



A Healer's Wrath

Author: Casey Morales

Category: Romance, Paranormal, Lesbian Romance

Description: How does a heart brimming with compassion turn to flaming stone?

My name is Irina.

From my earliest memories, my heart longed to follow the path of my parents, to become a healer and give myself to the service of others. When I manifested a Gift, the rare touch of magic, everyone knew I would be special, that I would change the world.

I trained and studied. My life was meant to be a salve to those who suffered.

And then they came.

Everything I loved, everything I dreamed, everything I ever dared to hope was torn from my grasp.

They will pay.

If I must conquer this land to find them, they will writhe beneath my heel.

If it takes a thousand years, they will know my wrath.

A Healer's Wrath is Irina's story, a tale from a thousand years ago, when legends rose and borders fell. It is the prequel to An Archer's Awakening, the first book in bestselling author Casey Morales's mm romantasy series, Of Crowns & Quills.

Please note: While the series features a heartwarming, slow-burn mm romance, this is Irina's story, how she rose to fame and became the powerful enemy who threatens all in the core series. There are no mm romance storylines in Irina's tale.

Total Pages (Source): 42

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

Chapter one

Irina

I stared up at the infirmary's towering double doors. I'd dreamed of following in my parents' footsteps since I was old enough to watch them work. They weren't famous. Few within the halls of power would ever know their names. And yet, my mother and father were among the many physikers who tended everyday wounds of ordinary folk across the Kingdom.

At twelve summers of life, I stood trembling before the hallowed halls of the capital's most prestigious infirmary, the Royal Medica. I could hardly believe the day had arrived.

"This is your door to open, 'Rina," my father said as he placed a gentle hand on my back. "Remember, you won't be alone. There are other apprentices starting with Master Rist today. You'll have friends to help you through this."

My eyes rose, drinking in the white marbled façade of the massive building. Black swirls of the stone's veins flowed like calming brooks through fields of snow. An ancient etching of the Phoenix hovered above the door, its gilding flawless and glittering despite centuries of exposure to harsh Kingdom winters.

As I reached for the bronze handle, the door flew open to reveal a thin boy whose eyes were as wild as his unruly brown hair. He took one look at me, made an odd yelping sound, and ran back into the building, slamming the door behind him.

“Is that one of my new friends?” I asked, blinking at the door that had almost smacked me in the nose.

My mother chuckled. “Maybe he’s shy.”

A moment later, the door opened again. This time, an old man in thick, round spectacles with lenses so small they barely covered his eyes stood before us. The man looked as wide as he was tall, causing the buttons on his pale blue smock to strain against the threads that bound them to the fabric.

“Hello, Irina. Don’t be shy. Come in and meet your fellow apprentices. Parents, I shouldn’t see or hear from you for another week. Is that understood? Now shoo.” He waved a dismissive hand toward Mother and Father.

I turned, expecting to see outrage from my parents at the week-long ban but found only grins and nods of acceptance. Then I remembered they had both been apprentices long ago. They knew what to expect. Why hadn’t they prepared me for this? They could’ve said something, anything. Annoyed, I crossed my arms and turned back to face my new Master.

“Deep breath, Irina,” Master Rist said more warmly than before as he beckoned me forward. “Your mother tells me you have quite the aptitude for learning and memory. We’ll test both straightaway.”

Then the door slammed shut behind me.

Chapter two

Irina

Master Rist never looked back as he led me through a series of winding hallways.

The sound of chatter drifted from behind many of the doors, but we didn't pass a single person as we ventured through the building that proved much longer than I'd thought possible while staring at it from the front. Rist stopped before an unremarkable wooden door.

"Irina, the first thing any physiker does when confronted with a patient is assess. We look, sniff, poke, prod, and a hundred other things. We do the same with new apprentices." The Master's wispy brows fluttered as air breathed through the crack between the door and its frame. "Today, you are my patient, and I will be assessing your mind."

He smiled and threw open the door, then stood aside and motioned for me to enter before him. I'm not sure what I expected. His grand gesture had me conjuring images of examination tables, shelves lined with shimmering vials, or chairs for working teeth. What greeted me was a lone rickety school desk and an even less sturdy chair. The window set into the far wall stood open, allowing a pleasant breeze to drift through the room.

"Take your seat, please," the Master said as he drifted around to the only other furniture in the empty chamber, a large leather chair and a small side table. Atop the table, two oil lamps burned brightly. "You can read and write, yes?"

I nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Excellent." He reached into his smock and retrieved a scroll bound by a simple strand of leather. "We will start with some basic arithmetic. From the moment you remove the binding, you have until the sand runs out to complete the exercise."

He handed me the scroll, then reached to the table and passed me a lamp. A small hourglass sat hidden behind. He raised the timepiece and waited.

I looked down at the scroll, at how it shook in my hand. I wanted to become a physiker more than anything, but no one had told me about a test on my first day. What if I failed? Would there be another chance? Would my parents still be proud if I returned home before even sitting for my first lesson?

Questions battered my mind as I struggled to keep my heart from beating out of my chest.

“Irina, whenever you’re ready, just remove the leather,” Rist prodded.

I glanced up. His eyes remained kind, yet firm.

I sucked in a deep breath and slipped the leather free.

The thud of the hourglass hitting the table startled me.

“Go on, then. Time waits for no one,” Rist said, settling into his chair with his eyes glued to me like some predator waiting to pounce.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

There were only ten questions on the parchment. Each involved a real-world scenario in which formulae required calculation or compounds needed to be mixed in precise amounts. As I stared at the page, reading each question before beginning my work, I was grateful for the endless hours my parents had drilled me on mathematics and its application to the healing arts.

How did others who did not grow up in the home of physikers pass these tests?

With half the sand remaining in the upper bowl, I startled Master Rist awake with a poke of the rerolled scroll.

“Sir?”

“What? Is everything—?” He jolted upright. “Ah, yes, Irina. Forgive me. I must have drifted off.”

He glanced at the hourglass. His eyes, distorted by his lenses, widened to comedic proportions.

“Are you sure you want to hand that in? You still have ten minutes.”

My bony shoulders raised. “I’m done. It wasn’t very hard.”

Strands of hair drifted in every direction as his brows rose, then he took the scroll. Unfurling it, he scanned one question after the next.

“My dear, this is excellent. Truly excellent,” he said.

“Thank you, sir.”

He rolled the scroll, tapped it on the hourglass, then peered up at me. “What was the name of the farmer in the fourth question?”

“Sir?”

“You heard me. In question four, what was the farmer’s name?”

“Cedric, sir. What does—?”

“And the name of the potter in question nine?”

I blinked. “Anders, sir.”

His brows bunched but still drifted on the breeze. “And what ailment would cause the symptoms described in question two?”

I tilted my head to the side. The question had only stated the patient’s symptoms, height, and approximate weight. It required me to calculate the amounts of each ingredient listed. There was no mention of the underlying illness. But I had spent so many days watching Mother and Father as they tended sick and injured, ticking through a list of symptoms felt familiar, comfortable even.

“Well, sir”—I stared into the emptiness of the far wall—“the patient suffered from aches in his stomach, cramping, and an inability to pass waste. There was no mention of fevers or sweating, no note about dilation of the pupils or changes in the skin. The ingredients suggested for the cure were chamomile, lavender or sage, garlic, and water.”

I thought a moment.

“I believe the patient suffered from constipation and some form of mild stomach upset, perhaps caused by consumption of sour milk or other ruined food. The physiker likely added the garlic as a precaution, not necessarily to treat what the patient presented.”

“Is that all?” Rist scratched his chin and stared.

The Master was goading me. It was good-natured, for sure, and I didn’t think he expected an answer. I gave him one anyway. “I would suggest adding elderberry. In addition to being another preventative, should the patient suffer from some germ-related ailment, this might also make the potion taste better for the patient. The original combination would be quite foul going down.”

Rist’s rumbling laugh startled me.

“That it would.” He rose, struggling to unwedge his girth from the narrow chair. “Irina, you answered every question correctly, but what amazes me is how you recalled everything with such clarity. How old are you, child?”

“Twelve, sir,” I answered, my swelling pride from his praise warring with a perpetual fear of judgement.

“Twelve.” He shook his head, repeating the number more to himself than to me. “All right. You did well in your first test. Follow me, and we’ll see how you fare in more practical exams.”

I followed the Master into the hallway, where he led me back toward the front of the building before entering what looked like an empty patient examination room. A long metal table stretched at the center of the room. On the wall nearest the door, several rows of shelves held bottles and jars with neat lettering pointing outward. Below the shelves was a countertop on which physikers’ equipment lay spread and ready for

use.

“Have a seat.” Master Rist motioned to the two wooden chairs whose backs were pressed against the far wall.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

The Master spent the next hour pulling one bottle after another off the shelves, hiding the labels, and asking me to identify the contents by look and smell. He occasionally lifted a metal instrument and asked its name or use.

If I closed my eyes, I could imagine the pudgy man to be my mother, as she often played the same game before opening her doors to patients. By the time I was seven or eight summers old, I could name every unction and ointment in her care.

By the time the Master had exhausted the final bottle, any nervousness I'd felt earlier in the day had drifted away. His tests were easy compared to the daily drilling I received at home.

Then Rist asked a question that left my mouth agape.

"How would you use magic to assist in healing?" He adjusted his spectacles and waited .

"I, uh, I wouldn't . . . sir."

He lifted his brows. "And why not?"

"Well, Master, I don't have any magic."

He glared so long I began to fidget beneath his gaze. Then he stepped forward and held out his meaty palm. "Give me your hand."

The jumble of nerves I thought long settled decided to dance a jig in my chest as my

slender fingers fell against his.

He laid his other hand atop mine and closed his eyes.

If he'd had a golden collar, I might have thought he was using magic to search for something. It looked like what I had seen Mages do when they visited the capital seeking the rare few who might have been born with magical abilities.

In all the times we had watched them test in public, never once had a Mage discovered another of their own.

Master Rist was not one of them.

His eyes opened, and he gave me a fatherly smile. "I feel nothing, child—not that I expected to. Spirits, I am not even sure what I thought I might feel, having no magic myself."

"Then why try to find it in me?"

He chuckled, sounding more like the rumbling of a blacksmith's bellows waking from a winter's slumber. "Because I am a foolish old man."

He patted my hand and stepped back.

"Right, then, no magic. Such a shame, especially for one with your gift of intellect."

My head lowered, as though I'd just failed one of his tests.

Rist's voice softened as he asked, "Why do you want to study healing?"

I looked up and studied his eyes. Of all the questions he asked that day, that was the

one that surprised me. It seemed so simple, so obvious; and yet, asked aloud, it loomed overhead like a specter threatening to envelop and consume.

“Because . . . I want to help people . . . like my parents.”

He nodded. “And how would you like to help people?”

“Healers make people feel better. They take away aches and pains. They give people happiness. No one makes people smile like Father. I want to give them that, to give people their smiles back.”

He stared for another eternity, then his lips curled and he nodded, as if deciding something. Then the old man turned and stepped toward the door. As his hand found the handle, he looked back and said, “If you study and apply yourself, you will be the best of us, Irina Santender. You mark my words.”

Chapter three

Irina

As a candidate for apprenticeship, I knew I should have been nervous about the Master’s probing of my knowledge. The amount of understanding required to earn a blue smock was daunting and required years, if not lifetimes, of study. I had never spent time with other apprentices, but Father said that, while many entered a Master’s service, few earned their smock. The success rate alone should have sparked fear in my young heart, but healing lived in our home. It was part of our lives and had been since I was old enough to speak my own name. Mother and Father had likely drilled years of training into my head without me even realizing it. The Master’s tests were simple by comparison to their ceaseless prodding.

Despite the advantage my parents afforded, I tried to answer with sincerity and

humility, two traits Mother said were more important to a physiker than any potion or tool. Was I proud of my knowledge? Did I enjoy confounding the Master and his questions? Absolutely, yet I also knew enough to understand just how little I understood.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

I suppose that was a lesson in itself.

This was also the first time I had ever left home. My whole world revolved around Mother and Father. We were rarely apart. I had never even slept under another roof without my parents in a room nearby. As we bounced from one examination room to the next, I couldn't help wondering if the Master's infirmary would ever feel like home.

And then there was the Master himself.

He seemed nice enough, but Rist was five times my age and a relative stranger. I'd met him a few times while attending various gatherings with my parents, but he had barely acknowledged my presence.

Now, I was the center of his attention.

Now, I was in his care.

Oddly, as I trailed my fingers along the stone walls of the hallway, I felt no fear at being separated from Mother and Father. I wasn't some jumble of nerves or filled with gloom about being on my own. I felt only anticipation for what lay ahead.

When we finished, Rist did not conclude the tests. He never said, "We're finished," or "Nicely done. That ends your exams." He simply opened the door, glanced back, and said, "Follow me," then led me down the eternal hallway to the far end of the building. As we stepped into yet another chamber, I froze in the doorway, a jolt of childish alarm stilling my heart.

Seated along a rectangular table at the center of a large room, spooning a brothy stew and chatting, were two boys and a girl, each wearing the white smock of an apprentice. Rist waddled around the table toward a counter on the opposite wall, where he ladled stew from a large iron pot.

The others ignored their Master, just as he had shunned them in favor of his dinner.

Conversation died as the trio turned and stared at me.

“Hullo,” a foppish boy sitting nearest to the door said, raising his spoon as if to wave. I knew apprentices were not admitted before their twelfth summer, but the boy was a scrawny thing I doubted would rise to my shoulder when he stood. He reminded me of the brother I never had but always pictured in my mind. The awkward innocence in his eyes made me smile.

I lifted my hand in a sheepish wave. “Hi.”

“Don’t just stand there. Come and eat. Get to know the others,” Rist said as he settled himself into a chair at the end of the table. When I didn’t budge, he motioned toward the young boy who’d greeted me. “Colin, this is Irina. Please introduce everyone?”

“Yes, Master Rist,” Colin said, scooting his chair back to stand. “Want some stew? It’s pretty good tonight.”

My stomach growled in reply.

“That’s Finn,” he said, pointing to the other boy who could’ve been his older brother. Both had curly brown hair and eyes so round they looked perpetually surprised.

Finn grunted through a mouthful and bobbed his chin in greeting.

Then Colin motioned to the girl, the elder among us, four or five summers beyond me. Her straight blond hair hung well past her shoulders and shimmered in the lamplight. She sat straight in her chair. “That’s Siena. She’s the senior apprentice.”

I smiled, glad to see another girl in the Master’s care.

She neither waved nor nodded. There was no warmth in her eyes or greeting on her lips. She barely acknowledged my presence.

Colin walked me to the counter, climbed a step stool, and dished some of the meaty broth into a bowl.

“Spoons are over there, cups and water at the end.” Curls cascaded as he motioned to the far end of the counter with a tilt of his head. Then he leaned toward me, still at eye level thanks to the stool, and whispered, “Don’t let Siena scare you. She is always mad.”

Despite everything, I giggled.

It only took a few days to catch onto the Medica’s steady routine, though I feared far more time would be required to understand the dynamics at play between my fellow apprentices. Colin was the easiest. Though we were of the same age, he acted with the maturity of a boy several years younger. His eyes widened each time Master Rist taught something new, and he cried so easily I wondered if he might shatter into a thousand pieces if someone nudged him a bit too hard. Despite his frailty, Colin’s easy smile was infectious, and I found myself caring for him as I might a brother.

Finn was not as transparent as Colin, though he was not very clever. A handsome lad with rich brown curls and even deeper eyes, he was nice enough and had an easy humor that made him hard to dislike. I caught myself smiling and staring each time he entered a room.

Unfortunately, Finn knew the effect his charisma and sparkling smile had on people. He strutted like a peacock, as though a subtle grin or wink might win him favors. Unfortunately, no amount of charm could make up for how he struggled to retain information.

Master Rist had none of it, demanding lengthy study sessions and additional tests to ensure important facts and formulae stuck in the boy's head. And yet, all the memorization in the world could not overcome his lack of comprehension regarding the application of information he learned. He was a pretty flame, but his wick would never burn brightly.

I knew he would never have been accepted into the Medica without strong recommendations and even better entrance scores; still, I doubted he would rise beyond a middling physiker, if he was lucky enough to graduate his apprenticeship.

Siena was, by far, the most complex—and infuriating—girl I had ever met.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

Like Finn, she knew too well how her golden hair and smile turned men's legs to jelly. It didn't matter if they were boys of Colin's youth or men as old and round as Rist, all she needed was one coquettish flutter of her lashes, and they were hers to command. From what I saw, she enjoyed ensnaring them, too, wielding her vixen's prowess like a swordsman swings a blade.

Worse, she was brilliant, grasping even the most complex concepts the moment they left the Master's lips; while the rest of us required multiple retellings and even more practical examples to absorb whatever principles were involved. Siena rarely studied, as new recipes for potions or unguents buried themselves in her brain.

I would have admired her if she hadn't flaunted her genius as often as she flicked her stupid hair.

I tried—quite unsuccessfully—to win her over with gentleness and praise. She was everything I dreamed of becoming: smart, clever, strong, and sure. On top of everything, she was beautiful—and not simply pretty for a rural girl raised among boys. No, she was that girl who made minstrels falter the moment she entered the dance floor. The Spirits had granted her every quality one might dream of, save one—humility.

I didn't understand why Siena sneered when our eyes met.

And so I loathed her presence almost as much as she shunned mine.

This dynamic blazed like sunlight beneath a glass when it became clear my own knowledge, hard won through years of learning at my parents' sides, nearly matched

her own—and I was five summers her junior and a newcomer in the Medica. Venom swirled in her eyes whenever Master Rist praised my answers before the others. I felt her gaze burning holes in the back of my smock.

For his part, our Master was stern yet gentle, severe yet kind, demanding yet understanding. He was what one hoped for in a teacher—and everything one feared when we failed to meet his expectations. Our youth mattered little to his instruction; and yet, when candles burned low, he often told stories or jokes to let us dream and laugh.

Each day, Colin and I sat through a lecture with Master Rist. Most of our first year was consumed with memorizing all the bones, muscles, and other parts of the body.

Some days, the lecture was brief.

On one such occasion, as Colin and I sat quietly around the table where we took our meals, Master Rist rushed into the room, his hair sticking up in every direction, and huffed, “Memorize everything from pages twenty-four through twenty-eight.” Before we could think to ask if there would be an exam at the end of the day, he bustled through the door and was not seen again until the next morning.

It was more common that the Master’s lectures began at sunrise and rambled until patients demanded his attention.

While we studied or listened to lectures, Siena and Finn prepared the exam rooms for the day’s patients. If the first folk to enter bore minor injuries or simple illnesses, Siena would tend them without the Master’s supervision. Anything more challenging than a runny nose required our rotund leader’s personal touch.

The closest Colin and I came to a patient during our first year was accidentally entering an exam room too early. When not studying, our primary job was to clean

and reset the exam rooms. We were never to interact with patients or engage in speculation. Colin took these instructions in stride, but I missed the days when my father let me sing to children or make some grandmother smile. I missed getting to hear the questions he asked and watch how he treated various illnesses. Most of all, I missed being around people older than my substitute baby brother.

Our first year passed slowly.

So slowly.

There are only so many parts of the body to memorize, and few of them sparked excitement when viewed on the yellowed pages of an ancient tome.

In my sixth month, I was granted the opportunity to sit for my one-year examination. The Master formed a testing panel consisting of Finn, Siena, and himself. The questions began simply enough.

“Name the bones of the hand,” Rist demanded.

“What are the muscles along the back of the leg called?” Finn asked.

And so it went.

Around the fourth hour of questioning, as we resumed following a heavy meal of meat and cheese, Master Rist’s eyes fluttered closed, leaving the others to lead the questioning.

“A patient presents with a high fever, chills, and swollen lymph nodes. What would be your diagnosis and recommended treatment?” Siena asked.

Finn’s head snapped up, and he glared almost as intently at her as I did.

“That isn’t an anatomy question,” I said, crossing my arms. “That isn’t even a second-year question, is it?”

“When you sit on this side, you get to choose the questions.” Siena cocked a brow and raised her quill. “Should we mark this as a miss? I hear no objection from Master Rist.”

She glanced to where the Master snored.

I tried to keep the fires in my eyes from blazing across the room, but the smug set to Siena’s mouth made that impossible.

I decided to fight in the best way I knew, to answer her stupid question.

“The symptoms, as described, could be several things, from a simple catarrh or imbalance of humors, though one would expect a runny nose or cough to accompany such a diagnosis. Absent those, these symptoms could indicate presence of the Black Death, an unlikely case, as the blackness has not been seen in the Kingdom in centuries.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

“Treatment?” Siena tapped her quill against her parchment. I sighed. “Immediate isolation, an unguent of garlic, aloe, and myrrh. Some suggest a potion of dried toad to draw out toxins and reduce swelling of the organs.”

Finn shifted in his seat, though I wasn’t sure if it was from the question or my ready explanation.

“Are those the only treatments?” Siena pressed.

She was relentless.

“One might try bloodletting, though I believe that to be a waste of time and blood, almost as useless as a posset.”

Siena leaned forward. “You doubt the efficacy of possets?”

I didn’t mean to laugh. It just flew out. “You think spoiled milk and ale helps illness? It is more likely a recipe for an upset stomach and an angry patient.”

Siena made a mark on her parchment—then another on top of the first.

“Was that an ‘X’ on that question?” I was livid.

She nodded. “You failed to mention theriac, which is a commonly accepted antidote to plague or poison. You also left out prayer, which I am sure our divine brothers would find objectionable.”

“Master!” I shouted loud enough to rouse our drowsy leader.

“Wha—what? Where are we? Arteries? Have we finished—”

“Master,” I said, before Siena could spin a tale, “I challenge the last question, as well as a number of others asked while you were, um, indisposed.”

“Challenge? Questions? Dear girl, really?”

I nodded. “Master Rist, I declare an official challenge.”

His bushy brows furrowed as his lips smacked together a few times and blinked away sleep. “Fine, apprentice. Challenge recorded. Read the questions in—well, in question.”

His lack of formality would’ve been funny if I hadn’t been so angry.

Six of Siena’s questions were stricken despite the fact that I answered four correctly.

Two hours later, with over four hundred questions asked, I had missed a grand total of eight, three of which were Siena’s discarded queries.

“Congratulations, Apprentice Irina. I have never had an apprentice advance so quickly.” Rist beamed as he draped a new white smock adorned with two sky blue bars on one sleeve across my shoulders.

As I slid my arms into the garment and smiled up at Rist, Finn and Siena caught my eye from over his shoulder.

Siena sneered, unable to grant me credit for even a brief moment.

Finn didn't meet my gaze, as his eyes were fixed on his shoes. I wondered at his reaction until I noted the two bars on his sleeves—despite him being three years my senior.

Six months later, when my first full year came to a close, Colin faced the same firing squad I had encountered. I was allowed to observe, though midway through the questions, I dreamed of being anywhere but in that chamber with my flailing friend. As he answered less than half correctly, Master Rist reclaimed the boy's smock and ushered him to the front where his parents waited.

I leaned against the cold stone of the hallway as Colin pried himself from his mother's arms and turned back toward me. As our eyes met, he raised his hand to wave, just as he'd done on my first day—though this time, I saw no joy on his face.

That was the last time I saw my friend.

Chapter four

Irina

My thirteenth summer began as my second year in Master Rist's apprenticeship trudged along. Time did not move differently; it still felt like wading barefoot through a pond of syrup. Each morning, I would meet him in his study, where he would give me a reading assignment. While he and the others tended patients, I studied alone. Every twenty or thirty minutes, Finn or Siena would appear in the doorway with instructions on which exam rooms needed cleaning. Near the end of each day, if the flow of patients allowed, the Master would return to his study and drill me on whatever lesson I was supposed to learn.

The whole thing felt more like self-study with some indentured servitude mixed in than tutelage.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

I missed Colin, and that surprised me. The boy was afraid of his own shadow but could be funny, in his own way. He wasn't fortunate enough to have physiker parents, so his knowledge lagged far behind mine. Still, that had given me the opportunity to mentor him; and I recognized that nothing reinforces lessons like having to teach someone else.

More than anything, the boy had kept me company.

But I wasn't sad.

Learning to become a physiker was my dream—and what girl in this man's world got to live her dream? Most toiled in their homes beside bone-tired mothers—or worse, in a field with weathered fathers. I worked, but it was of an entirely different sort.

My labor was aimed at a goal.

My efforts would one day be rewarded with a life for which most could only wish.

Still, spending my days alone made them feel longer and far lonelier.

My third year was one of great change.

My studies shifted, and I spent only about half of each day with my nose in a book or scroll, while the rest was dedicated to observing either Master Rist or Siena caring for patents. Finn was still not allowed to see patients on his own, but he assisted in minor treatments while I stood in a corner and watched.

It felt so strange. I grew up watching Mother or Father tend to even serious wounds. The simple therapies I now observed were nothing compared to those of my formative years. And yet, there was something new and gratifying about standing by as Master Rist worked his art. The two-year hiatus from working with patients gave me a new appreciation—or perhaps a new understanding—of the preciousness of life and how it must be tended.

As much as I learned, and despite all I'd already known, watching one of the Kingdom's greatest physikers in action humbled me in ways no book or exam ever could. It didn't matter if the patient before our Master suffered from fevers or had broken a limb, he knew exactly what to do. He asked so many questions and listened attentively, but he never hesitated once a diagnosis was clear.

But it wasn't his knowledge or application of cures that brought wonder to my eyes; it was the very way of the man. It was his manner and how he wrapped each man or woman in the warmth of his presence. Rist's gentle touch, his easy smile, the way he joked or teased with the most guarded of children—he reminded me of my parents and how their voices could calm even the most anxious patient. Were all physikers so compassionate? Was their demeanor as vital as whatever elixir they prescribed?

Midway through that year, we were summoned to the Palace. No one would tell us why. Master Rist ordered our smocks cleaned and pressed, then instructed us to meet him outside the front door at noon. We watched in confusion as he bolted the door and hung a sign on a hook that read, "Away on His Majesty's Business."

We were ushered into the Throne Room, a long hall with majestic columns that climbed higher than I could see. On a three-tiered dais at the end of the room, the royal couple sat on ornate thrones. A flock of advisors and ladies in waiting flanked the monarchs on the steps below.

As the castellan halted a dozen feet before the bottom step, bowing deeply, I realized

we were not called to attend some royal malady. This was an official audience.

No one spoke.

I could barely breathe.

The King glared down, his eyes impassive, his face stone.

Queen Asin ended the silence, releasing her husband's hand and rising. She was striking, standing as tall as the King but with the beauty and grace of a goddess.

"Master Bernard Rist, attend me," she said as she descended the first tier to stop on the second and extend her hand.

Master Rist waddled forward, his head bowed, until he struggled to his knees on the top step of the first tier. Taking the Queen's hand, he pressed his lips to her skin, then rested his forehead where his lips had been.

I could not hear the words they exchanged, but the Queen's smile deepened as they spoke, and I swear the King's lips quirked upward.

Then the Queen withdrew her hand. "Master Rist, rise and stand with me, please."

"Forgive my knees, Majesty," he said just loud enough for us to hear, and my jaw nearly hit the marble stones when Queen Asin reached out and braced the Master as he straightened and took his place one step down and to her right.

"Senior Apprentice Siena Clera, attend me," Queen Asin said.

I snuck a glance to find Siena and Finn gaping as openly as I had only a moment before.

Siena stood frozen so long the Queen had to lift a brow to move her from her spot. When the apprentice kneeled before her Queen, Asin did not release her hand or allow her to stand, but spoke in a clear voice for all to hear.

“Siena Clera, the Crown has learned of your deeds.”

“Your Majesty—?” Siena looked up.

The Queen silenced her with a glare.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

“You have been apprenticed in the Medica for a decade. You have studied diligently and served your Master with distinction. In this, you have served the Crown and our Kingdom, as well.” It felt as though the Throne Room breathed beneath those words. Siena’s shoulders relaxed, and Master Rist broke into a wide smile. The light of the braziers was spotty where he stood, but I caught a hint of moisture in his eyes, too.

“By order of His Majesty, from this day forth, you are apprentice no longer.”

A page appeared beside the Queen and handed her a bundle. She unfurled a beautiful blue smock with the royal crest stitched on the upper left.

“Rise, Physiker Siena Clera, and take on the mantle of a healer of the realm.”

For the first time in the years I’d known her, Siena’s hands shook, and I saw something other than loathing cross her face. If I hadn’t known her so well, I would’ve thought the girl felt joy—or whatever came closest to that emotion in her dim heart.

The Queen helped Siena remove her white smock and don her Blues.

Rist lost his battle with the moisture.

Finn muttered, “Well, bugger me.”

And, despite the gulf that forever widened between Siena and me each time we stepped into the same room, pride swelled in my chest. She might have been cold as the stones beneath our feet, but Siena was one of us—and she was the first to

graduate to the level of physiker in many years.

I turned sixteen in my fourth year.

I worked eleven hours by Master Rist's side, seeing one patient after the next. Spring might bring flowers and renew life, but it also brought a wave of seasonal illness that kept every physiker west of the Spires running at a hectic pace.

The Master instructed me to clear down our work area before he raced a few blocks away to make one last call. We had yet to take on any younger apprentices, so the task of resetting exam rooms still fell to me.

I pulled stretchy gloves up to my elbows and began pouring the pungent cleaning liquid onto a rag. After so many years working in the infirmary, I thought I might be used to the smell, but my nose still wrinkled every time I opened the brown bottle.

I startled as thunder clapped in the distance and the shudders rattled. Cleaner splashed onto the floor. I looked up to see a deluge of rain battering the window's panes, blowing sideways on the angry wind. I clucked my tongue at my own skittishness, calmed myself, and returned to scrubbing.

A few moments later, a voice screamed above the storm's wrath.

"Help! Somebody, come quick! It's Master Rist. Spirits, help me, please!"

The Master?

My mind tore free from the day's mundane tasks as white-hot fear shot up my spine.

I tossed the rag onto the exam table, tore off my gloves, and raced down the hallway as fast as I could run. When I burst into the receiving room, I could barely process

what I saw. Master Rist lay sprawled on the floor, his light blue smock now a quilt of crimson, blue, and black splayed around his body. Blood seeped from a gash on his forehead, and a sea of the stuff pooled on the cold stone beneath.

A piece of jagged wood jutted out of his torso.

“What happened?” I barked, biting back the panic that strummed within, desperate for the physiker’s calm to claim me.

A water-logged Constable spoke in rapid, clipped words that pricked my skin like briars in a wood. “We were headed back from his last call. The storm grew bad. Several wagons blew into each other on the road nearby, and that wood broke free. The Master was crossing the street when it all happened.” The man gaped in wide-eyed wonder as he pointed to the wood jutting out of Rist’s chest. “What do we do with that?”

I threw myself to the ground, my knees cracking painfully against the tile, and pointed down the hallway. “Go get my bag from the last exam room on the right. We need cloth and cleaning liquids for his head. And call for Siena and Finn.”

The other apprentices had left after the last patient, intent on enjoying a pint or three before the sun slept. Hoping either might hear the Constable’s cries was foolish, but I had little else with which to work than desperate hope.

The Constable stood frozen. “But that wood—”

“Go!” I shouted, mustering the command I’d heard so often in my father’s voice.

The man’s storm-soaked shoes squished down the hall as I turned back to Rist. Gripping scissors in my shaking hand, I cut away his precious smock, tossing the fabric aside to better see the spear jutting out of his flesh. The wood was about the

width of my wrist. The jagged shard rising from his chest had splintered, and I worried how many fragments now lodged inside my Master and what parts they might have pierced.

I reached under him, probing his back, but couldn't feel an exit wound.

Rist groaned as I removed my hand.

“Master, can you hear me?”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

His eyes fluttered open, but they roamed past my face, unseeing through a haze of pain and delirium. He passed out as quickly as he'd woken.

"Hurry up!" I shouted, my own panic rising.

"I'm coming," I heard from down the hall.

As I looked closer at the wound, I realized this was far more complex than any injury I'd treated. If something like this came in the door, Rist might let me observe, but I would not be allowed to so much as assist with treatment. Siena, in her freshly minted Blues, might not have been allowed to touch such a patient.

My mind raced.

I had no idea where to begin.

If I pulled the wood out, he could bleed out.

But I couldn't just leave a spike inside a man. He'd die just as easily from that.

I probed the skin around the entry, and blood raced to the surface and coated my fingers. My teacher was dying in front of my eyes, and I had no clue how to save him.

In that moment of terror, two things happened.

First, the Constable returned and dumped the bag of bottles, cloths, and equipment to

the floor beside me with a loud thud. I barely heard it over my own thundering heartbeat and the raging storm outside.

Then, an uncontrollable heat rose within me. It felt like the sun rising above the Spires, a dim glow at first that grew into a blazing heat that warmed all it touched.

Light blossomed in my palms.

The Constable staggered back and yelled something.

The Light was blinding—and beautiful. It begged to . . . to be released.

Without a thought, I did the last thing any physiker should do: I gripped the wood with one hand, pulled it free from Rist's chest, and tossed it aside. Blood exploded from the gaping wound. What stones lay untouched were drenched. My smock turned from white to red in an instant. I tasted bitter copper on my tongue.

Rist's face lost all color, as though the blood spurting out had stolen his very life.

The glow from my other palm flared, and Light surged into the wound, a river undammed and raging toward the sea. Rist's body lurched, his chest arched high, and he moaned so loudly I was sure the whole city heard his cry.

I gaped.

Was I helping or killing him?

I couldn't tell—but the Light didn't care. It thundered out of me, untamed, uncontrolled.

Everywhere blood marred skin, the Light flowed.

Master Rist began to glow.

Time froze, yet somehow crept forward. I hovered over Rist's limp form, magic coursing out of my spirit into his. I had no idea how to use whatever power flowed through me, so I squeezed my eyes shut and uttered a prayer to the Spirits for guidance.

As if in celestial reply, an image formed in my mind, a vision of the inside of a man's chest. Desperate, I imagined my hands moving from one injury to the next. I cleaned, mended, sewed, and drained, over and over in my mind's eye, until the cavity appeared as perfect and whole as was illustrated in Rist's books. Then I drew the skin across the chest and sewed it closed with threads of glistening Light.

My eyes opened wide, and I gasped as the wound on Rist's forehead sealed, leaving no trace of any injury save the blood staining his skin. When the glow faded, the gash in Rist's chest was replaced by a pink line of newly formed skin.

I had no idea how long the Light had consumed me. It had felt like only moments—and lifetimes, as well.

I looked up to find the Constable slumped against the far wall, his eyes wide and mouth agape. Finn sat beside him, his expression the same. Siena stood opposite, arms crossed, glaring down, her face an unreadable mask.

Exhaustion overtook every other sensation.

I slumped to the floor, and unconsciousness took me.

Chapter five

Johann

I stared into a rippling pool of water. Images shifted as rapidly as I could blink. My brow creased in concentration—and frustration—as I gripped the rim of the silver basin and tried to keep up.

“Johann, you were never very skilled at scrying.” The gentle voice was followed by an even gentler hand on my shoulder. “Why don’t you let me help you?”

I looked up, and the water’s surface stilled. The man who stood before me looked like every Mage in every children’s storybook I had ever read. With his velveteen robe with golden trim, the snowy beard flowing past his belt, his weathered skin, and omniscient, twinkling eyes, he could have been one of a hundred men of legend. He was likely the source of many—though few would ever know it.

I smiled and gripped the hand still resting on my shoulder. “Gareth, it is good to see you. Thank you for coming so quickly.”

“Your message left little room for debate. A new Mage? It has been many years since we added to our number. The chickens will cluck over this.” Gareth grinned and wiggled his bushy brows. “It has taken how long for our new Mage to discover her power? Ten, twelve years?”

“Sixteen.”

“So long as that?” Gareth whistled, shifting his gaze to the bowl. “Did you find her?”

“You know how I bloody hate scrying. Give me a good battle where I can hurl fire or lance someone with ice. This . . .” I waved a hand at the bowl. “This feels too much like research.”

Gareth chuckled. “Step aside, Grand Mage. Watch as your humble servant shows you the power of research.”

I grinned as I stepped aside, and Gareth stepped up to the bowl and gripped its sides. It was odd, seeing the age spots and lines that crisscrossed my mentor’s hands. He had been the first of Magi to greet me upon my magic’s arrival a thousand years ago. Even then, he looked ancient. Where his hair was the color of untouched snow, mine still ran inky as night. Where his skin sagged, mine remained taut across corded muscles. While I appeared as a man of thirty summers, Gareth could easily be my grandfather, perhaps great-grandfather, to mortal eyes.

And yet, I only saw my friend before me.

As Gareth’s gaze reached the pool, a crisp, steady image snapped to the water’s surface. Only a ripple disturbed the vision.

“Stone house. Young couple, both wearing the blue smock of a physiker. Snow covers the ground.” Gareth released the bowl, and the image winked out, leaving water so clear I could see the silver of the basin’s bottom. “I’m sorry, Johann. I can feel them somewhere west of us, but that is the best we are going to get. That house could be in the capital, on a farm, or in any of the villages dotting the coast.”

A gong sounded from somewhere far above, startling both of us.

“Looks like the others are arriving. Thank you for trying, old friend,” I said, patting

Gareth's shoulder. "Walk with me to the Chamber to greet our brothers and sisters."

I led Gareth down a series of hallways to stand before a set of gleaming double doors. A stylized rendering of the Phoenix stared down from deeply etched bronze. Magic flowed along its lines, and its emerald eyes glowed in greeting.

I placed my palm on a metal plaque to the right of the door. The Phoenix's eyes pulsed, and the doors swung inward.

Gareth stepped around me and entered.

"As long as I've lived, this never gets old." His voice was filled with childlike awe as he took in the Chamber.

A massive hall stood empty before us, as long as a dozen homes pressed together. Massive columns the color of the ocean's depths stretched skyward. Liquid magic flowed upward along marbled lines, giving the columns a sense of life and perpetual motion while casting a mystical glow about the room.

Ten high-back chairs stared across a vast circle of gold inlaid in the floor. Within that circle was a square of pure silver. The square contained another circle, again of gold. The symbol glittered and swirled as my foot breached its outer perimeter.

Gareth stepped forward and placed a hand on the back of his seat, a monstrous gilded throne with ornate carvings and plush violet cushions.

"I love this place, but that circle makes my skin crawl," Gareth said, more to himself than to me.

The lilt of a woman's island accent replied from a recess at the far end of the hall. "Good t'ing yer chair sits outside it."

Gareth and I spun to find a frail woman with graying hair bent over a gnarled walking stick. Her cane looked more like driftwood plucked straight from the beach than a well-carved staff. She wore a dress so vibrant she looked like a walking fruit bowl.

Her broad smile and hearty laugh beckoned us both into her waiting embrace.

“Isoldå, it’s been far too long.” Gareth shuffled to wrap the wiry woman in his arms and was rewarded with a cackle filled with warmth and affection.

“Last time I checked, ya can Travel t’ the isle, Mage Gareth. No need t’ wait fer the Grand Mage t’ summon t’ see me.”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

Gareth stepped back and bowed. “You are right, as usual. It would be good to see your beautiful home again, as well. I will try to make the journey more often.”

“Do we get hugs and promises, too?” Gareth looked up as two men and a woman strode through the doorway. One of the men towered above the others, his hawkish nose entering the room long before the rest of him darkened the doorway. The other man was almost as unremarkable as his simple worn cloak. Both men sneered as their eyes found mine. The woman wore a smug smile. Given her rapacious reputation, it was a wonder she wore clothing below that grin.

“Of course, Tasha.” Gareth stepped toward them, his arms outstretched in greeting.

“I wasn’t serious, you old fool. Step away,” Tasha snarled as the trio brushed past him to stand by their seats outside the circle.

Gareth cast a glance in my direction, but I only shrugged and offered a wan smile. Our family of Mages was as dysfunctional as any household to ever live.

Before I could dwell on that thought, more entered and underscored the point.

Amicus Sunshadow, leader of the pirates who stalked the northern coast of both the Kingdom of Spires and Melucia, waddled in. He stood only four and a half feet tall, and could barely wedge his wide ass into his seat. Scars lined his cheeks, and his hooked nose was curled almost as much as his surly lips.

Beside Amicus marched the barrel-chested military expert among the Mages, Elric Suther. Medals pinned to his black uniform coat tinkled with each of his purposeful

strides. Twin swords with pearl-tipped handles crossed above his head from their scabbards on his back.

Elric scanned each Mage as if assessing the odds of putting them in their graves rather than chatting amicably.

A thin man with shoulder-length black hair followed behind Elric. The tall man's face was ageless, though I knew Danai Thorn to be the youngest among us, a Mage of fewer than two hundred summers. His eyes were lowered in deference as he scurried to his seat.

Only a few greetings were shared. Gareth might call this a family, but it was one with deep fractures and embittered rivalry. Few among us enjoyed the others' company.

Nine stood behind their seats.

A moment passed, then a dozen, then a dozen more, as silence itched like ivy's poison.

"Where in the void is Kelså? Who does that bitch think she is, holding us up like this?" Tasha groused. Her eyes scanned the room as though searching for hidden assassins.

"Forgive me, sister." The pleasant tones of the final Mage to enter echoed throughout the hall.

All eyes turned to the doorway.

Kelså Rea glided into the room as gracefully as any queen, her back straight and chin high. She wore a gown of gleaming gold emblazoned with the Phoenix across her chest that complimented her rich skin. She radiated power, yet none could miss the

warmth in her eyes or her smile.

As Kelså took her place, the seat opposite mine outside the circle, I nodded and everyone sat. Tasha winced as magic flared and the gilded doors slammed shut.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice.” I met the gaze of each Mage in turn.

“It’s not like we had a choice. You laced your call with so much Compulsion we’d still be curled in a ball if we’d tried to resist,” Tasha said.

“I never was very skilled at simpler magics.” I chuckled. “Forgive me, sister. I am confident you will appreciate my urgency shortly.”

I smoothed my robe, staring into the circle glowing before us, then spoke with the reverent tones of my office. “That a new Mage was born over a decade ago is not news. Each of you felt her birth. However, it appears we need to make room for another chair around our circle. Our new Mage’s powers have manifested.”

The orderly gathering devolved as the Mages began chattering over each other. Before I lost all control, I rapped my gilded staff against the marble floor, snapping their eyes back to mine.

“Thank you.” I paused to allow the last of the conversations to die out. “We have attempted multiple scryings to locate our young sister but have only been able to garner fragments. First, she is west of our present location. That much we could sense through the currents. Second, an image of her caretakers appeared in the water. They were both wearing the blue smock of full physikers. I need not explain how rare it is to have one physiker in a household. Two is beyond remarkable. We Saw her home. It was made of gray stone, which indicates an upper-class home. Snow covered the sill of a window. Pieced together, I wager our Mage is in the capital of Fontaine.”

When no one spoke, I continued. “It is imperative we locate her quickly. I felt her powers rippling the currents yesterday. The poor girl will have some very confusing and uncomfortable experiences over the coming weeks and will need our guidance.”

“I will go. No need to trouble anyone else.” Tasha stood, as if she intended to leave that moment.

I raised a palm. “No offense, Tasha, but I was thinking this might require . . . how should I say it? A gentler hand?”

Gareth barked a laugh, earning a sharp look from Tasha, and amused glances from most of the others.

“That rules me out, too, Tash. Don’t be angry.” Elric fiddled with one of his combat ribbons. “Who did you have in mind, Grand Mage?”

I stood and extended hand. “Kelså, I suggest you Travel to Fontaine and locate the girl. Find her, but do not approach or speak with her. When you return, we can decide how best to make our initial approach. She will be confused, and likely frightened. Ten Mages showing up on her doorstep would be overwhelming. We will need to think carefully to avoid a repeat of Danai’s disaster.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

Danai, who normally sat quietly when the Mages gathered, snorted aloud.

“Something funny, Danai?” Amicus asked.

“‘Danai’s disaster.’ It sounds like a play the mummers might put on in a tavern.” He shook his head. “You lot scared the life out of me. I know you meant well, but having nine Mages light up like fireworks is an image I’ll never get out of my head. I thought you were going to fry me to a crisp.”

“It took us a week just to get you to sit and listen,” Gareth said, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “I’ve told that story in a hundred inns over the years. It works better as a comedy than a drama.”

A ripple of laughter made its way around the circle.

“I’m glad you were amused,” Danai said, crossing his arms and staring at the far wall.

“Come now, child. No harm came to ya,” Isoldå soothed. “Ya have t’ admit, ‘twas—”

I cleared my throat. “Can we look forward, please? Anyone opposed?”

I looked around the room for dissent, but no one spoke.

“Good. Kelså, you should leave immediately. You should not have too much trouble scrying for her once you arrive in the capital. The rest of us will wait here until you return.”

“Seriously?” Tasha leaped from her seat and raised her arms. “You want me to sit around and wait for her to come back?”

Ignoring Tasha’s protest, I rose and turned to Kelså. “Come back quickly, please.”

“Yes, Grand Mage.” She inclined her head, then vanished.

Chapter six

Kelså

Traveling was no more complex than any other magic. I thought my destination, pictured it in my mind, and willed myself to arrive in that place. Some Mages preferred to use hand signals, though, in truth, they served little more purpose than to add drama to a simple thought. Tasha would have waved her arms and spoken nonsensical words. She forever loved a stage and the adoration—and fear—that came from non-Mages who witnessed her acts.

Power had that effect on many of our number. For all the good we could do with the Phoenix’s gifts, too many of my brothers and sisters relished their own grandiosity over all else. I supposed that was the way with people, Mage or not.

I sighed and glanced around to get my bearings. The manor house was one of my oldest possessions, though I rarely slept beneath its roof. I had established similar estates in each major city throughout the known world. Besides the convenience and comfort of a familiar place to lodge, each manor was also equipped with a library, laboratory, and scrying room, allowing me to continue my research wherever my Travels might lead me.

I strode around a pair of chairs and stood before a large buffet that consumed much of the far wall. Intricate vines and leaves ran along its legs and sides, while deep

etchings of woodland creatures frolicking in a forest illustrated the front. I ran my fingers around the edge of the scrying bowl that sat atop the buffet's smooth surface. Blue magical flames from nearby candles flickered in its silver working.

"I suppose it is time." I drew in a deep breath and held it. Scrying was simple enough, but the act of peering into another's life felt intrusive each time I sought answers in the bowl.

I retrieved a pitcher from the washroom and filled the bowl. My Light leaped at my call, and the waters in the scrying bowl rippled. As quickly as the ripples began, they stilled, and an image of a young woman resolved. The girl's silky black hair trailed down the front of her smock. The garment should have been white, a pristine fabric marred only by the hair falling across it. But there was blood, so much blood. She was bathed in it.

I leaned closer, as if to comfort the child. "She looks so exhausted, and . . . her eyes . . . she's been crying."

The image moved with the girl's eyes as she placed a gentle hand on the brow of an older man who lay on a wooden table. The man was pale, gravely so, but his chest rose and fell with steady breaths.

His chest . . .

I squinted, examining every part of the man. His face was caked with blood, yet no wounds were visible, not even a scratch. A pale line the width of my palm streaked across his chest.

"A freshly healed wound," I muttered. "But no stitches."

I glanced around the room: glass bottles on shelves, stacked linens, silver instruments

hanging in a perfect line.

“Not at home? An infirmary, perhaps?”

I closed my eyes and the water rippled, the image shimmering into the air above the bowl and vanishing in pinpricks of Light.

I stepped back and leaned against the back of a chair. “Perhaps it is time I paid the Queen a visit.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

It had been years since I'd seen Asin, but we had been close once. No one was supposed to know it, but the Queen ran the information network for the King. While the High Chancellor governed the capital and ruled the Privy Council in His Majesty's absence, Asin was the true power behind the Throne. She could tell me how many rats were in the sewers and how many physikers were in the city.

With a thought, my paneled walls were replaced by marble and ancient tapestries. Queen Asin's blonde hair shone against her navy gown. She was alone except for a lady who brushed her long locks.

"Your Majesty," I said softly, inclining my head a few degrees.

The maid tossed her brush across the room as her scream echoed off the bedchamber walls.

Asin didn't even flinch, peering at me through the mirror of her dresser, an oversized luxury made for the most powerful woman on the continent. She raised one brow, and a tiny curl formed at one corner of her lips.

"The mighty Kelså Rea. And she bows before the Crown." Asin turned to face me but did not stand. She laid a hand on her maid's arm to calm the frightened woman. "To what do we owe this honor? Unannounced and in my own bedchamber, no less."

"Forgive my intrusion, but—"

"There was a time when a friend's visit was welcome, not something for which one apologized." Asin's voice wasn't cold, but the edge it held cut as surely as any blade.

My eyes lowered, then returned to hers. “Asin, Your Majesty, I am sorry. It has been too long.”

“Eight years? Perhaps more?”

“Could we speak alone?” I asked, glancing at the maid who stood frozen by her Queen’s side.

“To business, then. Right.” Asin shook her head, then turned to her maid. “Give us a moment, would you. And let the kitchen know there will be two of us for midmorning.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” The maid curtsied, shot me a sideways glare, then scurried out of the room.

The moment the heavy wooden door to her chamber slammed shut, Asin stood and closed the gap between us. Her embrace was so quick and fierce I nearly tumbled backward.

“It is so good to see you again, Kelså. Spirits, you had better not make me wait another eight years.” No amount of magic could have stolen words from my mouth as much as the Queen had in that moment. My childhood friend stood before me. She held me in her arms. My heart soared at the knowledge that our bond of sisterhood remained unbroken. “Now, I know better than to think a Mage paid me a casual visit, even if she should. What brings you here, Kelså?”

I pulled back and smiled at my wise friend. “Someone very special needs my help, though she does not know it.”

Hours later, I appeared in the manor once more to find Gareth sitting in my living room before a roaring fire, sipping a crystal tumbler filled with brandy. Golden liquid

splashed all over his robes as he startled. The glass flew into the stones of my hearth and shattered.

“Blessed Spirits! Can you not make some noise or use a door?” he exclaimed, setting his glass on a side table. He wiggled two fingers, and the brandy that had spilled lifted from his robe and the chair and evaporated. “That’s why Mages don’t spend time together. We scare the wits out of each other.”

I stifled a laugh as I kneeled to gather broken glass. “And you, old man, could let a girl know you planned to visit.”

Gareth snorted. “Girl? What girl is—”

“If you finish that sentence by guessing my age, I will stab you with one of these shards.” I held up a sizeable chunk of broken crystal.

“Fair enough.” He chuckled. “How goes the search?”

“Is the family getting anxious?” I smirked up at him.

“Well, it has been a few hours. Tasha says you may be losing your touch.”

“She would.” I snorted and resumed gathering broken pieces. “Asin—the Queen—sends her regards. She’s a decade older but still the willful, precocious girl I remember. I could’ve spent days with her.”

I sighed, and a smile parted my lips. “Anyway, our young woman is only a few blocks away in the Royal Medica. Asin claims she is brilliant, a sort of prodigy among the physikers, though she’s only in her fourth year of her apprenticeship.”

“Just what we need, another brilliant Mage to toss around their blessed opinions,”

Gareth snarked as ice clinked in a fresh glass.

“Would you rather our order be filled with incompetents? I think it’s wonderful we may add another woman with intelligence and drive. Someone has to keep you stodgy old men on your toes.”

“I’m only stodgy when you spill my brandy!”

“As you say, old man.” I laughed again, then sobered. The image of the girl soaked in blood, her eyes distraught and exhausted, haunted my thoughts. “Gareth, something terrible happened. When I scryed for the girl, I found her covered in blood, and not just the splatter you might expect from a physiker’s work. She was drenched in it. And her eyes . . . she looked almost beyond consolation.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

The trickling of brandy over ice mingled with the popping of the fire as I slumped into the chair opposite where Gareth had been sitting. The broken tumbler sat on the table, reformed without a hint of having been tossed against the fireplace.

Gareth settled back into his chair and sipped, his eyes searching the flames.

“You should not wait for the morrow. Seek her now. If her power rose to meet some great need, others likely witnessed the act. She will need guidance . . . and a gentle hand.”

“But Johann and the others agreed. We were only to find her.” I knew Gareth was right. The girl needed direction. Still, the others—

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said, cradling his glass in both hands. “The others will be furious. Tasha will see this as a power grab, an attempt to win the new Mage to your side before the others can even meet her.”

“What side?” I spat.

He gave me a look only a grandfather knows. “Child, don’t mock your own wisdom. You know better.”

I let my head fall back against the cushion of the chair.

“You mean well.” His weathered hand found mine, drawing my gaze back to his. “Help this girl. That is how you make things better. I will help you deal with Johann and the others.”

I nodded and stared into the fire. As the girl with the black hair stared back through the flames, it felt as though the entire world was about to change.

Chapter seven

Kelså

Gareth rose from his chair to see me out. He grumbled about his ancient knees and aching back, though I knew the magic coursing through his veins prevented such mundane ailments.

I walked the three blocks to the infirmary. The cobbles were slick from recent rains, and a chill drifted on the air. I drew heat from the surrounding air and wrapped myself in its warmth. As I neared the street where the infirmary was located, I had to step past several ruined signs and overturned carts.

“Looks like we missed quite the spring storm,” I muttered as I stepped over a broken chair from a nearby restaurant’s patio.

The infirmary was well marked—a large, blocky stone building with a crisply painted door emblazoned with the King’s crest, and an etching of the Pheonix above it. As I raised my fist to knock, the door opened, and a lanky boy in the white of an apprentice peered out.

“How can we help you?” he asked.

“I need to speak with your Master,” I said, pulling my cloak about my shoulders, as if to ward away the day’s chill.

In truth, I hid my robe. One had to be too young to speak, or too old to remember, to not recognize a Mage wearing the Phoenix emblazoned in gold. Gareth and I had

rehearsed how best to approach the situation, given neither of us knew the girl's name or anything about her background. A stranger's visit would be unsettling enough without immediate recognition that one of the few living Mages sought her out. Speaking with the Master first, enlisting his support and introduction, made the most sense.

The boy's eyes fell at the mention of his mentor. "I'm sorry. Master Rist was injured and isn't able to see patients. Is there something one of the apprentices might be able to help with?"

I stepped forward and spoke in a soothing tone, lacing my words with Compulsion. "Take me to your Master. I know something of the healing arts."

Unable to resist my call, the boy opened the door wider and motioned for me to follow him. We strode down a hallway and turned into the first room we reached. I recognized the chamber as the room from my scrying the night before. Rist lay on the wooden table, though his head now rested on a pillow, and he was covered with thick woolen blankets. The young woman from my vision sat in a chair by his side. Her brow creased, and her eyes darted from Rist's sleeping form to me.

"Irina, this lady is a healer, says she can help Master Rist," the boy said.

Irina glared after the boy as he scurried out of the room. A moment later, she looked up at me.

"What did you do to him, and who are you?"

I startled. A Mage so newly invested in her power should not have been able to sense my working.

"My name is Kelså Rea."

The girl gasped. “Mage Rea?”

“Please, call me Kelså.” I nodded and smiled. “What are you called, apprentice?”

I had meant to comfort the poor girl, but asking her to address me so informally only caused her to widen her eyes and cross her arms.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

“Irina.” Her voice was barely loud enough to hear.

I decided to barrel forward. “I can Heal your Master, though I sense someone has already done an excellent job mending his wounds.”

Irina shot to her feet. “I . . . I don’t know what happened. I didn’t mean to—”

“Irina, breathe easy. Please.” I raised a palm. “Listen to me, child. You did nothing wrong. In fact, what you did was wonderful. I am here to help you . . . understand, to help you celebrate.”

“Celebrate? What are you talking about?” Her voice grew stronger as anger mingled with her words. “My master is close to death. There will be no celebrating in these halls for some time.”

I stepped forward and took Rist’s hand in mine. Irina jerked forward, but I held her back with a quick glance. Keeping my eyes locked on hers, I called my magic, and a warm glow bloomed. The Light swelled until it flowed from my palm into Rist, illuminating his entire form.

“Stop!” Irina lurched forward. “What are you doing to him?”

The glow faded, and Rist’s eyes fluttered open.

“Irina? Where—? What happened?” He tried to sit up, but Irina threw herself to his side and pressed her hands to his shoulders.

“Oh, no you don’t. I just got you pieced back together. You need to rest,” Irina said, the steel of a physiker’s backbone ringing in her admonition.

Rist let his head fall back onto the pillow, but his eyes narrowed as he studied her. He chuckled, though his mirth grew into an uncomfortable rumble punctuated by a fit of coughing.

“Was I not clear? You need to relax . . . I mean . . . Master.” Irina frowned. “What’s so funny?”

“How you have grown, my girl.” His smile brightened the room. “So strong and fierce. You will be the Kingdom’s finest physiker one day.”

She stared, appearing frozen by the magic of his words. I thought it ironic how powerful those spoken by one without magic could carry so potent an impact.

Irina released his shoulders and resumed her seat by his bedside. Her eyes searched the man. She struggled to maintain the scrutiny of his gaze—until a tiny curl crept into the corner of her mouth, and Rist’s coughing laughter rang through the room once more.

I stepped forward and pressed my fingers to his arm. My magic flared, and Rist drifted into a peaceful sleep.

“Hey! Why’d you do that?” Irina’s hand shot forward and grabbed the Master’s wrist.

“He’s fine, Irina. I helped him sleep. That is all.” I glanced about the room. “Is there somewhere private we can chat? I would rather not be interrupted by others coming to check on your Master.”

Irina glared, as though deciding how far she could trust me, then looked down at Rist.

His breathing was steady, and color had returned to his face. He looked peaceful.

Irina nodded once. “We can use his study. It is as insulated from prying ears as anywhere in this building.”

Hours later, Gareth and I stood in the circle before the other Mages.

“She’s exceptional—keen intelligence, strong, inquisitive. She will be an excellent addition to our number when she accepts who she is,” I reported.

“What in damnation were you thinking?” Tasha’s rage echoed off the rounded stone walls. “We agreed you could find her. What gave you the right to make contact without—”

“Tasha,” Gareth cut in, “Kelså faced a rapidly evolving situation.”

“Rapidly evolving, my ass. The man wasn’t dying. The girl had stabilized him.”

“He was not out of danger,” I said. “I had to Heal him enough to—”

“You what?” Elric boomed. His knuckles gripped the arms of his chair so tightly I could almost see bone through his whitened skin. “You exposed yourself?”

“No, my gown remained on my shoulders.” I knew my quip for a mistake the moment it left my lips.

“And now you mock us.” Tasha glared at the Grand Mage. “Johann, this cannot go unpunished.”

“Punished?” Gareth spat. “One of our number Healed a prominent man, one in the favor of the King and Queen of Spires, and you want her punished? She soothed a

new Mage, the first we have seen in how long? She prepared her to accept us, to accept herself, and you want what? To bind her power? To throw her in a dungeon? To flay her at dawn?"

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

“Stop being dramatic, Gareth,” Tasha snapped. “Flaying is so last century. I would settle for banishment.”

“Banishment?” Gareth sputtered.

Half a dozen of the others began shouting over one another, while Tasha screeched and Gareth shouted.

I stood before my chair, chin high and shoulders back, amazed at the stupidity of it all.

“Peace, please,” Johann tried to calm the assembly.

When sugar failed, he chose the bitter approach, slamming his staff onto the marble so hard sparks flew and the circle flared to life, bathing everyone in a frightening golden glow. Startled eyes darted from the Grand Mage to the circle and back. Johann had not used his powers in their Chamber in centuries, perhaps longer. No one used magic there.

“Everyone, sit!” Johann’s command was inviolate. In that Chamber, we were his. Every ass found a cushion, and every tongue stilled. “We will not bicker like children. We are this world’s guiding Light. I expect each of you to act like it. Do you understand me?”

His words punched into my gut like a fighter’s knuckles, and I knew his power compelled obedience.

“Yes, Grand Mage,” nine voices mumbled.

“Good. There will be no banishment . . . or flaying . . . or punishment of any kind. There is no prohibition against what Kelså did. We are barred from affecting the flow of history, not Healing a single person. Some among us would do well to remember that when placing old grudges above current challenges.”

Tasha crossed her arms across her ample bosom and refused to meet Johann’s gaze. Elric’s icy glare would have cowed most.

Johann ignored his spite and turned back toward me. “You say she is prepared? That she will accept us now?”

“I did not say that. Gareth expressed hope based on the Healing. Irina is strong willed and intelligent. We will need to handle her carefully,” I said, still on my feet by my chair. “She has served as an apprentice for the past four years. All she knows is compliance with strict instructions of a Master. Rist is renowned among his community, both for his skill and his ability to train others. I believe she will devour any instruction we offer, as long as we win her trust first.”

Tasha sat back and crossed her arms. “What do you mean, ‘win her trust’? Did your little demonstration not entice her to learn?”

Tasha’s head remained facing away from me, despite her addressing my remarks. I locked eyes with Johann instead. “The girl is sixteen years old. She has never known anyone with magic and has never wielded it herself. She was still in shock from what she experienced, from what she did. Surely, each of us remembers magic’s first touch, yes? Some of us were much younger than Irina. I recall the terror in more than a few of your eyes.”

Tasha shifted in her seat, her gaze landing on the center of the circle, but she did not

argue. Her own manifestation had been among the most difficult I could remember.

“How did you leave things with her?” Johann asked.

“She is frightened but was willing to speak privately for several hours. That was an important first step. I should return and offer to teach her basic control. Once she views me as an ally rather than some mythical creature, you can approach her about her full potential.”

A few of the Mages snarked in hushed tones, but Johann held up a hand to silence them. “Fine, but she needs you now, not days from now. Return to Fontaine. Do what you can. We will meet again in one week to determine next steps.”

Johann banged his staff again, signaling the end of the discussion, then rose and exited the Chamber before the others could react.

I didn’t wait to hear the eruption from Tasha and her cadre. I glanced toward Gareth, receiving a quick nod, then vanished from the Chamber.

Chapter eight

Irina

“I didn’t expect to see you back so soon,” I said, crossing my arms.

Kelså sat in one of the comfortable chairs in the waiting area and smiled up at me. “I had not planned to return so quickly, but we were concerned about you.”

“About me? Master Rist was injured, not me.”

Kelså stood and stepped toward me, gripping my shoulders. I had to resist the urge to

stumble backward. “I’m not talking about any injury of yours. I’m referring to how you Healed his.”

I startled.

“You touched your magic for the first time, didn’t you?”

It had been years since I allowed someone to intimidate me. Living and working with Master Rist and the ever-pleasant Siena had stiffened my already rigid spine. Still, staring into the infinite eyes of a Mage, I had the sudden urge to run down the hallway and hide.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

“Why don’t we go back to the Master’s study?” Kelså suggested.

I nodded and turned, glad to pull my shoulders free of her touch.

Once inside Rist’s study, Kelså sat in one of the wooden chairs that faced his desk. I closed the door and pressed my back to the wood, as if bracing myself for whatever was to come. Of course, I was curious about magic and whatever had flowed out of me. I had thought about little else since it happened. Spirits, I dreamed it over and over, the Light welling inside me, then bursting out of my palms like a pair of beams from atop a lighthouse.

And yet, Kelså was one of the fabled Mages, the handful of men and women who possessed more power in their pinky than the whole of the Kingdom combined. Despite their reclusive nature, everyone knew of the Mages. Barmen and troupers sang songs and told tales of their adventures, though I doubted most of those held any truth.

But here I stood, with one of them sitting before me, wanting to what? Teach me? She hadn’t said as much, but that’s what it sounded like. Would Kelså become a mentor? A new Master? Would I belong to her? Was that even how it all worked?

The more I thought about it all, the more my heart thudded. It felt like it might rebound off the wood of the door and tumble onto the floor.

Kelså watched me for a long moment. “Mages can sense events within the flow of magic. Think of it like seeing ripples in a pond. We may not have seen the rock fall into the water, but we felt a disturbance in the stillness of the water.”

“So you knew I used magic the moment it happened?”

“Not immediately, but soon thereafter.” Kelså paused a moment. “We have been waiting for you to manifest your powers for several years, Irina.”

“Seriously? You’ve been . . . Wait. That means you knew—”

“The moment you were born, we felt a new Mage’s presence in this world. This happens only once in every few generations, sometimes skipping many. Your birth was cause for celebration among my family.”

Kelså’s brow crunched, just a little, then smoothed. I stared, trying to interpret whatever had crossed her face.

“You’re not a family, are you?” I asked. “At least, not a happy one.”

Kelså stared a moment then released a breath. “We are a family like many others. Some brothers and sisters are close, while others refuse to belong. Still, magic binds us together in its unique way.”

“Are the others . . . nice?” I could sense Kelså’s tension as she spoke about the other Mages but wasn’t sure how to ask.

Kelså burst into laughter, her snorts punctuating rich notes of mirth.

“What?”

“Your first questions are not about how magic works or how you Healed your Master. You didn’t ask if you had other abilities or how you might learn.” She struggled to contain her laughter. “Of all the things you could ask, you want to know if the others are pleasant?”

My cheeks colored, and holding Kelså's gaze felt like lifting an ox cart. "Well, yes. I mean, if Mages are a family, and I'm now a Mage, why wouldn't I want to know about my new brothers and sisters? I've never had one of those before."

"I am sorry, Irina. Of course, you would want to know." Kelså reined in her laughter. "I have been with them for so many centuries—"

"Centuries?" My eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

"We should start from the beginning, child. I promise to answer all of your questions as best I can, but please know it will take time. You are entering a world unto itself." Kelså glanced about at Rist's shelves, her eyes settling on a lone window. "I have a manor in the city, a place for me to stay in comfort when I visit the Queen. We could speak freely without worry about who might be spying. And I could use something to drink before we begin."

"I'm pretty sure I need that drink more than you do," I said with a sigh.

"Fair enough." Kelså's smile brightened the room. She extended her hand. When I stared at her in confusion, she nodded toward her palm and said, "Trust me. Take my hand."

I reached out. The moment my fingers grazed hers, we vanished from the infirmary.

"Sweet Spirits, how—? Where are we?" I stammered as I scanned a richly appointed room with widened eyes. Dark shelves towered from floor to ceiling, and a fire roared in a massive stone hearth. Every piece of furniture in the chamber was worth more than my parents' house, but it was the flames flickering on candle wicks that stilled my breath.

"Welcome to my home here in the capital." Kelså noticed me frozen before a silver

candelabra that sat atop a grand buffet. “Have you ever seen magical flames?”

I shook my head, unable to form words.

“You will grow used to the color blue. Most magics are tinged with it,” Kelså said fondly. “Come. I have wine or—”

“Whiskey?”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

Kelså laughed. “On any other day, I would lecture you about propriety, young lady. However, on this day, I will toast with you until neither of us feel any fear.”

I turned and stepped toward the chairs by the fire where Kelså stood.

“What do you have to be afraid of?”

“Meeting a new Mage is a grave responsibility. What if I steered you wrong? What if you refused my aid? What if you could not learn control?”

My eyes narrowed. “What if I can’t learn control?”

“You will. I . . . forgive me.” Kelså blinked, then swallowed. “Let us have those drinks now.” She stepped to a side table and filled two glasses from a crystal decanter, then held up the glasses and smiled as they frosted, chilling to perfection.

My eyes somehow widened further. “Is there anything you can’t do?”

Kelså’s laugh was warm and light. “Oh, child, yes. There are limits, but there are also many possibilities. Come and sit. I will answer as much as I can.”

Chapter nine

Irina

I stared at my palm. “I don’t understand. I’m trying.”

We had spent the first couple of hours talking. I grew up knowing magic existed and a special few could wield it, but it hadn't seemed relevant to my life. I had never even seen a Mage, and most of the stories people told of them made the men and women of magic sound like self-absorbed, privileged children.

And yet, Kelså's kindness and calm presence made me realize how ridiculous some of those old stories might be. The Mage answered each of my questions, some multiple times, never showing a hint of fatigue or annoyance. When our conversation turned more practical, and Kelså tried to guide me through finding my Light—my magical core—I found that the Mage enjoyed playing the mentor role.

Kelså folded her hands in her lap, pausing a moment before responding. "Irina, you used an incredible amount of magic when you Healed Master Rist. An experienced Mage would be exhausted, both physically and mentally. I am amazed you are still on your feet, much less attempting to touch your source."

"But it came so quickly. I didn't think about it. Spirits, I didn't even know magic existed within me." I wanted to toss the empty tumbler against the fireplace. I had memorized a million facts while studying in the Medica, but nothing in my time with Master Rist had been as frustrating as trying to call my Light.

"Magic responds to our need, sometimes to our deepest desires, too. You said you were afraid that you might lose Master Rist, that he was close to death? In your moment of greatest need, you tapped into something deep within yourself without even knowing it. Unless you find yourself in a similar situation—and I hope that never happens again—you will likely never access magic in that same manner again. As frustrating as this will be, you need to learn to find and touch your Light correctly."

I sighed in frustration. "It feels like that'll take forever."

Kelså sat back. “Only hours ago, you had no idea you possessed magic. I think you will survive a while longer before you learn to wield it. Think of your apprenticeship in the Medica. How long was it before Master Rist let you see a patient, much less treat one?”

I looked up. “Three years, and we still can’t treat someone without him or a senior present.”

“I promise it won’t take three years.”

“That’s encouraging.”

Kelså’s maternal smile disarmed her churlish lip as she took a sip of her whiskey. “Why don’t we stop for the night and resume tomorrow? You must be tired.”

Watching her drink, I realized we had emptied her decanter, yet I felt no more intoxicated than when we’d arrived.

“I see another question in your eyes,” Kelså said. “Last one today. Make it good.”

“We’re not drunk.”

Kelså smiled. “That is not a question.”

I rolled my eyes, earning a snort. “Why aren’t we drunk? Your decanter was full when we started. I should be passed out, but I feel no more drunk than if we’d been drinking water.”

“Have you ever felt drunk?”

I thought a moment. Father had only just begun allowing me to drink wine on our

weekends together. I remembered my parents getting tipsy. They were silly and disgustingly affectionate when they drank. It made me smile and want to barricade my door all in the same moment.

But had I felt anything?

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

“I . . . I don’t think so. I can’t remember ever feeling wine or . . . anything.”

Kelså raised her glass in salute. “Call it a perk of magic.”

Two mournful tolls of a bell sounded somewhere in the city, indicating the turn of another early-morning hour.

“I guess that’s a sign,” I said.

“That it is.” Kelså stood. “It is a sign you need rest. With Master Rist still abed, I imagine you will be busy.”

Oh, Spirits. The Medica. My Master.

How long had we been gone? The others would’ve noticed by now.

“I hadn’t even thought about that. With everything going on, and then you popping up out of nowhere, I lost track of time.” I pressed my palms to my eyes and leaned back with a heavy sigh. “We were finished seeing patients when you showed up, but the others will wonder where I’ve been. How will I even answer them?”

“Just tell them you needed some time alone. Given everything you have been through, no one would begrudge you that.”

“I suppose.” I nodded and yawned. “I may not get drunk, but staying up talking all night still wears me out.”

“Here, let me help.” Kelså reached forward, and her palm flared as it pressed into my arm.

“What—?” Warmth flooded my chest, then raged like a river down my arms and legs.

“I gave you a little of my energy. It should help with the sleep I have stolen from you tonight. Now, we should return before people’s thoughts shift from curiosity to concern.”

I began to nod, but we Traveled and reappeared in the infirmary’s waiting room before I could finish the action.

Chapter ten

Irina

Master Rist returned to his hectic rotation within days of a near-fatal blow. Between my Healing and Kelså’s own contribution, the Master claimed to feel better—and younger—than he had in years. I tried stalling any discussion of his Healing, magic, or anything else out of the ordinary, but my Master’s natural curiosity wouldn’t be satisfied with anything less than a detailed, logical explanation.

Magic. How logical, I thought as I sat with my head bowed and hands folded before Rist. Kelså remained by my side to answer any questions he might ask that I couldn’t answer. I found the Mage’s presence comforting.

“You’re telling me you used magic to Heal my wounds, the same wounds I can see only a trace of, but, by all accounts, were fatal?”

I nodded, but couldn’t bring myself to meet his eyes. “Yes, Master. I . . . didn’t know what I was doing. I just . . . it just . . .”

I was sure he'd accuse me of cheating, not using proper medicine or technique or something. He was always so strict about how to treat patients, and I threw all that into the storm when I used a foreign force I'd never experienced as my surgical instrument.

If he got angry, he might take my apprenticeship away and send me back to my parents. How could I face them after such a failure? They were so proud when I entered the Medica. Would they still have pride in the same daughter who left in shame?

Still, this was Master Rist's life at stake. I replayed that day a hundred times—no, a thousand times—and still would do it all over again. I would have moved mountains to save him. Rist was more than a mentor or teacher. In the four years I'd lived under his roof, the man had become a second father. The thought of losing him was more than my heart could bear.

As a tear escaped, I dared a look up.

I don't think he could have smiled any wider—and a tear was escaping his eye, too. He leaned forward and took my trembling hand in both of his.

"Irina, do you realize how special this is? How rare?"

I frowned so hard my brow ached.

Rist loosed a hearty laugh.

"Child, there hasn't been a Healer born with magic in hundreds of years. The Mages today tend toward other pursuits." He shot Kelså a glare, then turned back to me. "You have the power to do things I will never be able to do, Heal those beyond the aid of any physiker. With your hunger for knowledge, combined with magic, you

could help advance our work more than anyone in living memory.”

I sucked in a breath. “So . . . you’re not angry?”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

He laughed again. “No, Irina, I’m not angry. I’m proud. If Mage Kelså can help you learn to use this gift of the Spirits, I’m confident you will do great things.”

Kelså spoke for the first time since we sat. “You will need to continue your apprenticeship. To Heal complex injury or illness, you will need to understand the body and how it functions. Without a solid foundation of anatomy, you never could have healed Master Rist. Remember the image that formed in your mind?”

I nodded.

“You guided magic to mend what was broken. To do that, you first must know what things should look like, how they should work. I will stay for a few weeks to help you learn the basics, but you need to continue the Master’s work, too, likely for several more years.” She looked up at Rist. “If that is all right with you, Master Rist.”

He beamed, then schooled his expression. “Mage Kelså’s right. There’s still much for you to learn. We can’t have a half-trained magical Healer roaming around out there. Folks will end up with feet sprouting out of their ears.”

Despite everything, I laughed.

A month passed quickly.

Each day, I rose early, studied with my fellow apprentices, worked a full shift with Master Rist and his patients, then spent hours practicing with Kelså. I had never felt more alive, more filled with excitement and purpose.

The first time I called my Light and my palms glowed with Healing magic, I nearly fell backward. Then I jumped up and ran circles around the study, waving my glowing palms in the air.

Kelså laughed until she complained her side hurt.

At Kelså's suggestion, we waited to tell my parents about my magic until the third week. In the immediate aftermath of Healing Rist, I'd been too frightened, too unsure, to admit anything to anyone. Then, after meeting Kelså and beginning to understand the implications of having magic, a fresh fear formed in my mind. My parents were wonderful physikers, dedicated to the healing arts for much of their lives. How would they react to their daughter possessing magic, being a Mage?

Would it change how they saw me? Would they think of me as one of the self-absorbed, elite men and women who rarely bothered to grace normal folk with their presence, much less help those in need? Would they be ashamed of who I was becoming? Of what I had become?

I dreamed the look in Father's eyes, the disappointment, the loss. I felt him tremble and watched as he turned his back, never to look on me again. My heart wrenched at visions of Mother's tears and the echo of her cries.

Kelså would have encouraged me, told me everything would be all right, but I was afraid to even approach her with something so trivial. We were meddling with powers beyond nations. The last thing she wanted to hear was a young girl's fears over her mortal parents. I knew I was being stubborn. Kelså had been nothing but kind—loving, even. Still, courage fled each time I tried to ask her advice.

I had risked everything to save my adopted father. Now, it felt like I was risking everything not to lose my real one.

With no better plan, I determined to have better control of my Light before telling them anything. I knew the moment they learned I had power, they would beg for a demonstration. I knew Father, with his inquisitive nature, could never let a delicious curiosity go unexplored, especially when it involved his daughter.

In an ironic twist of fate—or a result of poor planning or the Spirits having a sense of humor about such things—I never told my parents I had magic. Roughly two months after Kelså's first visit, I was at home for a weekend visit. Mother and I were chatting in the kitchen when Father burst into the house. He'd been tending the horses and managed to slice his palm open on one tool or another. Blood wept onto the kitchen floor as he stepped forward.

Without thinking, I reached out, and Light flowed freely.

Father's eyes were wide as saucers. Mother fell back into her chair. Neither could speak for the longest moment of my life.

“Um, Father, I think you should sit down. I need to tell you both something.”

Father hugged me so long I thought he might never let me go.

Mother wept until Father insisted on seeing more of the “light show,” as he called it.

I felt silly afterward, worrying over my parents' reactions, fearing their judgement or scorn or whatever. They loved me. I knew that before, and I knew it even more so afterward. Still, the relief I felt after sharing the weight of that knowledge was a brilliant light all its own.

By the third month, I was able to call my Light at will and perform Healings of minor injuries and illnesses inside the body as easily as writing my name on parchment. Master Rist marveled, and Kelså said she was astonished by my rapid progress. She

said it often took others many months, even years, to approach my level of control and skill.

Kelså speculated that my singular focus on Healing offered more rapid advancement than those who attempted to delve into many aspects of their magical abilities. I wore blinders, insisting every waking moment be devoted to furtherance of my Healing knowledge and skill. I never even thought to ask how to perform simple magics, such as calling flame or Traveling. Healing was my life; it was my first true love.

Chapter eleven

Irina

I tried to keep my newfound powers secret, but word spread.

In the days following Kelså's departure, one of Fontaine's citizens arrived to see the rumored Mage Healer who worked in the Medica. Master Rist offered me an apologetic shrug, then ushered the woman and her ailing father into an exam room. By sunset, word of the man's miraculous cure had spread halfway across the city, and people were queued up around the block at the Medica's door.

I slumped against the exam table after the last patient departed around midnight.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

“I’m afraid this is only the beginning,” Master Rist said with fatherly concern.

I looked up into his kind eyes and nodded but couldn’t find the strength to speak. The morrow would come too soon and would likely bring an even longer line.

“Sleep in tomorrow,” Rist said. “Before she left, Kelså warned me using magic would tax your body and mind. The others and I will take the first patients who arrive. If an urgent case beyond our skill arrives, we’ll wake you.” When I didn’t reply, he laid a hand on my shoulder. “Irina, are you all right?”

It took a moment to gather my thoughts. “I’m not supposed to be the one with the greater skill here—not yet. I had hoped to grow into that one day, but years from now.” My voice sounded small as I continued. “Master, what am I becoming? I mean . . . I’ve always wanted to be a physiker. It’s all I’ve ever wanted, but this is all so much bigger, so much more . . .”

“Irina, listen to me. You are becoming who you were meant to be.” He kneeled and gripped my hands, raising them to his lips for a gentle kiss. “Whether you become a good Healer or the greatest of our time, only the future can tell. Trust your training and trust your heart. Look into the eyes of each patient and know you are making a difference, one person at a time. If you do that, this might not feel so big anymore.”

I offered a weak smile. I wasn’t sure I felt any relief, but I knew he was right.

What else could I do?

I thought back to the patients I’d Healed that day: an old man with trouble breathing,

a woman with stomach pain, small children with simple coughs and runny noses that wouldn't stop. Patients and loved ones entered with fear, wonder, and a hint of hope in their eyes. They left whole, with gratitude and joy in their hearts.

I'd given them that. I'd Healed them. More than just Healing, I'd granted them relief from pain and a sense of peace.

It's what I'd always dreamed Healing could be, what it should be.

Why does it frighten me so?

"Thank you." I kissed the Master's hands as he'd done mine, then stood and nodded. "I'm a little overwhelmed, and very tired. I think I'll take you up on that extra rest."

The months that followed were a blur.

Word spread far quicker than I expected, then exploded further when the local newsmen realized my story would sell papers. I became a staple of the front page, as they described in detail—often exaggerated detail—the latest patients saved by the "Miracle Healer."

That was the nickname the papers chose. Others floating about included the "Living Spirit" and the "People's Mage."

I loathed them all.

"Healer" was the only title I sought.

I tried to shut out the noise and see only the person before me, but those around me wouldn't do the same.

When the royal family became enamored, I knew life would never be simple again.

I was invited to the Palace for an audience with the King and Queen. Her Majesty insisted on throwing a ball in my honor, allowing the Kingdom's nobility to meet their most prominent apprentice in person and help my efforts.

My efforts.

When had this become about me? As much as I tried to redirect the Queen's favor onto Master Rist, she would have none of it. The Crown had a prize in its sights and would not be deterred.

Was I to become another jewel to them? Was my Healing?

I loved the gift magic had given; and yet, each day brought greater fame and felt more overwhelming than the last.

The Master took it all in stride. Never once did he show resentment or even a hint of annoyance that mine was now the sun and his was the shadow. While treating patients, I respected his role as my Master, and he treated me as he did the other apprentices. If anything, Master Rist and I grew closer. He was one of the few who saw . . . who understood.

Half a year passed before I saw another Mage. Kelså had left with a warm embrace, but with no timeline for her return. I had begun to think the Mages would let me finish my apprenticeship before shouldering me with more magical responsibilities.

How wrong I was.

I returned home for a weekend of escape with my parents. The public—even the newsmen—respected my boundaries when at home. Only the rare, serious case above

my parents' abilities called me into service while in my family's house, and I cherished my time with them more than ever.

Father and I rocked in chairs on the porch and chatted quietly as three Mages in long blue robes approached. I felt them arrive before I ever saw them approach the porch.

Mages respected no boundaries.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

“Irina?” the tall Mage with a square jaw asked, inclining his head.

“You can sense my Light. Why ask?” I hadn’t meant to snap, but their sudden, unannounced intrusion into my most personal of spaces was a sharp stone in my shoe.

One of the other Mages, a short, round woman with her hair spun up in a far-too-tight graying bun, pursed her lips as though she’d tasted something bitter. I wondered if bitter was all she ever tasted.

“Just being polite.” The tall man smiled, though his voice carried a tone of formality I had never heard in Kelså’s. “I am Grand Mage Johann Malvier. Is there somewhere we might speak?”

I glanced at my father. He quirked a brow, then rose and went inside.

The woman waddled forward and plopped into his seat before Johann could take a step. He gave me another shrug and remained on the ground before the porch’s bottom step.

“Kelså speaks very highly of you, and word has spread of the good work you are doing here in the city. We wanted to meet you for ourselves and see how we might help in your . . . education.”

Johann sounded sincere, and he had kind eyes; but something in the way he said the word “education” made ants crawl across my skin.

If the Grand Mage made my skin prickly, the other Mages made me want to bathe.

The woman was blatant in her disregard for anyone else. I got the impression she likely treated the Grand Mage with the same contempt she displayed as she scowled over our house and land.

The other Mage—the man—chilled me in ways I didn't understand. The combination of his thin, bent nose and his beady eyes, which sat a little too close together, gave him the appearance of a rodent waiting for me to look away so he could bite. Then I realized it was more than just his shifty looks. Something deep within my chest begged me not to trust him. Deception wafted off him like smoke pluming above a campfire.

Could my magic sense deception? Could it guide me away from those with foul intent?

I focused on Johann and tried to ignore the others.

“Kelså was very kind—and most helpful. She's a skilled teacher. I would love to see her again.”

Johann nodded. “I think that would be wonderful. She could become your mentor, if you would like.”

I smiled for the first time since they arrived. “I'd like that very much.”

“Irina, have you used your magic for anything other than Healing since Kelså left? She told us how you tried but were unable to touch your Light when performing any other task.”

I shook my head. “No, but I haven't really tried. When word spread about my ability to Heal, people started coming from all over. I barely have time to eat during the day much less try something not related to patients or Healing.”

“What do you know about magic’s other powers? Other things you can do with it?” Johann asked.

I thought a moment. “Well, Kelså called a ball of Light and made herself warm as we walked on a chilly night. Both those things would be nice, I guess.”

The woman, who still hadn’t introduced herself, barked a scornful laugh and traded sneers with Mr. Bent Nose.

Johann scowled at the woman, then turned back to me with a calm expression. “Those are helpful things, yes, but magic can do so much more. Would you like us to give you a little demonstration?”

Now he had my curiosity racing. I stopped rocking and leaned forward. “Of course. I mean . . . please do.”

Johann motioned for the woman to join them on the ground below the porch. She glared a moment but rose with a huff.

Johann extended his right hand, palm upward, and a fist-sized ball of bluish flame blazed to life above it. Then he extended his other hand in the same manner, and a ball of water formed. The water wiggled and swirled, then crackled until the whole thing had frozen into solid, spinning ice.

His eyes never left me, though my eyes were transfixed on the fire and ice.

“That’s—” I started.

“Silly and childish.” The female Mage cut me off with a Telepathic snark in my mind.

“You said that in my head!”

“At least she is not deaf,” the nasty woman mused.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

“It is time for you to see real power, Irina. Tasha is right. These are parlor games compared to what a trained Mage can do.” The thin man gestured to one of the mountain peaks several leagues away, its snowy cap still gleaming in the morning sun. Before I could ask what he was about to do, a deafening blast rang out, and the snow on the mountaintop exploded outward in every direction, leaving dull and lifeless rock where a vibrant carpet of white had lain only a moment before. The naked peak roared as a cascade of avalanches tore down the mountainside.

My hand flew to my mouth, and I gasped. “There are people on that mountain!”

The thin man scoffed. “I sensed no people. Animals, yes, but no people.”

“Who are you?” slipped out of my mouth.

I still couldn’t believe one man could do that to a mountain.

Johann pulled the thin man back by his elbow and stepped forward.

“I am sorry, Irina. I should have introduced my brother and sister when we first arrived.” He spoke in slow, reassuring tones, as if to counter the thin man’s strategy of shock and awe. “This is Chandler. He lives in Melucia, about thirty leagues west of Saltstone. He is one of the older members of our order. Tasha,” he said, motioning to the woman, “is the Mage-Advisor to the Triad in Melucia. She is also one of the most successful Merchants in the world, specializing in the growth and distribution of herbs.”

My brows rose, and Johann smiled. “I thought you might appreciate that.”

He stepped back a pace and placed a hand over his heart and bowed. “As I said before, I am the Grand Mage, but my mundane role is as advisor to the King.”

“The King? You mean King Melric? Our King?”

He nodded. “I have been the Mage-Advisor to the royal household of the Spires for hundreds of years.”

My head began to swim. Hundreds of years? How was that even possible? I’d heard children’s tales of Mages and their long lives, but those were just stories, weren’t they?

“Hundreds of years?” I whispered.

“Irina, how old do you think we are?” Johann asked.

I couldn’t bring myself to speak.

“Tasha will strike me down if I tell her age, so I will say this: There are ten of us, eleven now that you have arrived. The next youngest before you is Danai. He is a little over two hundred years old. The next is five hundred now, maybe even a little older. I lose track after so many centuries.”

“And the oldest?”

“Oh, he must be getting close to two thousand by now, though even he never knew his actual date of birth. Such things were not very important back then.”

I sat back into my chair. I stared at a point beyond Johann, but didn’t see anything. My mind was reeling, and I didn’t know how to make it calm, to get it to focus on the present. Nothing made sense. These people, their powers, their very lives.

Then I looked up, and in a hushed whisper, asked the only question that mattered.

“What do you want from me?”

“We do not want anything from you, Irina, but we do want to help you,” Johann said. “You are already a wonderful Healer, but that is only a cupful of water next to the ocean of your true potential. We want to help you realize that potential. Come with us, and we will teach you how to master power in ways you could never imagine.”

“Come with you?” I asked, startled. “I can’t leave Fontaine. My patients are here. My parents are here. My whole life is here.”

Johann stepped forward and leaned against the porch railing. His voice remained calm and measured. “Irina, we cannot teach what you need to learn in this place. The others have unique knowledge and skills, and we have tools that magnify and focus power, but we need the safety of our compound to test your limits. You would harm people here if you tried to do too much. My offer is for their safety more than yours.”

“I can’t.” I gripped the rocker’s arms. “This is my home. How could I just leave? I’m sorry, Grand Mage Johann—or whatever I’m supposed to call you—the answer is no. I won’t leave my parents and my people.”

“Irina—”

“Send Kelså, and I will continue learning, but I will not leave my home.” I stood and shook my head. “Thank you for coming all this way, but I need to help my mother with dinner. Please go.”

“The child has a pair of stones on her, I will give her that,” Tasha said.

“Tasha, not now.” Johann’s eyes flared with azure flame before settling back to their

icy hue. “Irina, please consider my offer. Talk with your parents and Master Rist. Tell them everything we discussed. Despite Tasha’s inability to remain civil, we are here to help. One of us will return in a month to answer any questions you may have and hear what you think. Feel free to have your parents join that conversation.”

“I’m not—”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

“Please . . . just think about it. Will you do that for me?”

I didn’t understand the warmth that surged through me as he spoke those last words. All I knew was that I wanted to agree, to tell him I would do whatever he asked. I needed to tell him, “Yes,” to please him, to help however I could. The urge to see him smile was overwhelming.

As the Mages vanished into a thousand twinkles of Light, leaving me alone on the porch, I could’ve sworn Tasha’s lips curled into a frightening grin.

Chapter twelve

Irina

“Take a seat, Irina.” Rist’s formal tone caught me off guard. It had been months since I’d heard him so serious. He was often stern with his other apprentices, but rarely so with me since my magic emerged.

I sat and folded my hands in my lap.

Rist paced before me, his own hands gripped behind his back.

He looks nervous, I thought. What could possibly have the man so agitated? My magic would sense anything wrong with his health, and I hadn’t heard of anything happening in the Medica to warrant him being so tense.

Had I done something to upset him? I raced through every patient I’d seen in the past

week, searching for some oversight or misstep. We hadn't lost anyone since I began using magic, and I doubted any of the cases I had treated recently were serious enough to threaten death.

He looked so pale, and sweat was soaking into his collar. I couldn't remember ever seeing the Master so out of sorts.

Then another thought struck: Had one of the Mages returned? They frightened me. Even to anyone without magic, they strode through a room with the gentleness of a storm at sea.

"Irina, I—" He looked at me, then away. With a haggard sigh, he started a second time, "I've been a physiker my whole life. It's—this is—what I'm trying to say—"

I'd seen my Master face the most extreme emergencies, with patients dying on his table with desperation in their eyes. He was a rock, steady and true. Nothing shook him. In that moment, he looked like a boy about to ask a girl for his first kiss. I couldn't decide whether I was more amused or terrified.

He ran a weathered hand over his balding pate and turned to face me. "There's no easy way to say this, so I'm just going to say it. I've informed the King that I wish to retire as Crown Healer. The Medica and apprentices need my full attention, and I can't give either the time they deserve if I spend half my days running between here and the Palace."

I wasn't surprised. More than once, Master Rist had confided in me how torn he'd felt between his duty to the King and to the Medica, his infirmary. What puzzled me was why he was so flummoxed telling me about stepping down. Was that what had upset him so? I studied his face. Color hadn't returned, and, if anything, he seemed to fidget even more than before.

A knot twisted in my gut. “Master, this is wonderful, isn’t it? We could use more of your time each day. I know the other apprentices will be glad for it.”

“You don’t know the rest.” His barely audible mumble reached my magically enhanced ears, and the trickle of unease racing through me grew into a raging river.

“Save your praise.” He sighed and his shoulders drooped. “The King asked me to nominate my replacement, and I . . . I named you.”

“Me? Master, I . . .” I blinked a few times, desperate for my mind to catch up to my mouth. “I don’t even have my Blues.”

His laugh wasn’t the merry rumble I’d come to adore. In its place, a strained quiver broke his smile. “Child, you are so beyond needing a smock of any color. Truth be told, the King should fashion you one of gold.”

I gasped. Gold was only worn by the King or Queen . . . or Mages.

“Master, that’s ridiculous.” I laughed, a nervous echo of his. “I would never—”

“Irina, you are a Mage, the first to be born in . . . I don’t even know how many years. And you are a Healer. A Spirits-blessed, Phoenix-guided Healer with magic. The other Mages care little for us, but you . . . you love helping people. There is no one in the Kingdom—Spirits, in the entire world—who deserves this more.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I had years of studies left in my apprenticeship. I was nowhere near ready to stand on my own, let alone care for the royal household.

As if reading my thoughts, Rist said, “You will continue your studies. There is still much for you to learn. However, the Crown will call upon your services when needed, and you will be the King’s official advisor on matters of medicine.”

“Master . . . I’m not ready . . . I’m only sixteen—”

“Hush, child. You will be called upon when the Prince skins his knee or has a runny nose. Anything more than that, you bring me with you. I will help you walk before you run far ahead of me, which you will, mark my words,” he rumbled, returning to himself and his good humor, then reached into his smock and removed a parchment. He handed me the note.

A crown hovering above the jagged mountain peaks of the Spires was embossed in the golden wax, the King’s personal emblem. I stared down with widened eyes for a long moment before snapping the seal and reading the missive’s contents.

Apprentice Irina Santender, His Majesty Melric Vance, First of his Name and King of the Spires, summons you to the Palace for an audience on the morrow at the second hour past noon.

Spirits welcome you into his royal presence.

Chapter thirteen

Irina

Ikneeled before the King as he smiled down from his golden throne. The chair's back towered above the room, though in reality, it only reached a few hands above the monarch's head. The Queen sat in her throne to the King's left and wore the same warm smile as her husband. Ranks of nobles, members of the Privy Council, and courtiers lined the hall on one side, while Master Rist, Siena, Finn, two new apprentices, and my parents stood to my right.

Though I dared not lift my head to look, I felt every eye fixed on my prostrated form.

King Melric's voice boomed throughout the chamber. "Apprentice Irina Santender, the Crown elevates you to full Healer, effective immediately. Further, we name you Crown Healer to House Vance. You are charged with the care of the royal household, as well as advising us on matters pertaining to health throughout the Kingdom. Rise, and don your new smock."

As I stood, a page stepped out of the shadows and presented me with a neatly folded bundle. My eyes widened at the golden trim that framed the deep blue of the fabric. Glittering thread two fingers wide lined the collar and both cuffs. I'd seen Blues many times. Master Rist wore his every waking moment. But these reflected the light of the flames in nearby braziers, its silky fabric dyed a most intense shade. Then I unfurled the garment. The crown and peaks, the symbol of the King, was

embroidered in the same golden thread across the center.

Queen Asin cleared her throat to get my attention, then motioned me forward. I glanced at the guards to either side of the throne, their broad swords no more ceremonial than their shining armor. The Queen followed my gaze, then extended her hand.

“Come, Healer, approach.” Her tone held a conspiratorial mirth.

As I kneeled before the Queen and kissed her hand, she leaned down and whispered, “The gold was my idea. Given how young you are, I thought it added a delicate touch to impress upon others how unique your skills are.”

I stepped back, and the page helped me pull the silk over my head and straighten it into place. It was magnificent. I traced a finger across the smooth surface and smiled up at the monarchs, then dropped to a knee once more.

“Your Majesties, I am overwhelmed with gratitude and pledge to do my best to keep you and your family safe and whole, so long as I draw breath.”

The High Chancellor had prepared me for the acceptance of the King’s appointment, but I added the bit about drawing breath as I stared at the royal shoes before me.

“We know you will, dear,” the Queen whispered. She reached down and gripped my shoulders, lifting me to stand. My breath caught at the touch of a royal, a rarity even more precious than the gold on my tunic. A slender hand found my chin and raised my gaze to meet hers. “Time to face your future.”

As the Queen spun me to face the court, the High Chancellor, who stood to the right of the King’s throne, called in a clear tenor, “The court and assembled guests are invited to dine with His Majesty, the King, and Her Majesty, the Queen, in

celebration of the Crown's new Healer. Pages will show you to the hall where we will dine."

The King and Queen rose, and all assembled bowed as they descended the dais and exited the audience chamber. I stood before their thrones, dumbstruck as the nobles began to disperse and follow pages.

"Irina." My mother's voice startled me out of my stupor. She and Father stood a few feet from the bottom step, each beaming with pride.

Unsure how one descends from the throne, I threw my shoulders back and strode down the stairs.

"Careful, child. They will think you belong here if you keep walking like that." Rist's booming laugh caught me so off guard that I almost tripped on the last stair.

"No danger of that," Father said. "Our girl may be powerful and bright, but she was born with two left feet."

Mother swatted him playfully, then grabbed me by the shoulders and pulled me into a hug. Father added his weight, then I felt bodies thump into me from behind. A quick peek revealed Finn hugging from one side and Master Rist stretching his chubby arms as far as they would reach around the other.

Siena stood a few paces away, refusing to join the group embrace.

"My lady, Healer." A youthful voice disturbed our moment, and the weight of Finn and Master Rist vanished from behind me. I turned to find a boy who looked of ten summers in royal livery. He bowed the moment our eyes met. "Please follow me. The King and Queen wait."

“My lady?” Father’s voice was punctuated by a grunt, no doubt caused by Mother’s elbow.

I looked over my shoulder and winked. “Mother and Father, please attend me.”

Master Rist laughed, Siena rolled her eyes, and this time, I earned my mother’s playful slap.

The King’s luncheon was more of a feast that I had ever known, with platters of vegetables, meats, and fishes landing before us in a steady stream. By the time dessert arrived on the table, I vowed never to eat again lest my new smock need tailoring to allow for my growing belly.

I emerged from the Palace with a new sense of purpose—and a new silk garment—clinging to my shoulders. As we strode back to the Medica, people waved and gawked. Some pointed at my tunic with the golden trim.

“The ale houses will be filled with rumors this night,” Master Rist said.

“What rumors? What are you talking about?” I asked.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

“My lady.” Father draped an arm around my shoulders and kissed my head. “The people whisper about what your golden thread might mean. Have you forgotten what that color represents?”

“No, of course not.” My gaze fell to the cobbles as we walked. “It’s just . . . I’m the same person I was before.”

Rist stopped walking a few dozen paces from the Medica’s door, halting our entire party’s progress. He and Father exchanged a glance, and then it was my Master that held my shoulders.

“Irina, we know you. Those you have Healed think they do. The people who waved know only what they hear, and rumors make dragons of toads.” He sighed, and his smile fell. “Some will adore you, though they know not why. Others will fear you for the same reason—or lack of reason. Word of your gifts has already spread like wildfire across this Kingdom, and it will only burn brighter now that you wear the King’s crest. I fear your days of simple study are ending.”

Father nodded. “Your Master speaks truly, Irina. I hear the talk from our patients, in the taverns.”

Mother nodded. The others stared.

I didn’t know how to feel. The King’s and Queen’s recognition was beyond anything I could have ever dreamed; and yet, fame had never been my goal. My path was supposed to be that of my parents, of a simple physiker whose work gave hope and comfort. What would come with being well known? How would life change? Would

people bless or envy me? Or both? Would they be kind or—?

“Irina, there is time enough to worry later. Come, enjoy today.” Mother, as ever, knew my heart. Her smile chased away my fears . . . for the moment.

Chapter fourteen

Irina

At first, I didn’t notice the change. I had become used to crowds queuing up for treatment or advice. Patients had always been kind and paid deference to those offering care. Master Rist lectured often about the dangers of thinking too highly of one’s self simply because we wore a smock. He bade us to stay humble and remember our role as servants to the people.

And yet, as fall gave way to winter’s touch and more of my time was spent traveling between the infirmary and the Palace, I began noticing subtle differences.

The first time a woman curtsied as I passed.

That was a respect paid only to nobles and royals. I was neither.

Even the Palace staff took my appointment as more than a simple shift of a Healer’s duties. Maids doted on me everywhere I went, never letting me open a door or carry my own tools. I knew such gestures were meant with the best of intentions but couldn’t stop my skin from crawling every time they occurred.

When the guards at the Palace gate snapped to attention and lowered their heads in crisp salute, I decided to seek the Queen’s counsel.

Respect was one thing. Obedience was a bridge too far.

“Your Majesty, I know everyone means well, but it’s uncomfortable, all the bowing and . . . well, I’m sure you know what I mean better than anyone.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” Queen Asin smiled and gripped my hand. She then leaned forward and lowered her voice. “If you want to know the truth, it still makes me a little uncomfortable, and I’ve worn a crown most of my life.”

“But I don’t wear a crown, and I’m not even a noble. They shouldn’t bow, not to me.”

Asin smirked, and I was sure she was about to share some clever scheme; but, as quickly as the expression came, it vanished, and her smile returned. “They are showing you respect. By extension, they are showing it to the King. After all, you’re his Healer.”

“I suppose.” I wasn’t sure I agreed, but who was I to disagree with the Queen? “It still makes me itch.”

“You will get used to it. Most of it, anyway.” Asin rose. “Join Melric and me for dinner tonight? It would be nice to have some youth at our table for a change.”

I hopped to my feet. “Really? Your Majesty, I’d love to. Thank you.”

As public as the Crown might be, the King and Queen were known for valuing their privacy and rarely invited anyone into their residence, much less to dine with them when there was no formal function requiring it. My mind teetered between astonishment, elation, and a burgeoning affection for my Queen.

“Good,” Asin said with a knowing smile. “We will see you at seven. Please come in something more comfortable than your smock. The King and I will be very casual.”

My head spun. What did one wear to dinner with the King and Queen in their private dining room? And what was the Queen's definition of casual? A gown without her jewels? Was it even possible to be casual with the royal couple?

I left the Palace with a dozen other questions racing through my mind—and a good deal of excitement over the evening to come.

I was so wrapped up in my own thoughts that I didn't see a man in a flowing blue robe watching me pass as I exited the Palace gates.

Hours later, I practically skipped as a page led me into the royal dining room. I'd changed from my smock into a simple green dress. I was relieved to see the King in a simple, white linen shirt with long sleeves and laces that ran halfway down from his neck. The Queen had been right; I'd never seen a royal so casual or relaxed. He stood as I entered, sipping the wine a porter had filled to the brim, then grimaced as a few drops splattered across his shirt.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

“Tossing wine on yourself already, dear?” the Queen quipped as she entered from the opposite side of the room. Despite wearing an unremarkable dress and no jewelry beyond the diamond on her finger, Asin glided through the small chamber with the grace and beauty of the fae found in children’s fables.

I dropped into a deep curtsy and held myself low.

“Now, stop that. You are among family now. No need for a show.” The King barely looked up as he dabbed his shirt with a napkin, while servants scurried to find something to remove the stain. One suggested getting the King another shirt, but Asin wouldn’t hear of it. “Let him suffer. Spilling good wine is abuse of the highest order.”

The servant’s eyes widened as he backed away, but I caught a hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

I reached for a chair across the table from the royals, but Asin’s hawk-like gaze stopped me.

“Not a chance, young lady. You come sit close to us.” She patted the chair next to the Queen’s setting. I shuffled into my seat as another attentive servant pulled my chair back.

How many servants do they have? I thought, as two more appeared to fill our glasses.

At a gesture from the Queen, I took a sip of wine. It was sweet and tasted of plums. More importantly, the light liquid sent a pleasant warmth into my chest. As thrilled as I was to be there, my nerves were abuzz.

“So, Irina,” the King began, admitting defeat over his stained shirt, allowing crimson to flower across white. “How are things at the Medica these days?”

“Mel, please. Let the poor girl stop thinking about Healing for one night.” The Queen shot the King a look, then turned toward me. “Tell us more about you, dear, something our court of spies does not already know.”

The King chuckled as my eyes widened. “You have spies—”

“I was joking, but yes, we have lots of them,” Asin said before her husband could interject.

“Oh, right. Of course, you do.” I fumbled with a fork, desperate for somewhere to send my nervous energy. “Well, I spend most of my time either here or at the infirmary. There’s not much to tell.”

And so the royal grilling began. The Queen might’ve scolded the King for pressing me to talk about the infirmary, but Asin was relentless with questions around my childhood and personal life. Half the time, I could barely get an answer out before the Queen asked her next question. It was all good-natured inquisitiveness, and I was sure the woman liked me, but it was dizzying trying to keep up.

The King, used to his wife’s antics, sipped his wine and watched through amused eyes.

Dinner consisted of a brothy beef stew, roasted potatoes, several preparations of greens, and loaves of freshly baked bread. While the food was hearty and filling, it was nothing like the spread we’d enjoyed at my elevation to Crown Healer. The King apologized for the peasant fare, claiming they usually ate so richly they thought it nice to take a night off from that, too, once in a while. I thought it was one of the tastiest, most lavish meals I’d had in years. The simplicity of the royal couple’s lives

I witnessed behind the veil of the Crown made me appreciate and like the pair even more.

And yet, simple did not mean sparse. Servants placed more food than we could eat in a week on the table, and wine flowed more freely than melted snow down the Spires in Spring. By the time dessert was served, my nerves had calmed. From the reflection of candlelight in the King's glassy eyes, he and the Queen were tipsy.

When the King began telling jokes, Asin tried to intervene, but I begged him to continue. We laughed through tears as servants cleared the plates, leaving only dessert wines in thumb-sized goblets.

"Irina, we have had such a wonderful time tonight," Asin said. "We would love to see more of you, if you are willing to join us from time to time."

"Oh, Your Majesty, I'd love that. You're not at all what I—"

The last of my statement stuck in my throat as the Queen lifted a brow.

"Everyone thinks she's a sharp-tongued devil." The King snorted.

Asin slapped his arm.

"Well, they do!" He earned another slap.

I failed to stifle a giggle, and the three of us lost ourselves in the moment again.

Until the Queen gripped her chest and tumbled to the stone floor.

"Asin!" the King screamed.

I shoved back my chair and threw myself to the ground beside the Queen. Light flared from my palms, turning the dimly lit room into a core of sunlight.

Servants raced out of the room, desperate to find help.

Silver-plated guards raced in.

Page 28

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

The room transformed from a place of light-hearted banter into an angry anthill of activity.

I threw all of my focus into the Queen. “NO!” I screamed as my Light flared even brighter. Several guards staggered back. Servants shielded their eyes.

I pressed two fingers into Asin’s neck, then laid my head against her chest, desperate for the sound of a heartbeat.

There was none.

The Queen was dead.

Chapter fifteen

Irina

Hours later, I stumbled through the Palace gates, headed home.

I was numb, yet my mind was somehow spinning and dazed at the same time.

When it was clear the Queen would not rise, I had stepped back and allowed the King to grieve. If I lived a thousand years, I hoped to never see such anguish again. Servants wept. Tears even streaked down the faces of a few of the stone-faced guards.

High Chancellor Wilton and High Sheriff Wien arrived sometime later. The Palace had been sealed, and every servant, maid, and guard working that night was

questioned. The Chancellor focused on the kitchen staff, while the Sheriff remained in the dining room with the King. Two Constables I hadn't seen enter ushered the staff away from the scene to be questioned.

The mournful tolling of a bell high above the Palace brought the King's head up.

"So soon?" he asked no one in particular.

Sheriff Wien, a tall man with brackish hair and a stern jaw, kneeled beside his King. "Tradition, Majesty. Nothing more. Your people will want to mourn with you."

King Melric nodded.

I could see his eyes. They stared but did not see.

When the King remained quiet, Sheriff Wien stood and turned to me. "Lady Healer, may we speak?"

I curtsied, unsure of the proper etiquette when standing before a noble, a King, and a fallen Queen. "Of course, my lord. Should we go—"

He motioned to the table. "Here will do. The King should hear what you have to say."

I thought that might've been the cruelest thing I'd ever heard. The King was a husband. At least, he had been a husband. Now, he sat slumped on the floor, little more than a shell of himself, refusing to release his wife's hand. How could anyone think to demand statecraft of him then?

That was the moment the enormity of the situation sank in.

In my first audience, it was impossible to ignore the awe of standing before the royal

couple, of striding the marbled halls where men and women of history lived and crafted the future. Then, in a few brief hours, in the private residence of a husband and wife, I came to see my rulers as people, not merely symbols of greatness. I began, if only a little, to forget the crowns that rested so heavily on their brows, and thought of them as a kind, warm couple who welcomed me into their home.

As the High Sheriff of the Kingdom of Spires, in his black cloak adorned with golden braid, sat across the table and stared, I felt as tiny and insignificant as any commoner to kneel at the foot of the throne.

“You were dining with the King and Queen this evening?” Sheriff Wien’s voice was firm but not unkind.

I nodded. “Yes, my lord.”

“And you saw the Queen fall?”

I nodded again.

“You tried to revive her?”

“I used my magic, more than I ever have, but . . . nothing worked.” I bit back a sob.

“She was dead before I could help her. I tried. Truly, I did.”

The Sheriff surprised me by reaching across the table and taking my hand. His grip was gentle, and when I looked up, his eyes were soft. “We know you did, my lady.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

I squeezed my eyes shut and drew in a breath, not realizing I squeezed his hand as I did.

“Could you tell how she died? Would your magic tell you that?” he asked, freeing his hand and leaning back.

I wiped a tear from my cheek and met his gaze. “I don’t need magic to know she was poisoned; but yes, my magic also confirmed it. I could See into her body.”

“Really?” He stared. “What did you see inside her?”

I hesitated. I’d treated hundreds of patients, if not more, but I had never seen poison like that. I’d never seen anything like that.

“It looked . . . it’s hard to explain . . . like a blackness seeping through her veins . . . like tar oozing where blood should flow. I know that doesn’t make much sense, but that’s what it looked like.”

“Could you tell what kind of poison it was?”

I shook my head. “I have no idea. It was unlike anything I’ve ever seen.”

“We will need a thorough examination. I believe the Queen would choose you to perform such, were she here.”

I closed my eyes again, and tried to keep my heart from shattering into a hundred pieces. How could they ask this of me? I knew it was my role, and the Queen and I

had begun to understand one another, but still . . .

“Whatever the King needs,” I said, unable to think clearly.

Motion brought all eyes to the King as he stood and addressed the Sheriff. “Let the girl go home, Byron. I leave my lady wife”—his words faltered—“in your care.”

The Sheriff bowed toward his King, then said to me, “One of the Palace guards will escort you to the Medica.”

“I’ll be all right—”

He raised a palm. “Tonight, accept our escort, please.”

I curtsied as he motioned to one of the guards and instructed the man to walk me home.

The next day, I returned to the Palace to examine the Queen. I insisted Master Rist accompany me. Despite my rising power, he outmatched me by a lifetime in knowledge and experience. Besides, Rist was a comforting presence, a calmness in the turbulent sea that was the royal court.

The Queen had been poisoned. Of that, there could be no doubt. If what I had seen with my magic was not confirmation enough, the blackening of her tongue we found during our examination removed all uncertainty.

But how?

Royal guards stood watch as the kitchen staff prepared each meal. Every plate set on the royal table passed through two separate tasters, one in the kitchen before the food left, and another outside the dining room. They were kept separate and observed by

different guards to eliminate any possibility of collusion.

“Tell me about the dinner,” Rist said as we watched priestesses wrap the Queen’s body in white cloth.

I walked my Master through the evening. He insisted I recount each course, every refilling of wine, every new place setting laid before us. My memory was normally strong, but who thinks to memorize the servings of a dinner?

Then something occurred to me.

“Master, I ate the same food from the same platters, yet I showed no sign of poison.” I stood and paced across the chamber. “I didn’t experience dizziness or quickening of my heart. I showed no signs of perspiration. Those were symptoms I observed in the Queen as she collapsed. She gripped her chest, and when I attended her, her skin was clammy and wet. Now that I think about it, the King suffered no symptoms, either.”

“What are you thinking, Irina?”

“I . . . I don’t know. Why would anyone want to kill the Queen? She wielded significant influence, but the King rules. Perhaps someone tried to kill him and poisoned the wrong glass or plate.”

Rist gripped his chin and tapped a finger against his lips. “Do you think Kelså or one of the other Mages could help us identify the poison? At least that would give us a place to start.”

I sat beside him again, rested my head against the back of the chair, and stared into the ceiling. The thought of seeing Kelså again was pleasant enough, but there was no way to know if she would be the Mage they would send.

The Master was right. We needed help.

With a groan, I rolled my head to look at him. “Kelså taught me how to reach out to her. I’ll try when we get back to the Medica.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

In the days that followed, I hid in my chamber in the infirmary, avoiding all but the most critical of patients. Master Rist pleaded with me to come out, to help with patients, to talk. Still, I kept to myself, grappling with what I'd seen in the Palace.

On the fourth day following the Queen's murder, a knock and an unfamiliar voice sounded at my chamber door.

"Irina," a rich, deep voice called. "I am Mage Danai Thorn. Kelså and Johann sent me to help you. We had nothing to do with the attack on the Queen. We are very sorry. Please let me in."

I bolted across the room and threw the door open, banging its handle against the stone wall.

"How do you know about the Queen's death?" I glared up at the man, fists balled against my hips. My hair was wild, my eyes red, and I was still in my night clothes from the prior evening.

"You met Johann. He has been close to the King for many years. They have ways of communicating." He raised both hands in surrender. "And they did ring the bell rather loudly."

I slammed the door in his face.

The knock sounded again.

I stood there glaring, as if my ire could frighten the man away.

Moments of silence passed, long enough for me to believe the Mage had left me alone, when Light flared in the corner of my room. When the brilliance faded, the man, Danai, appeared. Straight black hair was pulled tightly behind his head and tied with black ribbon. He looked young, twenty or so winters. To my credit, I didn't startle—just looked up with sad, tired eyes.

“I asked you to leave me alone. Do you Mages ever listen to anyone but yourselves?”

“That is a fair assessment of our brothers and sisters. There is no sound they love so much as the tones of their own voices.”

I glared, then pointed to a chair by my desk. As Danai settled into the uncomfortable seat, his navy robe spreading across the floor, I retreated across the room and sat on the corner of my bed.

“You called it an attack. No one has determined how the Queen died. What aren't you telling me, Mage?”

I spat that last word. Danai flinched.

He surveyed my room. Clothes lay strewn about. Only two candles remained with any wax or wick, while others' lives had dribbled and puddled across my desk. Two uneaten meals on tin trays sat on one side of the room, giving off a faint stench.

He waved a finger, and the discarded trays vanished. With another wave, soiled clothing disappeared, and wax reformed into perfectly round candles. A ball of Mage Light appeared, giving the room a cool illumination.

I watched but said nothing.

“Have you eaten?” he asked.

I eyed him, then shook my head.

“Are you hungry?”

Reluctantly, I nodded.

A new tray appeared on the desk. It held a bowl of soup, a fist-sized loaf, and a pitcher filled with water. Danai poured water into the glass, then rose, strode across the room, and handed it to me.

I stared up at him for a moment before accepting the glass and taking a sip.

“Why are you doing this? Why do you care?”

He pulled the chair from behind my desk and sat facing me. “Because we—Johann, Kelså, and I—are not like the others. We were not part of their plan, and only learned of their actions earlier today. Because we believe those given great power have a responsibility to do good, to help those without. Because our hearts break at the thought of what you—and the King—must be suffering right now.”

“What plan? That’s twice you’ve made it sound like you know what happened, like the Queen was murdered.”

There were only a handful of people in the entire Kingdom who knew that the Queen was poisoned. I doubted Mages were among the King’s inner circle, though Danai’s reference to the Grand Mage and his closeness to the King made me wonder. Still, it had only been days, and I needed to hear him answer.

“She was.” His voice was ice.

I managed to draw in a breath and look into Danai’s unflinching eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

“She was your friend.” It wasn’t a question.

I nodded.

“She was killed because she was your friend.”

My breath caught. “Spirits. Why?”

I clutched the glass so tightly my knuckles whitened.

“They are sending you a message. Join us, or this will happen to everyone you love. Irina, you are a new Mage, a wild card, if you will. The balance among our number is . . . tenuous. We each felt your well of power when you were born. It was like seeing a stone tossed into a pond. When you manifested—when you Healed your Master—that felt like an entire mountain hit the water’s surface.”

My eyes moistened, and I swatted away tears before they could betray me. “I still don’t understand. What does that have to do with—”

“Listen to me. They want your power added to theirs to tip the scales. You are stronger . . . you are very strong. They will stop at nothing to bring you to heel.”

“But . . . the Queen?”

He nodded. “The Queen first. Next could be your Master or the other apprentices. They could destroy the Medica. And then there are your parents.”

My fingers lost their grip on the glass; it clattered to the floor. My eyes darted around the room, as if some corner of the chamber might offer solace. I gasped for breath, and the world closed in around me.

Danai dropped to his knees before me and reached up to grip my shoulders. I tried to pull away, but the last vestige of my strength fled, and I fell into his embrace.

He held me as I wept.

“Irina, some of us wish to help you, to teach you. Others want you contained. You will need more than Healing to protect yourself and those you care about.” He pulled back and searched my eyes. “Please, let me help you.”

Chapter sixteen

Irina

The Queen’s death was pronounced a heart attack, allowing the people of Fontaine to grieve without fear of a murderer clever enough to strike the royal household. The King, frustrated by his inability to bring justice to those responsible for his wife’s death, became despondent. I was summoned to the Palace almost every day. Most of the time, I listened while the King mourned or recalled happier times.

Danai remained in the capital. As the weeks rolled by, he became a fixture within the Medica. While he had no formal training in the Healing arts, he could direct his magic to tend simple wounds and sickness, allowing the rest of us to focus on more challenging situations.

The Mage’s medical knowledge may have been limited, but his magic knowledge far outmatched mine. Whenever one of us tired, he lent his strength through a trickle of power that restored the spirit. Our days had always been long, but now, with his help,

they no longer ended in utter exhaustion. His presence morphed from one of comfort and support to a vital source revitalizing strength.

He rarely left my side. When my endurance flagged, his hand was there lifting me, shouldering the burden with me.

I allowed him to teach me more about my powers, too.

Danai taught me how to call balls of Light, flame, and water with ease, eliciting squeals of delight and rounds of applause from the few apprentices I allowed to watch my training. And yet, despite the wonders unfolding before me through our lessons, Healing remained my greatest passion.

Early one morning, as the sun peeked above the Spires, we crept around the side of the Medica and peered out at the endless sea of people. “I can’t believe how many people are here. It seems like there’s more every day.”

Danai grunted in agreement, then replied in my mind. “You know you don’t have to whisper. There’s a better way.” I shot him an annoyed glare, but he just grinned down at me. “Word of your Healing has spread beyond the western end of the country. People are now flowing in from every corner of the Kingdom. The King was even forced to post soldiers in the blocks around the Medica to maintain order.”

“I always wanted to help as many people as I could.” I shook my head and turned back toward the door. “I just never imagined anything like this.”

“Irina, you haven’t left the infirmary in weeks. You work from sunrise to sunset until you can barely stand. I can only bolster your strength so much. You need time to gather your own strength, to heal yourself. You still need time to mourn—”

“Stop. Don’t go there,” I said with more heat than I intended. “I’m sorry, Danai. I

didn't mean to snap. It's just . . . I'm just scared if I go down that path, I won't be able to find my way back. I'll lose myself in grief—and anger. I can feel it even now, churning and pressing, begging for release, like it wants me to hurt someone for killing the Queen. I'm scared, Danai.”

He gripped my shoulders and pulled me into an embrace. I breathed his scent as I pressed into his chest.

“I won't let you get lost, but you can't hide from your pain. If you try, you'll end up hurting everyone you care about, not to mention yourself. I've seen far too much good in you to let that happen.”

I pulled back and looked up. His eyes were intense, pools of hazel with flecks of gold. They bled empathy.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

My magic could feel his sincerity, desire to help, and something else—longing?

I studied him and realized his feelings had grown larger and more quickly than the clamoring crowds, but I didn't have a clue how I felt. There'd been no time for my own feelings, not with so many others needing my attention.

If he cares about me—I stopped myself. That was ridiculous. He's a Mage protecting his interests, nothing more.

Besides, I didn't have time for silly emotions, much less a relationship. Too many people needed me: my parents, Master Rist, the apprentices, our patients—even the King. Melric relied on me more with each passing day, and I looked forward to our visits.

That realization made me pause.

The maelstrom that whirled inside me was so much—too much. Maybe Danai was right. Maybe I needed to get away from everything and everyone before I drowned beneath their sea of expectations.

I shook off the internal dialogue and patted Danai's chest with my palm.

“Thank you, Danai. I don't think I could've made it this far without you.”

I turned and strode back into the infirmary.

Chapter seventeen

Danai

“There’s nowhere in the world more beautiful than the Spires when the leaves turn,” Irina said as we walked up the path that wound around the base of the mountain closest to Fontaine. Snow still capped the peaks, but life was blooming about the mountains’ feet. Recently barren trees sprouted buds of green, laying a carpet of verdant shades. Crystal brooks, overflowing thanks to the thawing of spring, raced by.

But it was the wildlife that captured Irina’s gaze.

“Shh. Stay still,” she whispered.

“Why are we standing still?” My voice brushed her mind.

She glared back with narrowed eyes, then pointed through the woods. “Because there’s a family of deer, and I’d rather not scare them away.”

I grinned. In so many ways, Irina was a woman grown, bearing the weight of duty that would crush most twice her age. And yet, in moments like those, the girl of seventeen smiled back at me. Her happiness filled me with a joy I scarcely understood. It was a drug, and I craved it more each day.

From the first moment, my heart longed to hold her, to press my palm to her cheek, to feel her lips against my own. There was a glow in her that had nothing to do with magic. To me, she was magic.

I’d yet to summon the courage to tell her how I felt, though I doubted she could miss it. She caught me staring often enough. The coquettish smile she gave was enough to spike the heat already flowing through my veins.

Perhaps today, I thought, then grinned inwardly as I stared at the deer. But a little help from a friend couldn't hurt.

She reached out to grab my arm and pull me back into our hiding place, but I strode forward, heedless of the noise of my passing. The heads of all three deer, two adults and one fawn, snapped up. I let a trickle of magic flow toward them, and their tension eased. Only when I stood before the fawn, stroking her chin, did I glance back to find Irina's astonished face.

"Come. The little one is curious about you." I winked and flashed her my best smile.

"Is he talking to you?" she asked, wonder filling her voice as she stepped from behind the foliage. "How are you doing this? Why have they not run?"

That was the first time her words touched my mind.

I had to suppress a shiver.

She walked slowly, as though afraid she might frighten the deer away, until she stood by my side. The fawn looked up and met her gaze, then licked her outstretched hand.

Her laughter sang through the trees.

It filled my heart.

"What are you smiling at, Mage?" she asked, bumping her shoulder against mine.

A rush of pink flowed up my neck and into my cheeks. I looked down and focused on the fawn. "In all these months, I don't think I've seen you wear anything other than your smock. Riding leathers look good on you."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

Her eyes dropped to her trousers and blouse, then rose to meet mine again. “You were right. It is good to get out of that building and feel something other than a smock against my skin.”

I chuckled. “The whole glowy-hands thing sets you apart more than your clothes—and not just as a Healer. I have heard talk in the city about some wanting you to take part in the government as advisor to the King.”

She stopped stroking the deer. “What? Are you joking?”

I shook my head. “Irina, the people adore you. More than that, they respect you. Many of them see more in you than just a Healer.”

She stepped away from the deer. I released my flow of magic, and we wandered off into the woods.

I stepped close to Irina. “Did I say something wrong?”

She looked up. Her eyes held such depth. “That’s flattering, but all I’ve ever wanted was to be just a Healer. It’s the whole reason the Mages . . .”

She seemed to wrestle with what to say next as she walked to a boulder and sat. I remained standing, waiting.

Finally, Irina said, “Why do they care what I do? From what you’ve said, they don’t even like each other, much less want to work together. Why can’t they just leave me alone to do my work?”

“Because they’re afraid of you.”

“Afraid of me?” She scoffed.

“Yes. Afraid and jealous. Or covetous might be a better word for it.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” I closed the gap between us and sat beside her. “They were afraid of your power at first. They wanted it for themselves, and saw how you resisted them. They couldn’t control you as they wished. Now, they’re more afraid of what you represent and how the people respond to you. They see you as a threat to the way they’ve lived for hundreds, and in a few cases, thousands, of years.”

I watched as she puzzled through what I’d said. She gripped her fingers, then released them.

“It doesn’t make any sense. I don’t even know how to use my magic other than to Heal—and those few things you’ve taught me. What difference does it make if I’m liked by the people? Would they rather I’m feared or hated like they are?” When I flinched, she gripped my arm. “Oh, Danai, I didn’t mean you. I’m sorry. You have been nothing but kind.”

“I know they hate us. You don’t have to protect me from the truth.”

“Danai—”

“Mages have not always been good to the common folk. There were times when they used power to subjugate and control. They lashed out because they could. It has been centuries since those events occurred; still, the people remember. Tales of those deeds frighten children to bed. They’re sung in taverns and on street corners. The people

hate what they fear, and Mages instilled terror long ago.”

Irina’s grasp on my arm tightened. “It doesn’t help that you hide yourselves away. If they just knew you as I do—”

“Irina, please. Just hear me out. This is important. The Mages who killed the Queen will return—maybe not today or tomorrow, but they will come back. When they do, they will come for everything you hold dear. If they can’t get you to join them, they will try to destroy you to eliminate the threat. You need your magic to protect yourself. The only thing that can repel power is greater power.”

She released my arm and stood, stepping across the clearing before turning back. “What am I supposed to do, Danai? You and Kelså are the only other Mages who cared enough to show up and help. As much as I appreciate everything you’ve done, the three of us wouldn’t be enough to match them, even if I knew how to use my magic.”

“You could—”

“Could what?” Her voice rose as she spoke. “Were you going to say you’d train me to fight? To use my magic to what? Destroy rather than Heal? Isn’t that what they want, Danai? Are you one of them now?”

My eyes lowered before returning to hers; I noticed pain creasing their edges. “I know you don’t mean that.”

“How do you know what I mean?” she shouted, her voice now loud enough to echo through the mountains. “And how do I know they didn’t send you here just to have this conversation? You’ve been so patient, waiting until the time was right, waiting until I trusted you enough—”

I stood and walked to the edge of the path, looking out over the valley below.

“See! Now you’re turning your back on me.”

“Irina, please stop.” When I turned to face her, a tear had fallen down one cheek. “All I ever wanted was to help you, to . . . to be with you. I don’t want to return to the other Mages, and I don’t want you to—but you need to be able to defend yourself. They’re not going to leave you alone.”

As quickly as her anger flared, it died. She looked into my eyes, and I felt her magic swell with empathy.

“Danai—”

“You don’t have to say anything. I know your anger is not aimed at me.” I looked up the path where we had been heading before we stopped. “We still have time to make it to the top.”

She stared a moment, then gave me a weak smile and nodded. As we turned and started up the trail, my shoulder brushed hers, and I gripped her hand. She squeezed, then let go and stuffed her hand into her pocket.

Irina did not see my shoulders fall as we hiked.

Chapter eighteen

Irina

Isipped amber liquid from a crystal tumbler as King Melric smiled and watched my every move.

When he summoned me for an official audience to advise him on matters of health and the state, we met in the Privy Council chamber, surrounded by guards and the bustle of Councilors and messengers. More often, though, he hosted me in the private dining room over a meal that felt more intimate than official.

That night, following a most delicious dinner, the King suggested we retire to his study.

“You love to study, do you not?” he asked.

I smiled and took his proffered hand and stood. “I do, Your Majesty.”

“Did you know, my library contains the oldest tomes in the Kingdom, perhaps in the world? There is an entire section of journals by Kings and Privy Councilors dating back to the time before we were one kingdom.”

He didn’t release my hand as we strode toward the door. A servant waiting to clear the last of our glasses glanced down, and her eyes widened before flitting away.

“I dream of a day when no crisis or audience commands my attention, so I might read alone and explore the mysteries bound in leather in my own home.” He squeezed my hand as we made our way down the hall.

“What would you read?” I asked, flustered by his clasp and his leading me into his most cherished part of the Palace.

“I think the question should be, what would you read?” He glanced sideways, a grin playing at his lips.

The hairs on my arms perked at his smile.

“What do you mean, sire?”

He stopped before a large wooden door. Ornate braces held torches on either side. The King removed a chain about his neck I knew he wore beneath his tunic. I had seen it several times when examining his health. A single key slid down the chain as he held it out to me.

“That is the key to your library?” I asked.

He nodded.

“I wondered what room you held so close to your heart,” I said, taking the key.

“Please, do the honor then,” he said, motioning to the brass plate with the keyhole. “Did I mention that some of the journals were written by Crown Healers? If I recall, one is six hundred years old.”

I fumbled the key before sliding into the lock. “Six hundred?”

Click.

Melric leaned down and whispered so close to my ear I could almost feel his lips. “That is not the key to my library. It is the key to my heart.”

The door swung open, and I stood frozen beneath its arched frame. What lay before me was no study. It could barely be described as a library. The cavernous chamber behind the simple door was lit by only a few candles and stretched beyond my sight.

“Would you please your King with a ball of Light?”

I looked back, puzzled. He had never asked me to use magic for anything beyond Healing. Still, he was King.

I focused on my Light and called a ball of bright bluish flame. As it grew, darkness fled, revealing a palace unto itself.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

“Dear Spirits,” I whispered.

The room was narrow, the width of five or six carts traveling side by side, but it went on forever. I sent my ball of Light ahead of us, hoping to glimpse the far wall but never did.

“How is this possible?” I breathed. “This room must extend beyond the Palace walls. Does it go into a mountain or underground?”

I ran my hand over leather tomes on shelves that lined every wall. The ceiling rose more than twenty feet, and rolling ladders stood sentry at regular intervals along each side. In the center, leather chairs and a few elegantly carved desks were the room’s only furniture.

“Am I to teach you of magic this night?” the King mused. His hand found the small of my back, and he guided me further inside. “I will pour us drinks. Take a look around.”

I was already lost in wonder by the time I heard ice hitting glass.

“I never knew so many books existed,” I said.

“The library in Sil boasts more books than any in the world, though I doubt that claim. Few outside the royal family have ever seen this one. As you discovered, our study received a bit of magical enhancement.” Melric chuckled. “At last count, there were more than six hundred thousand volumes here, but that was a decade ago and did not include official state records. I believe we may approach one million any

day.”

“A million,” I repeated, unable to find my own words.

“Do you like it?” He stood beside me and held out a glass of brandy.

“This may be the most wonderful room in all the world. I could spend my life trapped in here and never feel imprisoned.”

He laughed, a booming sound almost as rich as his voice when giving royal proclamations from his throne. “We can skip the imprisonment. You are welcome to enjoy it whenever you like.”

I turned to face him, blinking away disbelief. “Your Majesty?”

He sucked in a breath, reminding me of how new apprentices braced themselves the first time they stood before our Master.

“Why don’t we sit and chat? There are things . . . well . . . I would like your thoughts.” He downed half his glass and stepped back to refill it. I had known the King for almost a year and had never seen him act so discomfited. If I didn’t know better, I would say he looked nervous.

We settled into oversized chairs, and I watched as Melric swirled the ice in his glass like a soothsayer reading the future in leaves. “Someone on my staff commented that you have visited the Palace every day for eight months. Were you aware of that?”

My eyes widened. Of course, I knew my visits were daily. He summoned me daily, and I was the King’s to command. What I hadn’t realized was how closely the staff paid attention to guests’ comings and goings. That was unnerving.

Melric eyed me, a grin forming. “I have worn this crown for twelve years. If I let the nattering nits get to me with their gossip, I’d never get any work done. You should not let their talk bother you. Besides, I have come to . . . trust your counsel.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” I leaned back, trying to relax despite the creeping feeling that the ceiling might fall on my head at any moment. “Your trust means a great deal to me.”

“Good. That is good. Trust is very good,” he said, beginning to babble. He ran a hand over his beard. It was still mostly black, though snow would eventually cover his face as it did every corner of the Kingdom.

I studied him with my Healer’s gaze.

There’s something off about him tonight.

Then the King did the last thing I expected.

He rose, set his glass on a side table, and kneeled beside me.

What is he doing? My heart leaped into my throat.

Color flooded the King’s cheeks, and his gaze rose to meet mine. I wanted to reach out with my magic, to sense what he felt, to understand why he acted so strangely, but I dared not. He was my King.

“Irina, you were important to Asin. You know that, right?”

I nodded. “She was my friend, Your Majesty. I cared for her.”

He looked down, then back up. “You are loved by the people. I think . . .”

Again, he looked down, and gulped.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

He's so nervous. Sweet Spirits, his hand is shaking.

"I think you could be loved by your King, too."

I fumbled my glass, splashing liquor across my pale green dress.

"Your Majesty—"

"Please, Irina, call me Melric, at least when we are alone."

No one called him by his name, not even his closest friends.

I tried looking away, but the gaze of a king held power. It compelled with the force of a magic all its own. And when a king said he could love you, his gaze became the whole world.

He took my glass and set it on the table, then cradled my hands in his.

"Your Majesty, you will get brandy on your tunic."

"First of all, my name is Melric." He smiled, and some of his nerves seemed to settle.

"And second?"

"I have a palace full of servants to care for my tunic. A little brandy will not bother them one whit." His smile brightened. "Irina, you became part of our family the day you first set foot in this Palace. Since then, you healed me in more ways than I can

count. I have come to rely—no, that’s not right—I have come to enjoy—dammit—Irina, I need you.” He struggled a moment. “When you’re here, my heart is lighter. When you leave, the halls of this Palace grow dim.”

“Your Maj—Melric—” I was spluttering worse than the King.

“Please, let me get this out. I’ve been practicing for days.”

My eyebrows rose.

“Irina, I loved Asin with all my heart. You know this. Surely, you saw it.”

“Of course.”

“I could never replace her, and I will always love her. But . . . the Kingdom needs a Queen, and the Crown needs an heir. I need a partner. More than that, I need someone I can trust—and love—someone who will never leave my side.”

He reached into his pocket and removed a silk-wrapped bundle. His fingers trembled as he unfolded the cloth and revealed a thumb-sized emerald surrounded by diamonds atop a golden band.

I gasped.

I had seen that ring on the hand of Queen Asin many times.

“Irina Santender, will you be my Queen?”

Chapter nineteen

The Mages

A silver chalice rested on a pedestal in the Chamber's center, shimmering flame dancing above its rim. Intricate lines of silver and gold intertwined to form powerful symbols of magic across the floor, walls, and ceiling. Six Mages stood encircling the fiery goblet. Each face wore the same troubled expression.

Chandler spoke, breaking their silent contemplation. "There is no more time. She grows in strength and power by the day. The people flock to her, especially after her marriage to the King. It has been over five years since Johann's visit. We must act."

"She is a girl of eighteen. What threat is she to our combined might?" Elric crossed his muscled arms. "And just how would you have us act? Kill one of our own? Kill the Queen of Spires? She may not follow our path or live among our order, but she is still a Mage, one of us. The Phoenix would extract a price I doubt any here are willing to pay."

"Bah! That silly old wives' tale? We are the Phoenixes for this age." Tasha looked into each Mage's eyes. "But you're right, she should not die. That precedent would be unhealthy for the rest of us."

"Why are ya so fixated on dis girl, Tasha?" Isoldå asked, speaking for the first time since they'd gathered over an hour ago. "She does not'ing wit' her power but Heal. Does she even know how t' use it for anyt'ing else?"

Tasha ground her teeth and glared at the islander. "How can you ask that? Are you even more of an idiot that I already thought?"

“Tasha.” Elric’s voice held a note of warning.

Isoldå merely quirked a brow and crossed her arms.

Tasha’s eyes narrowed. “She is Queen at what, sixteen or seventeen winters? And if you cannot feel the waves of her power like a boulder dropped into the Well, your magical senses are numb. She could already match two, perhaps three, of us. If we give her time to grow—”

“She can only grow if we teach her, else she fumbles in t’ dark,” Isoldå said.

“Isn’t Danai still with her?” Chandler asked.

Tasha nodded and locked eyes with Isoldå. “Johann sent him . . . to teach her.”

Isoldå’s mouth opened, then closed.

“What do you propose?” Chandler barked. “You do have a plan?”

“Of course, I do,” Tasha snapped. “We strike first, before she can rise to power. We cripple her so she may never threaten us in the first place. She cares little for herself, for riches or glory, but those she loves are everything to her. We use them to break her spirit—or to bend it to our will, at the very least.”

“Kelså and Johann will never approve,” Elric said. Several of the others murmured in agreement.

Tasha waved a hand and extinguished the flame at their center. “Then we had better not tell them.”

Chapter twenty

Irina

I smiled across the kitchen as Mother pulled fresh bread from the wood-burning stove. A yeasty aroma drifting through the house made my stomach growl as it had since I was a child. When Mother slathered salty butter across its golden crust, the simple loaf transformed from a household staple into a delicacy from my past.

Five years had been little enough time to grow used to life in the Palace. Melric was kind and gentle, growing to love me in ways I never knew possible. I hoped, in time, I would learn to love him in return. A year in the Palace had also opened my eyes to the lives of royals. We enjoyed extravagant wealth, ate food prepared by the finest chefs, and enjoyed the richest wines. I owned more gowns than there were days to wear them. And the jewelry . . . the moment I thought I had seen it all, Melric would place another necklace or ring in my hands.

In a way, I supposed I loved him. He was good and kind, forever seeking my opinion and counsel.

Was I in love with the King? Was that a thing of which I was even capable? I may never be sure.

One thing was certain: I was never alone.

Ten ladies awaited my pleasure. Ten. Who needed ten women to don a dress or face paint? Servants stood at every doorway waiting on the off chance the King or I might have a sudden need. I couldn't remember the last time I opened my own door.

Nobles were also ever present. They preened and fawned, like some strange flock of birds who could never impress others enough. They were necessary, I supposed. Without their support, the Crown would fall. Still, I was never sure whether to brace myself for mindless flattery or endless groveling when one approached.

Perhaps Melric's greatest surprise to date was the day he added me to his Privy Council. Asin had never been allowed to sit at their table. No Queen had. When I tried to protest, Melric lowered his voice and cupped my cheek. "I need the brightest minds in the Kingdom advising me, and the rest are candle flames next to the sun that is my Queen."

When my royal duties allowed, I still worked in the Medica. Melric had objected at first, but the way the people responded to their Queen laying hands on the ill was beyond anything we could have dreamed. I didn't Heal for fame or glory, but the sparkle of the Crown grew each time I worked by Master Rist's side.

Sparkles were funny things.

As I watched Mother fret about the kitchen, I realized something.

I miss these simple pleasures.

Who would have thought the Queen of the Spires would miss sitting in a simple kitchen baking bread with her mother? The idea almost made me laugh.

"Go get your father. Lunch is ready, Your Majesty." Mother placed the loaf in a basket and covered it with a towel to keep it warm. She grinned down at me and made a shooing motion. "Go on, before this gets cold."

I hopped to my feet and offered a mocking bow. "Only because you addressed me properly, Queen-Mother."

I found my father snoring, nestled beneath two blankets in a rocking chair on the porch. His mouth was so wide open I worried flies might find a new home.

I kneeled beside him and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Papa, wake up. There’s fresh bread and beef stew.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

He muttered something as his eyes fluttered open. His head was now covered with more silver than black, and his joints resisted quick movement. Had I been gone so long? How had age crept up on him so?

My heart twisted every time I came home to find another hint of erosion wearing away at my parents, especially my father. He seemed to be aging more rapidly than most. I knew it was part of the natural cycle, but it still pained me to think of their life-threads shortening. I moved stray hair from his forehead and reached under his elbow.

As I helped him to his feet, the sounds of footfalls on gravel made me turn.

Four figures in silky blue robes approached.

Mages had visited before, but they'd never obscured their identity. This time, each robed figure wore a simple white mask that tied around the back of their head. There were no markings or features, only two eye holes and a thin slit where their lips hid.

The tallest of the Mages stepped forward and spoke without preamble or greeting. "Irina, it has been five years. It is time for you to join us."

It wasn't a question this time.

I stepped in front of my father, crossed my arms, and squared my shoulders with the Mage. "I belong here, with these people, with my people. I do not need any of you."

The tall Mage cocked his head as if considering. "Perhaps you are right, but you do

need our instruction. Today, you will learn the price for refusing our aid. I hope this will be the last time you need this particular education.”

Before I could think or speak, the Mage raised a palm, and my father wailed in pain. I whirled to watch in horror as he clutched his chest and tumbled to the ground. His eyes were wide.

I threw myself to the ground and thrust my hands out above him. Light raged from my palms as I poured every drop of my energy into saving him.

But it was too late.

My father’s heart had stilled.

I raised my head and released a primal scream as I gripped my father’s shoulders, shaking him, begging him to live.

He stared through lifeless eyes and did not stir.

A clatter lifted my gaze, and I saw that only one Mage remained beside me. The other three were now inside the house—with my mother.

I shoved past the Mage and bolted through the door.

The Mage at the door wrapped me in his thick arms and held me tight against his chest, forcing me to watch what unfolded before me. My mother’s eyes snapped up to meet mine as magic leaped from the hands of the other two Mages, engulfing her in writhing blue flame.

The stench of scorched flesh filled the cottage as Mother’s cries ebbed and died.

The Mage restraining me released his grip and stepped back. With a wave of his hand, the flames vanished, leaving a charred, smoking husk where Mother once stood. Without a word, the robed figures nodded to one another and vanished.

I fell to my mother's side and sobbed.

Chapter twenty-one

Irina

Hours later, when my tears had dried and the fires of my anger were stoked, I appeared with a blinding flash in the royal bedchamber. Melric would destroy the world for me. He would hunt those Mages down and—

My head swiveled before landing on the prone form of the King.

He lay unmoving on the bed. The sheets beneath him were drenched in blood. On the floor at the bed's foot, a summoning circle was painted. The symbol had been traced using the King's own blood and blazed to life as I stared into it, removing any doubt who had been responsible for the King's murder.

I threw my head back and howled in rage.

Guards poured into the chamber.

Alarms rang throughout the Palace.

Bells tolled throughout the capital.

Page 39

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

My mind raged, then fear for the last of my living family stabbed into my chest.

With a thought, I vanished from the Palace and appeared before the door of the Medica.

“WE WARNED YOU,” was etched deep into the wood beneath another circle.

Anger burned through me.

I had resented the Mages.

I despised their arrogance and disregard for others, especially those without magic.

They were entitled, condescending, and powerful—a terrible combination.

And now my hatred was a brilliant star.

My heart warred with my head, caught between devastating grief and abject wrath. A part of me wanted to flee the Palace, find a quiet corner of the Kingdom, and cry until tears refused to fall. But the greater part of me longed for retribution.

My magic flared, swelling in my chest and brightening my sight. As I thought of all the ways I would see Mages die, power writhed, an enraged beast clawing at its cage, desperate for release.

Like snow on a spring day, my sadness melted beneath the fires of my rage. The small girl who stood before the Medica’s door all those years ago whimpered in the

recess of my mind. I turned on her, freeing my magic to eviscerate her presence from my soul.

There would be no salvation, not for me, and not for those who stole everything I held dear.

I felt power pulse, a beating heart beside my own. It fueled my rage—or I fueled its rage—and my path unfurled before me.

Glaring at the door, I raised a palm, and fire bloomed. I willed it into the etching until a broad smear of char was all that was left of the Mages' message. With a flick of my wrist, the door flew open, and I strode in. I had never wanted to use magic for anything beyond Healing, but now I ached to turn every drop of my power into a weapon.

There would be no denying my vengeance.

Danai froze in the hallway as I marched toward him, my eyes ablaze with the same fire from my palms moments before.

I stormed past him and down the hall.

"Irina, what happened?" Danai made to move toward me, then froze again, eyes widening.

I turned and stepped so close our breath mingled, then raised my palms. Balls of flame appeared, swirling and throbbing.

"Your friends just killed my parents and my husband."

"Oh, gods, no. The King—" His face twisted in horror as his hands pressed against

his forehead.

“Did you know they were coming? Did you know their plan, Danai?” My voice was Death on the wind.

“No. I had no idea they’d returned. How do you know it was them? What happened?”

My flames flared. “Were you involved?”

“No!” His voice teetered between hurt and disbelief. “Irina, I would never—”

My eyes drilled into his as my magic drilled into his mind, searching for deception.

“I was with my parents. I watched them die. They made me watch. Then I found the King in a bloody bed.” I edged forward, the flame now close enough to lick his cheeks. “The Mages left a little note for me on the door. They wanted me to know what happens—”

“What did they say?” He gulped.

“It was simple and clear. ‘We warned you,’ with a summoning circle.”

His mouth fell open. When he spoke, his words were a hollow whisper. “They’re challenging you to resist them.”

“I accept.”

Chapter twenty-two

Irina

I stormed into the audience chamber to the echoes of shouting and arguing. The Council had assembled, and had positioned themselves for a Kingdom without King Melric. If someone didn't get things in hand quickly, this would spin further out of control. Melric died without an heir, which meant every duke in the land was likely angling to replace the royal line with their own.

I had just watched my parents burn.

I was in no mood for their games.

“Everyone, sit.” My magic-enhanced voice rattled the paned glass of the chamber.

All heads turned and arguments ceased.

“Your Majesty?” the High Chancellor blinked in confusion.

“I know who killed our King.” My voice was acid on iron.

The most powerful men in the Kingdom sat and waited for me to make the trek across the chamber to their table. The High Chancellor was the last to take his seat at its head.

When I reached the table's foot where the Minister of War craned to watch, I surveyed the men before me. Power radiated from me, as palpable as my anger, battering the assembled Ministers like waves against a rocky shore.

No one dared speak.

"Mages killed Melric. They also killed my parents."

The men gasped and exchanged glances. A few whispered.

The High Chancellor was the first to respond. "How do you know it was Mages?"

"I was with my mother and father. I held them as they drew their last breaths. I watched Mages still my father's heart and bathe my mother in flames. They admitted their crimes on my infirmary door."

I glared across the table's length and waved a hand in the air. A perfect replica of the lettering and circle I found on the Medica's door ignited in flame a foot above the glossy wood.

A stir of gasps and chatter erupted around the table.

I snapped a finger, and the fiery image exploded into thousands of sparks, stunning everyone back into silence.

"The King died without an heir, but his murder compels us to act without delay. There is no time for drawn-out haggling or angling for power by the nobles." I flicked my wrist, and a crown appeared on my brow. "From this moment, I am the Crown."

It took a moment for the Councilors to shake free of their shock.

What followed began as indistinct murmurs between small clusters and swelled until the Council's clamor echoed off the stone walls. The Chancellor tried to regain order, but no one heeded his calls. Wood scraped against stone as men and women shoved back chairs and waved angry fists, shouting their indignation.

How could a low-born commoner—a woman—be elevated above the lords of the Kingdom?

Above the Privy Councilors themselves?

Each of them fancied themselves more qualified than anyone in the line of succession, though none held a place in that royal queue. They salivated over the crown as a starving dog might over a slab of meat. Melric had been a good king, wise and generous, but the dukes who stood to inherit the reins of power were useless, selfish idiots who only cared about fattening their own purses.

I could see it in their faces, hear it in their protests. Any member of the Council would make a better ruler than that lot.

Now a common Healer thought to rule?

The High Sheriff leaned toward me and whispered, "The men of Council will eat you alive, and the nobles—oh, the nobles will do worse. They'll come for you at every turn. Your rule—your life—will never be secure."

"This is insanity," another man shouted.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

I let the men shout and scream until some became raw from the effort. When I tired of hearing them squawk, I waved a hand and drew heat out of the room, leaving their breath blooming in near-frozen clouds before their lips.

“Thank you for your attention.” I strode around the table to stand on the bottom step before the throne. “My coronation will take place in three days. I expect a grand affair. You had better get started. Anyone who objects will experience a far colder reception than you feel in this moment.”

The Crown Treasurer rose to object. “Your Majesty, this is wholly improper. The Kingdom will never accept—”

His mouth froze.

Frost formed across his bald pate, then tiny fractures crawled across his brow. I snatched a silver goblet from a table by the throne and hurled it into his chest. His body shattered into shards of frozen bone and flesh, scattering across stones.

“Anyone else care to lodge an objection?” When no one moved, I nodded and sat on the throne. “Excellent. Let’s get started.”

Chapter twenty-three

Irina

Danai paced before the throne as I watched in amusement.

We were alone.

Even the guards had been dismissed so we might speak privately, though I was sure an army of men in silver plate stood outside each door to the chamber. There were also likely a few others pressing their ears to the door hoping to catch a few words.

My magic would disappoint them.

“What, Danai? What aren’t you asking? I can see your mind whirling like a tornado.”

He stopped and turned to face me. “How? How did you freeze that man?”

“Magic is an interesting tool.” I grinned and shrugged. “You were right, Danai. I needed to learn to harness my power all along.”

He gaped up at me. “You are brilliant—and wrong—on so many levels.”

“I am Queen. Nothing is wrong if I say it is so.” I waved a hand dismissively. “Now that I think about it, the title Queen is so, I don’t know, common. It was given to me when I married, not something ordained. Besides, the consort to the King has no real power. What do you think of Empress instead?”

His brows rose. “It is certainly more . . . I don’t know . . . just more.”

Danai was rarely flummoxed. A grin tugged at the edges of my mouth.

“Good. That’s settled. Now, tell me what plans you’ve made for our brothers and sisters.”

He lowered his head and sucked in a breath. I had tasked him with planning revenge against the Mages, most of whom were difficult to locate and impossible to contain. I

couldn't fathom how to wage a war against an enemy who could vanish at will. Beyond that, if even a few of them combined their efforts, I could never hope to match their power. They would crush me before I ever drew a drop of blood. This was utter folly.

Danai's greater knowledge and experience with magic was my only hope of taking them on. I needed him, and that crawled beneath my skin like a burrowing worm.

Virtually everyone I had ever loved was dead. I hoped never to need someone again, certainly not another Mage.

His mouth opened, and it looked for a moment like he might resist, but he finally said, "Tasha and the others around her have scattered, each fleeing to protect their own holdings."

"That's good news, isn't it? We can pick them off one at a time rather than trying to battle them as a united front."

He nodded. "Yes, but . . ."

"But what? Just spit it out, Danai, so we can be done with this."

He recoiled, staring back as though I'd just slapped him. "Johann, Kelså, and, I think, Gareth have vanished."

I shrugged. "Okay, good. They are doing the same as the others."

"No, they are not, and that's what worries me." He shook his head. "They left to protect the Well."

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:42 pm

“What Well? What are you talking about?” He pinched the bridge of his nose, then looked away again, so I sent another wave of Compulsion. “Tell me about the Well, Danai.”

He looked up, his eyes glass. “It is magic’s heart, where the currents flow and pool. Legend calls it the home of the Phoenix.”

“It is important enough for the three of them to leave me free without opposition?”

He nodded. “If the Well falls, so does magic. At least, that’s what the legends say. It has never happened.”

I steepled my fingers. “So, what do we do?”

“A direct attack will not work. If they think you are coming for them, they will band together, and you cannot win that fight.” He hesitated, as if deciding whether to add fuel to my fire. When he met my gaze, something resolved, and his chest lifted. “Benton and Amicus are the weakest. You and I could easily defeat them.”

“Is there a way to consume their power when they die? Not their spirit, just their magic?”

Danai’s eyes widened in a horrified glare. “Irina, that’s forbidden. It’s . . . evil—”

“Slaughtering my parents was evil. This is vengeance.” I waved a hand. “Now, is there a way?”

He blinked a few times, then his head lowered. “Yes.”

“Good. You will teach it to me. What next?”

“The others are too strong. When you consume another’s power, it diminishes. You will only retain a portion. You and I, with your new strength, might defeat Tasha, but Elric is ancient and almost as strong as Johann. Even if we could beat him, we would lose much for our effort.”

I rose from the throne, paced a few strides away, then turned back. “So, we let those two cower in their holes. What then?”

He sucked in a breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he looked doubtful. “Irina, this is madness. We—”

I stepped forward and placed a hand on his cheek and the other on his chest. It was the most intimate touch I’d ever allowed. I knew he loved me. It couldn’t have been more obvious had he been a mooning teen. His longing was yet another weapon for me to use.

I leaned in, so close my breath brushed his lips. “Danai, I need you. You are the only man who can stand by my side.”

His eyes softened, his breath quickened, and his walls melted before me.

“We . . .” He gulped. My lips were so close I could taste the wine on his breath. His words were little more than a hushed whisper. “We take a page from their book and go after the people they care about.”

“Go on,” I said, stroking his hair and pressing my body against his.

“As Queen—I mean, Empress—you have an army at your disposal, the largest in the

world. Most of the Mages live in Melucia. Their livelihoods were built there. Their homes are there. If you want to hurt them, destroy what they care about, same as they did to you.”

“And if they resist?” I whispered in his ear.

He shivered.

“We kill them.”

Silence, like the sound between lightning and thunder, hung in the air.

“What is to stop them from fighting my army?” I asked, rubbing circles in his chest with my fingers. “They could easily wipe out a nonmagical force, no matter how large.”

Danai’s heartbeat quickened beneath my touch. “They . . . they will not interfere if they believe it is a fight between nations. They would see that as lowering themselves.”

“How much lower can they get—killing my parents, the King and Queen?” I scoffed, pulling away from him. His whole body sagged forward, as though a lifeline had just been plucked from the grasp of a drowning man.

“That was not about the affairs of men. That was about you. Another Mage.”

Anger blazed to life within me. “Never call me one of them again. Do you hear me? I will never be one of those vile creatures.”

He took a reflexive step backward. “I only meant . . . from their perspective, coming after you was related to the magical world, not a political squabble among the nations.”

I released a breath to calm myself. Danai was trying to help. “Fine. We raise an army, invade Melucia, burn down their homes. What next? What comes after that?”

“You become everyone’s queen.”

I reached up and removed the crown, tracing my fingers along the edges of gems embedded within gold. When I looked up, a smile crept across my face, and a new hunger rose within.

“Everyone’s queen. I like the sound of that.”