



Witching hours

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CELLEY ARMSTRONG EXPECTATIONS



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Expectations

As I sat listening to Victor Tucci's story, a single refrain ran through my head.

And what do you expect me to do about it?

I wouldn't say such a thing, of course. Perhaps some variation on it, something more polite, without the inherent connotations of indifference such a phrase could carry. Yet the gist would be the same. What did he expect me to do about it?

A rhetorical question. I knew precisely what he expected me to do, without so much as a hint as to his intentions in his words, his bearing or even his eyes. I knew. And I knew that when he finished, and made clear that expectation, we'd both be disappointed. Perhaps I even more than he, for I was about to receive yet another glimpse into my future, where my value would forever be measured only by my parentage and what that parentage could do for men like Victor Tucci.

I thought of stopping him. I suppose I should have, to save us both the bother. I certainly couldn't afford the waste of this hour. It was two A.M., I had an exam at eight and, when it came to sleep, I was well below my quota, a combination of a busy exam study schedule and a stressful visit from my father two days ago having deprived me of all but a few restless hours of

slumber. So, I should have said, “Look, I know what you want, but I can’t help you” . . . or some more polite variation on the sentiment. Yet I didn’t.

My father taught me to hear people out, whether it was a VP with a new marketing concept or a junior custodian complaining about a switch in toilet paper brands. Cutting people short demonstrated a basic lack of courtesy, and made people feel their thoughts and opinions weren’t worthy of your attention. Ironic, isn’t it, that as fast as I run from my father’s influence, in so many things, it’s his words I hear, and his words I follow. Does that mean I lack the will to really break free? Or that I’m mature enough to acknowledge when he was right about something? I don’t know.

I swallow a yawn and blink hard, hoping my eyes aren’t glazing over.

Maintain eye contact. Don’t fidget, don’t check your watch, don’t glance at the clock, don’t do anything that might make it seem you have better things to do. Don’t just try to appear interested; try to be interested.

That last part was easy. I was interested in what Tucci had to say. Any conversation involving the words “rare,” “black-market” and “spellbook” were guaranteed to get my attention. Of course, I could have informed him that the correct term for what he was describing was “grimoire,” but it’s never polite to correct someone when you know perfectly well what they mean. Of course, the first thing I thought when Tucci mentioned the book was “where is it and how can I get hold of it?”

From the sounds of it, though, this book didn’t contain the sort of spells I’d care to add to my repertoire. I have no aversion to dark magic, not in principle nor in practice, provided that the principle and the practice are guided by ethical standards. All martial forms of magic are considered dark magic. Dark, not evil. The morality of dark magic depends on the application.

One cannot argue that using an energy bolt spell to kill a business competitor is moral (unless you happen to be my father, in which case, morality is a clay that can be molded to suit the requirements of circumstance). Yet nor would most people argue that using that same spell to foil an assassination attempt is equally immoral.

Still, while I'm cognizant of the value of such magics, and have been actively studying martial and lethal spellcasting, there is a limit to how many such spells one conceivably needs. They are, after all, only weapons. A non-supernatural who foresees the need for self-defense may acquire a gun, perhaps a knife, and learn a form of martial arts. Different weapons for different circumstances. Yet the only person who requires a dozen varieties of guns is one who is not fending off assassination, but carrying it out.

Given the type of spells Tucci was describing, a more accurate analogy would be, not additional varieties of guns, but ones specially designed to do more than kill, perhaps to put out an eye or disfigure a face or create a wound that will cause untold agony before death. In other words, not instruments of defense, but instruments of torture. And that is one form of weapon I have no use for, proof that I have not absorbed *all* of my father's teachings.

"So you can see why I'm concerned," Tucci said as he finished.

"Naturally. Such spells should not be in the public domain, and I will agree that it is a cause for concern, and yet . . ."

I paused, about to ask some variation on "what do you expect me to do about it?" and try not to cringe as I awaited the inevitable response, when a thought struck. Perhaps Tucci didn't expect that at all. Perhaps what he wanted was . . .

"You'd like me to retrieve these grimoires," I said, straightening, the drowsiness I'd been fighting finally falling away. "To remove them from circulation."

A blank look, and I was about to rephrase myself, substituting spellbook for grimoire when Tucci nodded.

“Yes, yes, that’s it exactly, Mister . . .” He faltered on the word, as if he couldn’t bring himself to use the formal mode of address for someone half his age, but knew he should, out of deference to that surname, which he finally got out. “Cortez.”

“Lucas. Please.” I snatched my notepad and pen from the side-table. “Now, first, let me be very clear that I’m not certain I could undertake a task of this magnitude. My work thus far has been limited, primarily in the simple legal advice. Yet that is not to say I have no experience with more *active* work, so to speak, including surveillance. The removal of property not my own would entail slightly more expertise than I currently possess, but one cannot gain experience without taking that first step.”

Tucci stared at me, uncomprehending. A not-uncommon reaction when I open my mouth.

I propped the notepad on my knee. “Why don’t you tell me some more about where this grimoire is being held, and by whom?”

He continued to stare. I mentally replayed the last sentence, but it seemed straightforward and simply worded enough. So I waited, presuming he needed more time to organize his thoughts.

“You . . . you’re going to . . . get them . . . yourself?” he said finally.

“Preferably, although, if necessary, I do have a few contacts I could call upon who have some experience with this kind of . . .” I let the sentence drop away as I saw the look in his eyes, and knew this wasn’t what he meant. “You wanted me to take this to my father.”

“Well, yes,” he said, as if such a thing should have been obvious. And it was, being precisely what I’d assumed he’d intended from the start, misled only by my own misguided surge of optimism.

Tucci continued, “I’m sure your father would let you help. As you said, it would be good experience for you, getting to know the business from the bottom up, so to speak.” A flash of a smile. “Can’t learn everything sitting behind a desk, can you, son? At your age, I’m sure you don’t want to, either.”

I waited a moment, to be sure none of my disappointment leaked into my words. “True, I’m sure, for any young man who intends to follow the path into the family business. However, as you are doubtless aware, I have disavowed all connections to the Cortez Cabal.”

“Yes, yes, that tiff with your father—”

“It isn’t a—” I swallowed the word. “I realize that my alienation from my father and the Cabal is widely considered an adolescent act of rebellion, but I should think that, after five years, and having outlasted my teens, it is apparent that this is more than that.”

From his look, I knew that the only thing that was apparent to him was that I was living proof that some young men didn’t leave teenage rebellion behind when they reached their twenties. I looked into his eyes, and I could see myself reflected back as he saw me, a resentful, ungrateful brat, someone he’d rather not deal with at all but, as a non-Cabal sorcerer he stood no chance of an audience with my father or brothers, so this spoiled scion was as close as he could get to the Cortez Cabal inner family.

“I’m sorry,” I said, rising to my feet. “If you wish to bring this to the Cabal’s attention, I would recommend you notify—”

I stopped. Did I want him bringing this to the Cabal's attention? Granted, however rare he thought this grimoire was, my father probably had a copy hidden somewhere, or access to one. And yet . . . If he didn't, did I want to hand it over to him? Possibly get the current owner killed over it? My stomach twisted at the thought, yet I forced the worry back with logic. My father wouldn't order the owner killed so long as he could get the grimoire without resorting to such drastic and potentially untidy measures.

"Notify who?" Tucci said, his gaze impatient, probably assuming my attention had slipped to thoughts of keg parties and girls and whatever else rich college boys filled their empty heads with. "See here, I don't think you're understanding the seriousness of this, young man. This is a very important spellbook, and it's in the hands of a witch."

My head jerked up. "A witch?"

"I said that, didn't I? The moment I arrived, I told you who has this spellbook—"

"Evan Levy," I said. "From Minnesota, if I'm not mistaken."

"Who the hell is Evan Levy? I said—" His jaw shut with a clack, as if forcing his mouth shut, reminding himself that, inattentive brat or not, I was still a Cortez, and heir-apparent to my father's throne. "I'm sorry, but you must have misheard. I said Eve Levy."

"Eve Levy?" I frowned, running the name through my head. Familiar, and yet . . .

"Levy, Levi, some—" Tucci's hands fluttered. "Some Jewish name."

"Levine," I said slowly. "Eve Levine."

I sat down. Tucci rambled on, but my father's lessons on proper listening behavior flew out of my head, and I made no effort to pretend I was still listening. Vincent Tucci wasn't bringing this to my attention because it was a dangerous spellbook that should be put under lock and key, but because it was in the hands of a witch. Such a thing should not be tolerated. Preposterous,

of course. Racism at its ugliest. No, not its ugliest. Its ugliest would come if the Cortez Cabal got wind of the situation. While my father's attitude toward someone like Eve Levine was pragmatic—he'd try to buy the book from her and, failing that, intimidate her into handing it over, my brothers and the board of directors would not be so willing to treat Eve as they would a sorcerer. For them, this would be an excuse to execute an embarrassment, a witch who fancied herself a master of sorcerer magic, who dared teach sorcerers to use their own magic.

Would such an execution be unwarranted? I would like to disagree with capital punishment in all situations, but I have seen cases where one cannot argue for anything less, where it becomes a matter of kill the transgressor or allow more innocents to die, and in such an instance I must value the life of the innocent over that of the criminal. Although I knew Eve Levine by reputation only, a criminal, a killer. Yet, not knowing the circumstances behind her crimes, I cannot judge her on those.

But I can judge her on one indisputable fact: that she made her living instructing sorcerers in magic they weren't skilled enough to use properly and, if this grimoire Tucci was concerned about was any indication, in magic *no one* should use. She gave men the power to torture and kill. An executable offense? I don't know. What I do know, though, is that my brothers and the Cabal board of directors would not kill her for this. They would kill her for the indignity of a mere witch presuming to teach sorcerers, and an indictment on those grounds was as despicable as a KKK lynching.

"A witch . . ." I said, adjusting my glasses as I pretended to ponder this. "That does make a difference. You're quite correct. She does need to be stopped, and anything I can do to help, I will."

Tucci tried not to smirk. "Glad you feel that way."

I picked up my notepad. “If you can provide me with the particulars, I will pass them along to my father immediately.”

My motorcycle idling at the curb, I looked up at Eve Levine’s apartment building. A modest high-rise in a good neighborhood. One might expect something more luxurious for a world-class teacher of the dark arts. If you’re going to sell your soul, you might as well put a decent price tag on it. As always, though, teaching isn’t the most lucrative way to make a living, whether it’s black magic, high school English or criminal law.

As with my law professors, Eve would see people pass through her classes destined for jobs that would net triple her income. Yet the old adage about “Those who can’t do, teach.” failed in this instance. Eve Levine was widely known as an expert practitioner of her art, and I had heard enough stories that, even sitting here looking at her building, I had to put such tales from my mind, remember the importance of my mission and bolster my resolve.

Why did Eve Levine teach when she could earn more by “doing”? I will admit to some optimistic bent in my nature that makes me long to believe that she refrained from acts of evil out of a basic core of good that shunned immoral uses of her powers. Yet if it is possible, much less advisable, to rate such things on a continuum, teaching magic to kill and maim must be seen as *more*, not less wrong than carrying out such acts oneself.

It’s a matter of scale. If you commit such acts, you commit them for personal gain. If you teach them, you give countless others the power to do the same, and the sheer number of “evil” acts is multiplied many times over. One could argue, and rightly so, that most of Eve’s students

didn't have the spellcasting wherewithal to maim a cockroach much less a human, but the fact remains that her lessons exist to give people that power, whether they can use it or not.

It is possible that Eve taught out of a misguided sense of morality, a "But I'm not doing this stuff myself" defense that let her conscience rest easy. Yet I suspected there was more to her decision than that, and it was prompted by the same impulse that compelled her to rent a modest apartment in a good neighborhood, rather than a good apartment in a seedier section of town. That reason showed itself ten minutes later, when the front door of the apartment opened, and out strode a slender woman with dark hair to her waist, dressed in black jeans, a turtleneck shirt, a hip-length leather coat and boots that added another inch or two to her already formidable height. Eve Levine. And that "reason?" It was at her far side, almost hidden behind Eve, only sneakers, a backpack, dark hair and gesticulating hands visible. Eve's preadolescent daughter: Savannah.

A cab waited at the curb, as it did every weekday morning. Eve opened the door and waved her daughter in. The girl paused, hands still moving, relating some story that couldn't be interrupted. Her mother waited, mock exasperated, then playfully shoved her into the taxi the moment she'd finished, and climbed in after her. Savannah had to be nine or ten, old enough to take the cab by herself. And the school was less than a mile away, not an unreasonable distance for a child to walk, but they always took a cab and Eve always went along, then walked back herself, picking up a coffee on the way. It was an unwavering routine that I'd been following for the past week, long enough to reassure me that I now had close to an hour to break into Eve's apartment and confiscate that grimoire.

I waited for a break in traffic, then swung out. At the light, I stopped beside two young women in a sports car, who tried to get my attention. This, however, was one case where my

father's advice about paying attention to people did not apply, and I could, without guilt, pretend I didn't notice them. The driver rolled down the window, calling to me, and I considered employing my surefire method of deflecting unwanted female attention while riding my motorcycle: removing my helmet.

The safety gear necessary for proper use of a motorcycle—a full helmet with tinted visor, bulky leather jacket, gloves and boots—renders one's features and physique invisible, and even the most unlikely male suddenly becomes attractive, a dark, mysterious figure astride a vehicle that symbolizes rebellion and freedom from cultural mores. To destroy that image, I merely need to remove the helmet, and endure the looks of surprise, disappointment, and even, occasionally anger, as if I've committed the unforgivable sin of false advertising.

There had been one time, about a year ago, when I removed the helmet, and the young woman *didn't* flee, but even, after a few moment's hesitation, asked me out to dinner. I'd accepted—out of surprise, I think, and perhaps a healthy dose of that unrelenting optimism. We hadn't even made it through the appetizers before she'd started making "suggestions." Had I considered contact lenses? Perhaps a less generic haircut—something longer . . . or shorter . . . highlights might be nice. And, while I appeared to be in reasonably good physical condition, she knew a friend who swore by protein shakes for bulking up. In short, if I wasn't what she'd hoped I'd be when I removed that helmet, perhaps she rectify that. After dinner I'd begged off with a lie about an overdue paper, walked her to her car and beat a fast retreat.

The light changed, sending the memory skittering away.

I let the sports car get two car lengths ahead of me before zipping into that lane and turning the corner beside Eve Levine's apartment. I'd park a block over. I'd mapped out my route—indeed, every step of this expedition—days ago. Then, yesterday, I'd carried it through

right to the point of opening her front door, then walking through my escape. Overkill, I'm sure but, having never undertaken a break-and-enter before, I was leaving nothing to chance.

First, I had to get through the apartment building front door. Hardly an obstacle, as I'd learned the day before. I hid my jacket, helmet and boots, and changed into flat shoes, then walked to the nearby strip mall, from which I purchased an oversized floral arrangement and affixed a large card with "Congrats!" scrawled across the front. Then I walked to the edge of Eve's apartment building. When I saw a man striding through the lobby, I hurried to the front doors and began struggling, trying to open them while holding the flowers. The man took one look at me—a clean-cut young Latino in a golf shirt carrying flowers—and immediately assumed "delivery boy." He held the door for me with only a laughing comment about dropping them off at apartment 318 for his wife.

Next, I had to get inside Eve's front door. Again, a simple task. She didn't even bother spell-locking her door, as if even that bit of witch magic was beneath her. Perhaps that also bespoke a overreaching confidence, an arrogance even, assuming that anyone who knew she kept valuables like rare grimoires would also know her reputation enough not to attempt to steal them. Whatever the reason, the door had only a basic lock, one easily handled with the skills I'd acquired from a half-demon I'd assisted in a legal matter. Within a few minutes, I was inside Eve's apartment, ready to begin my hunt for her grimoires.

As I expected, Eve's confidence didn't extend to leaving her grimoires in plain sight, or locked in a chest. She'd placed a false back in the bedroom walk-in closet, so it appeared a normal shallow one. It was only upon searching her closet that I realized the trick. I cast a trap-detection spell, but found none, not surprising, I suppose, considering she had a child in the home.

I should have snatched the grimoire and made my escape. That was the plan. However, when confronted with a wall of grimoires, half of which I had never seen, a quarter of which I had never even heard of, I could not resist lingering. The temptation to fill my bag was overwhelming, and as I stood there, salivating like a child before a wall of exotic candies, I couldn't help but think that it was my obligation to remove them. Almost immediately, the impulse shamed me—that I would even consider using the excuse of “doing right” so I might have these spells for myself. In compensation, though, I could not resist permitting myself a glance through several of the books I didn't recognize, if only so I would know if they were something I might wish to seek out elsewhere.

And that's when it happened, as my attention was absorbed by a spell for casting a trap that would knock someone unconscious, the very sort of non-lethal spell that I could see a definite use for. I was poring over the spell, wondering if I had time to jot it into my notebook when I heard a floorboard squeak behind me. My first thought was one of the very sort of arrogant confidence I'd accused Eve of. I heard it creak and thought I might be mistaken because I had cast a perimeter spell at the front door, which was the only viable entry point. Yet even as that assurance flashed through my mind, I had had cause to question the assumption. Perimeter spells were witch magic, which I was not yet proficient in and, although that particular spell was a simple one I had mastered, my rate of success was likely not one hundred percent. It allowed a

margin of error, particularly if my attention had been elsewhere, already roaming Eve's apartment, wondering where she'd hidden her grimoires.

I realized this just in time to grab a grimoire from the shelf, and start shoving it into my bag. Then, at a sound from the doorway, I whirled to see an energy bolt whip past the very space where I'd been standing.

I dove to the side, hands rising in a knockback spell, something simplistic yet easily cast. Still moving, I caught a blur of motion, and thought I'd hit her, but as I wheeled, I saw that she was still standing, having anticipated my move and leapt aside. Her next energy bolt hit me like a high-voltage blast to the gut. Everything went black, a split-second loss of consciousness that ended as I crashed to the floor and jolted awake.

I tried to leap up, but couldn't move, my arms and legs frozen in a binding spell. Eve advanced on me, then stopped a few feet away.

She blinked. "My God, they're right, you do look like your father." She tilted her head for a closer look. "Well, no, you don't really. But at first glance . . . It must be your eyes."

She took a step back. "So, Lucas Cortez. When my neighbors described the young man they'd seen at my door yesterday, I wondered if it could be a Cortez employee. But a Cortez himself? Now that I *didn't* expect."

Neighbor? I cursed myself for my carelessness. So that was why Eve hadn't employed traditional security methods. She'd discovered an inexpensive and, quite possibly more reliable alternative: taking an apartment next door to a bored and nosy retiree. A useful piece of advice I'd do well to remember. For now, though, I had more pressing concerns.

"So what is Lucas Cortez doing stealing one of my grimoires?" she continued.

As she scooped up the book that had fallen from my bag, I wiggled my fingers. They moved, but only barely and with effort, proving that her binding spell was gradually weakening as her concentration wandered. Time to stall . . .

“I’m sorry,” I said, affecting the guise of a sheepish schoolboy. “It was an initiation prank, for my Cabal fraternity. I didn’t want to do it but . . .” A helpless shrug. “Being a Cortez, I don’t get off easy on stuff like that. I know it was stupid, and I’m sorry—”

“You lie almost as well as your father.”

“I *do* apologize—”

“Oh, I’m sure you would apologize . . . if this was a prank. But only Ivy League schools have Cabal fraternities, and unless the rumors are wrong, you don’t attend one of those. So what could you possibly want with this grimoire?” She leafed through it. “No offense intended, but this magic is far too advanced for a twenty-year-old sorcerer.”

I waggled my fingers again. The spell was fading. One good wrench, and I’d break it.

“I—I need the money,” I said, forcing a blush of humiliation. “You’ve probably heard, I’ve cut ties with my father. I’ve tried to make it on my own, I really have, but college is so expensive.” I swallowed. “I just needed a bit of money and someone told me you had more books than you could possibly use, so I thought you wouldn’t miss one—”

She cut me off with a laugh as she tossed the book onto the bed. “My God, you *are* good. As entertaining as it is to watch a budding master of the art of bullshit, I’m going to have to insist you start—”

I hit her with a hard knockback spell, leapt to my feet—

Something hit me in the shoulder, harder even than the energy bolt. As I flew back toward the bookcase, I reached out to catch myself, but her spell was so strong that I still slammed into

the bookcase, my arm cracking, pain ripping through it. I slid to the floor, cradling my broken forearm.

“Oh, shit!”

Eve moved forward and, for a second, I thought she was going to fall to her knees beside me, but then she backed off, cursing. When she wheeled on me, her eyes were hard and cold.

“That changes things, doesn’t it? Do you think I don’t know why you’re here, Lucas Cortez? Do you think I haven’t heard *those* rumors. Fancy yourself some kind of crusader against injustice, do you? Well, you should stick with legal advice, boy, because you’re in way over your head here. What would happen to me if papa Cortez found out I broke your arm? Smartest thing I could do right now? Safest thing?” Her eyes went colder as they met mine. “Finish the job. Dispose of the body.”

I pitched to my feet, and made a headlong run, zigzagging to avoid her spells. I sheered past the bed to grab the grimoire. She lunged to get it first and I changed course, running for the door instead. As she snatched up the book from the bed, I slammed the door, casting a lock spell even as it closed.

Eve grabbed the door handle, turned it, then let out a bark of a laugh.

“Witch magic? You really are your father’s son. Pragmatic to the core. It’ll take me twenty seconds to get out this door, so you’d better have your running shoes on, and I swear, if I ever hear a peep of this from anyone . . .”

I didn’t hear the rest of the threat, already being in the front hall. I threw open the door and raced down the hall. She didn’t follow.

I paced my dormitory room, trying to contain my impatience as I placed the unavoidable call to Victor Tucci.

“Yes,” I said. “I have removed the grimoire from her possession, and have surrendered it to my father, who will deal with Ms Levine”

“And he knows who gave you the tip?”

“Absolutely. He’s grateful to you and will not forget your assistance in this matter.”

As Eve pointed out, I have a facility for falsehoods, a talent both natural and learned. There was little chance of Victor Tucci ever discovering my lie. A man like that only wanted to know he had earned some credit with my father, credit that he would doubtless never use. Even if he was in a position to require such a credit, he would never be allowed the opportunity to redeem it—under such circumstances, his pleas to speak to the Cabal CEO would be denied out of hand.

As for Eve Levine, with regards to my injury, she had nothing to fear. Even had I been inclined to use my position to exact revenge for my arm—which I certainly was not—I retained enough of my family pride to never allow such a thing to happen, to admit that I had been bested by a witch.

I also knew I had no need to fear that Eve would change her mind and come after me. Had she ever intended to “finish the job and dispose of the body,” she’d hardly have told me her plans. Ever the teacher, she’d been imparting a valuable lesson, one that I would remember. I was not prepared for such endeavors. Before I ever attempted such a thing again, I needed to vastly improve my criminal skill-sets.

So the exercise had been a valuable one. More than that, I had experienced my first taste of success. After I hung up with Tucci, I sat on the edge of the bed, my broken arm in a makeshift

sling, and fumbled with my pantleg, tugging it up with my good arm, then holding my leg aloft while I removed the elastics from my calf and let the thin volume fall to the floor.

I reached over and picked up the grimoire. A slender tome containing no more than a dozen spells. As I flipped through, I couldn't even decipher what more than a few of them did. That explained why Eve had stashed it on a high shelf, amidst dusty grimoires, those with magic too difficult even for her advanced skills. Future volumes of study, put aside until she had the time and skill to revisit them. With any luck, by the time that happened, if she did notice this one missing, she'd never connect it with my visit.

I closed the book and tapped it against my legs. What to do with the thing? Considering what sort of magic it was purported to contain, I suppose I should have destroyed it. Yet that seemed almost sacrilegious, and certainly presumptive, to take a book so rare, a piece of history, and burn it because I feared what it could do. My own ancestors had been guilty of a similar crime, so many years ago, setting fire to a form of power they feared: witches.

Yes, the analogy was a poor one, yet could I pass judgment on this book. Should I? A matter that would require more consideration. For now, I had other things to do. First, call a local shaman physician to get my arm set. Then take a three-hour bus ride to retrieve my bike, presuming I could ride it with my arm in a cast. Once that was done, I had a week's work of classes to catch up on.

I found a good hiding spot for the grimoire, put it out of my mind, and reached for my phone book.