

ED MASESSA

WANDMAKER'S  
APPRENTICE

Two crossed wands, one with a pointed tip and the other with a rounded tip, positioned behind the title text.

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CHAPTER  
ONE

“B ahtzen bizzle!”

Henry cringed. He knew he had made a mistake the second he squeezed a drop of the yellow fluid into an Erlenmeyer flask. A bright flash and a puff of smoke was a pretty strong clue. Serena and Brianna stifled giggles across the room.

“Sorry,” Henry said.

“SORRY?” Coralis exploded. “Tell that to the small village you just eradicated due to your carelessness. Or to the forest you just turned to stone. Or to the caverns you just collapsed—” The old Wand Master’s rant stopped abruptly as his next words caught in his throat. His forehead creased with lines of sorrow and pain. Silence filled the room for several uncomfortable seconds. Henry held his breath, and he knew Serena was doing the same.

The tails of Coralis’s long black coat snapped as he spun and exited the room at a brisk pace. Henry had seen this reaction enough times over the past year to know their lessons were through for the day.

“Not again,” Brianna moaned. She gazed at the half-finished

experiment in her hands. “What’s the use? I’m pretty sure I don’t have any talent anyway. At least he yelled at *you* this time.”

Serena watched Henry’s pout spread to his shoulders. “It’s not your fault.” She offered a one-armed hug. “How long is it going to take before he’s himself again?”

Henry shrugged. He had no answer to that, because he understood there was no timetable for grief. When they’d defeated Dai She in the Arizona desert fourteen months earlier, Randall had been killed in the process. Once Coralis’s finest apprentice, Randall was the main reason the world was still in one piece.

Coralis had not forgiven himself for what had happened, and occasionally something would come up in casual conversation that would trigger another painful memory. They never knew what would set Coralis off or how long it would take him to recover.

“Help me clean this mess up and we’ll get an early start on the gardens,” said Henry. “Gretchen will appreciate the extra time we can give her.”

“Isn’t today when she plans to try her new fertilizer?” asked Serena as she gave Henry a light jab with her elbow.

“Yes. She’s going to try *your* fertilizer, which *you* created, totally by accident.” Henry acted jealous, but they both knew how proud he was of her. He smiled broadly and she turned away as her olive skin turned a slight shade of pink.

Brianna rolled her eyes. “I’m outta here. Enjoy your ‘garden time.’” She signaled air quotes with her fingers and smiled mischievously . . . then squinted in pain. “Ow!”

“Another headache?” Henry started toward her.

She held a hand up to stop him. “I’m okay. Like Gretchen said, it’s probably just growing pains.” Brianna smiled weakly and waved good-bye.

“I hope Gretchen’s right.” Serena took Henry’s hand. “But in the meantime, there’s ‘gardening’ to do.”

Henry laughed. If there was an upside to Coralis’s frequent absences, it was that the time he spent with Serena had been good for them. Aside from having the common link of being uprooted from their homes and sent to a foreign country, they seemed to learn more about their abilities when left alone to figure things out. Serena had once commented how it was just as important to know what would happen when they did something wrong, through trial and error, as it was to learn through careful study. As long as they didn’t blow anything up—which was something Henry was more apt to do.

At times the results even gave Coralis a rare chuckle—like the time one of Henry’s missteps caused a large piece of rose quartz to sprout eight legs and chase Gretchen through the courtyard. The quartztopus was all the ammunition Serena needed for days of relentless teasing.

“Wait a minute! Gardening can wait. Isn’t today Thursday?” Henry asked brightly.

“Detour day!” exclaimed Serena. She took Henry’s hand and pulled him from the classroom.

Castle Coralis was nestled into an area of the Carpathian Mountains so remote that weekly supplies had to be delivered by horse-drawn carriages. Lush forest thick with flora and

fauna extended for kilometers in every direction. And this forest had one other characteristic that others didn't—a personality. Henry and Serena even went so far as to call it Forest, as if it were a person.

Forest seemed to enjoy toying with them. Each excursion presented a challenge. A footpath would be there one day and gone the next; occasionally, a path would close behind them as they walked, sealing them off from the castle and any sign of civilization.

Such was the case today.

They exited through an opening in the courtyard wall that hadn't been there the previous day. It immediately closed, blocking any hope of reentry. These were the trips Serena enjoyed the most. It was as if the castle and its surroundings were as much an instructor as Coralís was, sending them on journeys of discovery, directing them to explore new, unknown areas. She giggled with the delight of a five-year-old getting her first princess tiara.

Henry forged ahead so she wouldn't see him smiling at her reaction.

They walked an unfamiliar path for long minutes. Finally, they came upon an open field filled with wildflowers and herbs. On their walks, it wasn't unusual for them to stumble upon unfamiliar plants, which they would bring back for Gretchen. Her knowledge of botany was limitless and she willingly shared every detail—which plants could be used for healing wounds and ailments, which could be used to add potency to spells, and which were so poisonous that

simply touching them to their lips could have devastating results.

The botanical bounty in the open field before them was unprecedented. Nearly every plant was new to them. As the forest path closed at their backs, inviting them to step forward, Serena suggested there would be far too many to bring back this time.

Henry came to an abrupt stop, deeply suspicious. He felt the tiny hairs on the back of his neck rise with a tingling that he called his “Spidey-Sense.”

Serena noticed his mood and immediately switched from exhilaration to caution. “What is it, Henry?”

“I don’t know.” He rubbed the top of his head nervously and focused on the tree line surrounding the field. The entire setting was so calm that he could have easily imagined families enjoying peaceful picnics among the flowers. Yet something wasn’t right. “I don’t think we should go out there.”

“Forest has never led us into danger before,” Serena said. But his worry was infectious. She turned as if to leave—then remembered the path had already closed behind them. “We don’t have many choices.”

It suddenly struck him what was amiss. “There’s no path through the field. We’ve never been given free rein before.”

“Maybe it’s finally up to us to make a choice,” Serena said. “Maybe it’s a gift from Forest.” She seemed to like the sound of that and took several steps into the field.

Henry’s Spidey-Sense flared up in warning. “Get back!” he yelled.