Are you familiar with the formulas used in the making of meditation candles?”

“No. I only know the colors and their properties.”

Yallick snorted. “That should not surprise me. Well, each color of candle is made with a slightly different blend of herbs, thus each gives off a different aroma when burned. It is the aroma that strengthens the spirit for its work.

“And it is that which the magicians of yore could not abide. The candles are at their weakest when two of the same color are burned together. The magicians, despising a power that they did not—could not—share, strove to weaken the power of the candles by creating a new tradition that they could not be mixed. That tradition is now observed as incontrovertible law.”

“So,” I began tentatively, then continued when Yallick didn’t stop me, “what they teach us to be right and proper is really the exact wrong way.”

“Indeed. I think you have experienced this yourself, most especially today.”

I thought for a moment. “So is there a chart I can study to learn the best way to mix candles?”

Yallick threw his head back and laughed. “No, my dear. This is something you must learn for yourself. Experience, not study, will teach you how to harness power.”

Harness power. Those words struck a chord within me. It was all well and good to be able to cast magic spells, but the power I’d felt in my meditation session—that kind of power would strengthen me to . . . to . . . to do anything. I relaxed in my chair, letting the heat of the fire wash over me.

After a while, Yallick spoke again in a soft voice. “Magic is actually quite simplistic. It takes the energy all around us and re-channels it. Granted, not an insignificant skill, when you think about it.” He pointed to a basket of ripe summer fruit sitting on the mantle. “It can be very useful. But maejic is so much more. It . . . can you guess?”

“It . . . it . . . creates power?”

“Not quite.” Yallick smiled. “Creating power, that would be quite a feat, would

it not? No, maejic does not create power but gathers it and concentrates it. Like what you did with the locked door in the arena.”

I looked at him in surprise. “I didn’t do anything. It wasn’t locked.”

“Donavah, you do not actually believe that an unguarded entrance to the arena would be left unlocked, do you?” He shook his head and wagged a finger at me. “The king makes quite a lot of money selling tickets. I might not have been there, but I assure you, that door was locked.”

“But, like I said, I didn’t do anything.”

“You *think* you did nothing. What were you doing just before you opened the door?”

“I was . . .” I sucked in my breath. “I was meditating.”

“And a moment later, when you desperately needed the door to open, it did. That, my apprentice, is maejic.” Yallick smiled.

\* \* \*

I suppose I should have expected it. The next morning’s meditation session went as badly as it possibly could. I closed my eyes and rummaged in my desk drawer to pull out two candles at random. Orange for creativity and yellow for kindness. I sat on my prayer mat in my small room, stuck the candles into some ancient holders, carved from petrified wood, that Yallick had given me, lit the candles, and waited to see what the power would feel like today. And waited. And waited.

I told myself that trying to force something is usually the best way to hinder it. Then I tried to find my calm center. It was gone, almost as if it had never existed. Was yesterday’s taste all that I would ever experience for myself?

Finally, I gave up and blew out the candles. Someone knocked on my door, and Traz called my name softly. It was uncanny how he always seemed to know right when I finished meditating.

“Come,” I said, and he opened the door, breathless from running, as usual.

“It’s weird outside,” he said, sitting on my cot and placing his staff across his lap.

“Weird how?”

“I don’t know. It’s ice cold, there’s no wind, and there’s almost no sound at all. Almost like the forest is holding its breath in anticipation.”

I looked at Traz, wondering when he’d become so fanciful. He was usually the more practical one of us. “In anticipation of what?”

He shrugged. “Dunno. But it’s weird.”

“Well, come on. I need to get ready for a lesson with Yallick.”

“I’m sure glad I don’t have to study with him. He’s always in such a bad mood.”

“A lot, but not always,” I said as we walked into the front room of the cottage.

Just then there came a loud pounding on the door. “Yallick! Yallick!” The door opened and someone burst into the room along with a blast of cold air from outside.

“Anazian!” Traz cried in surprise. “What’s wrong?”

I looked at the mage with whom Traz was staying. His eyes darted all around the room, although a quick glance was all that was needed to see that Yallick wasn’t there. Anazian’s face was paler than usual, and it looked as if he’d left his own cottage without even combing his hair—which was quite unusual for him. And strangest of all, his hands fluttered all about, as if he didn’t know what to do with them. All in all, he didn’t look anything like the composed, handsome man I knew him to be.

“Yallick hasn’t returned from his morning meditation yet,” I said, taking a step toward the open door to close it.

“Yes, I have,” Yallick said, striding through the doorway, gripping his meditation candles in his hand. In a moment of strange clarity, I saw that his knuckles were white. “What is it, Anazian?”

“They’re coming, sir. They march against us!”

“Who?” Traz, Yallick, and I all said together.

“The king’s men.” He swallowed, and his Adam’s apple bobbed. “The Royal Guard.”



*Ah, Arellia. My sweet Arellia. Wife of my youth, mother of my beloved son. I miss you still, though many long years have passed since our final parting. I taste your sweet breath. I feel your soft hair.*

*There has been no other but you.*

*I am powerful, far beyond our hopes and dreams. But the flavor of victory is bittersweet without you by my side. I will miss you until I draw my last breath.*

*If my power could bring you back to me, I would spend it all. But there is no magic that can stretch beyond the grave.*

*It may yet be long ere I join you, but be patient. Await me, my love, in Otherworld.*



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