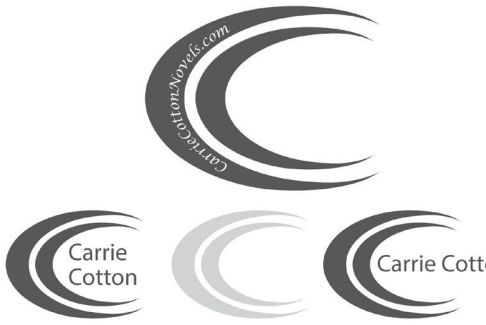


MAGIC
IN THE SHALE



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FLECK BOOK SERIES

Magic in the Shadows
Magic in the Mystic Circle
Magic in the Shale

This is a Young Adult Fantasy Novel.

This novel includes a teen mother
and some sexually suggestive content.

Dear Reader:

For the longest time I believed the old adage of the dwarves, that hope is delayed disappointment. I've witnessed hope's corrosive nature. The hope that a miserable employer, or a difficult family member, or dare I suggest a spiteful spouse, will melt into harmony. Hope can be a type of willful stupidity, masquerading as optimism.

It's said that the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour. Maybe that's because how people think, and what motivates them, seldom changes. If there's a change in how someone thinks, then it's reasonable to believe there could be a change in how that person behaves. In my experience, people seldom change for the good of others. People change to achieve something for themselves, or to avoid a penalty. If you find an exception, treasure it.

I still think there are three kinds of people; watchers, thinkers and doers. Doers are the worst, because they instigate change. I was born a watcher, but I've slipped into becoming a doer. Sadly, I'm still not much of a thinker. Sometimes I wonder if, perhaps, hope could be something more than willful self-delusion. Sometimes, maybe, hope could be the spark that fuels courage that allows us to see the possible over the probable.

Sincerely,

Fleck

MAGIC
IN THE SHALE

CARRIE COTTON

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

I SPENT THE MORNING lulled by the charm of a small fire swaying and swirling next to my thinking rock. It was a quiet fire. Not the sort of fire that hisses, flickers, and crackles. It yawned and stretched, then it quietly stood up and sauntered away. It didn't bow or ask me to name it, or anything annoying like that.

I watched it toddle off. Even at a distance I could see its yellow glow as it entered the woods. The living-trees, in autumn colours and spring blooms, stepped aside, politely nodding. Their acceptance of the fire testified to the accord of unification embraced by the creatures in the Mystic Circle.

The Council was muddled, rattled by our defeat in the war and the loss of so many citizens. My plans remained the same. I wanted to fade into the background, allowing the Council to take on more responsibility, until they forgot about me altogether. I hoped they would, eventually, realize they have each other to rely on, and they didn't truly need me.

Mira fuddled my plan at the first Council meeting by stating, "Once again, you succeeded where we failed."

I assured them I tripped and stumbled my way to the shatter sequence and moonbeam grains. Then I told them how badly I blundered with Gem, and how Tatem cast a spell calling down rain. I tried my best to help them understand they can't anticipate all the problems that will rise, and they don't need to have all the answers before they begin. They just have to fumble through.

To my relief, the Council maintained responsibility for the application of the *Allegiance of the Mystic Circle*. That allegiance set the terms of governance for all magical creatures and non-magical citizens. At Council meetings I mostly quietly nodded and smiled at them, hoping to boost their courage and support their decisions.

Looking back, I have come to understand that persuasive ideas, like equity and harmony, don't wink out; they take root deep in the collective mindset and murmur on, like an echo growing louder through time.

Hectare roamed around free, sulking and grumbling. Maple agreed to leave, but here we stayed, like a wheel caught in muck. My darling ten year old brother, Quinn, was causing trouble by rallying the dragons' discontent towards humans. Gavin spent his time in the company of healers, who continued to apply tinctures and gifts of magic to improve his sight.

After much procrastinating and complaining, Zephyr finally sewed me a pair of brown pants, with lots of pockets. She also made me a comfortable light orange shirt. She continued to sew dresses and made a fuss of pouts and frowns when I preferred to wear my pants.

Our cottage was rebuilt, after the spell-casting wizards blasted it into splinters. It was larger than the original, with three bedrooms: one for me, one for Maple, and one for Laurel. It also had a separate kitchen with a round stone table.

A small snug served as a comfy living room. Maple was upset that all the crowns were gone. I felt relieved.

It had only been a few weeks since the second awakening. The first awakening happened under the castle, when the mystical creatures were released from their bottles. That was back in the beginning, when I was searching for Quinn. As you recall, the stick men released the majority of the creatures.

The second awakening was the reanimation of the statues with the moonbeam dust and the shatter sequence. The creatures acted like I was a humble hero, surrendering myself to King Slyne's ownership, in order to redeem them from salt back to living beings. They even wrote one of those annoying nursery rhymes, to record the event for their children down through the generations.

"That was a friendly little fire." Maple's voice drifted towards me. She'd walked up to my thinking rock, with baby Laurel sleeping in her arms.

"Yes." I shifted, so that I could see her better.

"They," Maple nodded towards the trees in the distance "have a deep sort of wisdom and kindness." Absent-mindedly she added, "I suppose that's because they're so well rooted."

I cocked my head and raised my eyebrows in surprise at that statement. Then we both laughed because Mystic Circle trees aren't deeply rooted at all. They tend to pull up their roots and wander down to the river to chat with the mer-people, then off to the town square to sway to the music from the tavern.

Two little tulips and a patch of daisies beside my thinking rock all giggled along with our laughter. The little flowers had crowded in, holding hands and swaying in unison. Little snoops. I don't trust them, but their cheery giggling made Maple happy. I tolerated them for that.

Maple's abrupt laughter woke Laurel in a sputter of

squawks. Her attention shifted to rocking Laurel in a playful doting manner. The pretty dwarf, Hildred, walked out of the cottage with Oliver close behind her on his eight harry legs.

Hildred plucked Laurel from Maple's arms, and with a polite nod she placed the babe face down on the soft felt of Oliver's back. He had grown to the size of a large dog. I smiled at the memory of when he was so small that I could hold him in the palm of my hand.

As I watched Hildred and Oliver stroll away, I began to realize that every single mystical creature was tied together. I feared I might be the string that bound them. Perhaps that's what being a Queen is. Somehow, over time, that string became a cord knotting us together. It seemed every time I shifted, or simply stayed silent, the creatures were tied to a consequence. That thought made me shudder and twitch my shoulders.

Maple sighed, "Everything feels calm now, peaceful even."

This felt like the beginning of one of those conversations where she suggested we should stay here in the Mystic Circle, even though she already promised we could leave.

"The trees are still crowding in." I waved my arm towards the woods. "The meadow should be bigger. We should be left alone and not bothered."

"True, we should be left alone and not bothered." Maple nodded past me.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Hectare glide out of a shimmer and begin levitating towards us. Maple shrugged and walked away. After the war, the mystical creatures were wary of the non-magic humans, who they called 'outsiders' and characterized as ordinary but devious.

I reminded them that King Slyne had some extra-ordinary help from the wizards, Tatem and Hectare. Hectare contested my assertion, publicly claiming neutrality, ruining my point

by placing all blame on King Slyne; who is a King, but also an ordinary human.

When the magical creatures agreed that King Slyne was a typically treacherous and vile human, I reminded them that their beloved Maple and Laurel were both ordinary humans. That gave them pause to reconsider their words and dampen down their riotous prejudice. I suppose, if you measure progress on a sliding scale, Hectare's assertion of neutrality was an improvement over his historic stance of imprisoning and ingesting the mystical creatures.

"Lovely morning, is it not? So good to see you looking so well, my Hope."

He wore a white pirate shirt, open at the neck, tucked into fitted pants. Maple once said he is the sort of handsome that could warm even the most frosty of women, and tug a please and thank you from their lips. The gold flecks in his brown eyes glinted and danced in the sunlight.

At the time, I suspected he glamour-crafted that handsome façade, as a bit of magical-allure placed over his true natural wormlike self. I forced myself to focus on who I knew him to be, rather than the man he flattered himself to be.

"It was a wonderful morning. What do you want, Hectare?"

"Ah, yes." He tapped his fingertips together in prayer hands. "Busy morning, I see, nary a moment to spare." He lifted his chin and pressed his shoulders back, reminding me of the stance Quinn took when I knighted him. "Tell me what you want from me, my Hope."

"I don't want anything from you."

Sometimes, I wished one of the mystical creatures would show some initiative and poison his tea. Sure, he would likely heal himself. Of course, I would scold them, but they didn't even try. To the best of my understanding, not even one of the

creatures ventured beyond sour glares and openly shunning Hectare.

At the time, I still expected Hectare's ego to rise to the surface, followed by a calamity of appalling conduct. He felt like a problem I'd been putting off.

"I am a Demon Wizard, more powerful than any other. I have shackled my powers. I have not ended one single of your creatures. Not even the dullards, or the idiot bothersome ones."

"Why is that Hectare? Why haven't you had a magic hissy fit?"

A worry took root and began to grow in my thoughts. If he shackled his Demon Wizard power to impress me, then when I left he might resurrect his destructive morbid tendencies. Then the magical creatures would come clamoring after me, to save them from his power-crazed offenses. His face became calm and reflective.

"Truly, I am lonelier than I imagined I would be. Their fear is not as intoxicating as I anticipated it would be. Despite the considerable power I have obtained, I am as empty as before I began. If not here among magic, then what other place is there for me?"

He shrugged one shoulder limply.

"I don't belong with humans. They are dullards, striving and conniving for scraps of power in dusty spells. When they achieve power, they do little with it. They cannot think to shift a mountain or create a new thing. Rather they gather their power into a pile, point at it like a child and swoon over it. They are like wind-up dolls, tittering about, bumping into walls. Could you restrict your intellect to that of an imbecile in order to evade the hollowness of loneliness?" He straightened his shoulders. "I am not a pretender."

I laughed in surprise at the statement.

“You should take off your glamour magic and assume your natural appearance before making that claim.”

Ignoring my rebuke, he prattled on.

“Here in the Mystic Circle power is not strived for. It is assumed in the natural gifting of magic. It is a relief to be away from the preening, pandering, power-puffing and politicking of the unimaginative, ungifted, dreary humans. Tatem was the only interesting conversationalist of King Slyne’s court.

“Sadly, she proved to be little more than a paranoid librarian, obsessively siphoning power from sheets of clever wording. I will confess that she riled me, not because she was so paltry in her talent, but rather, she reminded me too aptly of my former self and my former strivings. I prefer, now, to see her as a marker of my advancement in achieving true magic talent.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head at the memory of Tatem’s angry fits.

“You are perplexing, my Hope. You withhold from me your affection; then deny me the comfort I am able to secure from a woman who eagerly receives me.”

His tone shifted to a soft hopeful coo.

“This reaction suggests you wish me exclusively for yourself.”

Frowning and shaking his head he continued.

“When I advance towards you, you wrinkle your nose, as if I am a puff of sour air. You are a duality of intense spunk and utter passivity. It is as if you sit on the raw, ragged cusp of darkness and light.”

That statement caused me to hold my breath because it perceptively hinted at shadows. He was the sort of nuisance that would have both the ability and the audacity to intrude into shadows to pester me.

Hectare huffed, “You are equal measures corroding acid

and soothing salve. How do those extremes rest in you, and not give rise to blisters?”

I let out the breath I had been holding. His eyes softened.

“I, myself, am a duality having been on both sides of power, my Hope. I tell you true, I would rather have it than not. This being confessed, you must know that I regret the sorrow my pursuit of true magic caused you.”

I didn't like that he was hinting at Linden.

I chided, “Regret, without a change in behaviour, is a shabby repentance.”

“Indeed, my Hope, my words are but a start. The tattoo of the Redeemers' Crown wraps itself around your arm. That hints at a flicker of the possible. After all, ogres live here in your Mystic Circle with the elves they once hunted and devoured. Surely, that began as a flicker of the possible. Certainly, there is a place for me here.”

I taunted, “Certainly, the best place for you is in a bottle.”

“I have witnessed unlikely harmonies, here in your Mystic Circle, my Hope. Little fires walk freely through live woods, without posing a danger.”

“Ah poor dear-heart Hectare,” I goaded. “Are the creatures still upset that you stuck them in bottles for a hundred years? Are they miffed that you ingested their friends and family to fuel your ambition to reign supreme over everyone and everything?”

I made a straight line of my lips and rolled my eyes. Hectare huffed a slow sigh that sounded a little like a growl.

“Oh, High Enchanted Queen, Pretender of Indifference, Warden of Absolution. You alone hold the authority to enact the duty of the Redeemer's crown. You flutter in and out of your responsibilities like a drunken butterfly.”

“Don’t make me regret allowing you to stay in the Mystic Circle, Hectare.”

“It is not that you allow me to stay, my Hope, but rather that you have failed to force me to go. A few simple words from you would end my misery.”

He bowed his head slightly and his tone shifted to a flirt.

“My magnificent and glorious drunken butterfly, keeper of the Redeemer’s Crown and gateway to redemption. Confirm my claim on your friendship and command your creatures to receive me. Place on me a title befitting of my significant capacity. Help them to welcome and appreciate me.”

“Maybe if you just stop scowling at them. Maybe smile and nod politely at the creatures. When they say good morning to you, be friendly and say good morning back.”

“They do not acknowledge me at all. Not even when I inform them of how helpful I have been to them, in my many efforts on your behalf.”

That statement caused my body to twist into a frown. In my experience Hectare’s help was typically accompanied by a dollop of harm. He is one of those people you meet in life. The sort who are so enamoured with their own deluded perception that they sound sincere when presenting their warped version of events.

He reminded me of my mom, and the people in my town, who pretend their opinions are truth. Pretenders never succeed alone. They need other people around them to pretend the same thing. That’s how they collectively substitute their opinion for truth.

“I’m not going to agree with you Hectare, so it’s not going to work.” I held up my hand when he opened his mouth to defend himself. “Stop sulking and grumbling. You’re the one

who caused all the trouble. You can't twirl truth, tease it apart and reweave it to fit your current preference. Stop talking to me as if I didn't see everything you did."

This situation reminded me of the young dragon Chance's statement that *Perception is an interpretation of reality; not necessarily the truth of reality*. I shook my head.

Hectare pouted. "I allowed myself to believe we have moved past our fumbled beginning,"

"How can we move past all your nastiness when you haven't changed? Stop acting like I'm stupid. Like I don't understand all the trouble you caused, like not helping us in the war and feigning neutrality at King Slyne's castle."

"I removed the magic tethering you. I focused your attention in a direction that would better serve your ambitions."

"You gave Gem to Tatem." I shook my head and heaved a sigh. "You caused Gem to die, again! Is that the sort of help you are referring to?"

"Regrettable." Hectare looked away.

"You say regrettable, then you do something nasty. Then you say regrettable and on it goes like a bouncing ball."

As I studied him, I began to understand that he was attempting to appear more appealing by placing a disguise of decency over his inner self, just as he had placed an attractive veneer over his physical outer self. From the shadows, I've watched other people, who weren't as depraved as him but were similar to him. People who were missing the ability to sincerely care about, or connect with, others. People who felt rejected, because others sensed how nasty and dangerous they were.

For a man like Hectare, who craved applause, that sort of rejection could turn him inside out and foster spite. For just

a moment, I grasp how fragile Hectare was, despite his power puffing. Given his proven capacity for self-delusion I hoped that, maybe, imitating affection might be the first tender steps towards making amends. Over time, maybe feigned concern could become an approximation of caring. To keep him from losing hope and finding trouble, I softened.

“Hectare, you’re a bit of a muddled knot for me.” Honesty can be like that. It can leak out as a sort of insight. “It’s better to have you here trying to get along, than off in another kingdom plotting against me. I can’t fix things for you. You have to fix things with the magical creatures yourself. I’ve known lots of people who pretended they were smart. Eventually, others around them began to think they were smart, not because they did anything brilliant, but rather, because they didn’t do anything stupid. If people can fake being smart, then could you do the same with caring?”

A surge of unease drifted over me as I wondered what he would do, if he never achieved the admiration he sought.

“My Hope, I recall your admonishment, during your captivity at King Slyne’s castle, that you would not tutor me in how to imitate caring.”

“That was when you were King Slyne’s problem. Now you’re here, and you’re our problem. I don’t care what you think, what you want, or how you feel, or even what you’ve done in the past. Honestly, I just care about what you actually do now, and what trouble you’ll stir for me in the future. If you can’t become a decent person, then can you please-please just fake it?”

Rolling my shoulders in a shrug, I sighed, “Maybe it could be enough if you stopped sulking and doing nasty things. The

only advice I can think to give you is to be consistently nice and hope someone, someday, will be nice back.”

I slid off my thinking rock and walked briskly away. I know I could've banished Hectare from the Mystic Circle. I think the magical creatures were waiting patiently for me to cast him out. If I had to confess the nub for my hesitation, it would be the quiet echo of forgiveness Maple graced upon me.

I wouldn't pardon Hectare for his offences against the magical creatures, but I hesitated shy of denying him the opportunity to seek and achieve redemption for himself. Maple's forgiveness taught me that there is no greater humbling, and no truer motivation for transformation, than forgiveness born of kindness; particularly when leniency isn't deserved. If Hectare could realize his situation through the lens of that truth, then perhaps there could be hope for true forgiveness, rather than the fragile crust of forced forbearance he requested. The creatures, if not Hectare himself, deserved better than mandated tolerance.