



KAREN FROST

DAUGHTER
OF
FIRE

CONSPIRACY OF THE DARK

CHAPTER 1

“The Northmen have breached the wall! Oh gods, they’re coming. They’re coming.”

—Last words of Jeldrek Broadsword, Captain of the King’s Guard

“Everything in this world has a price. At some time, in some way, the debt must be paid: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. There is nothing free in this world.”

—Raelan Bloodmoon, War Mage

STORIES, WHEN TOLD BY A skillful storyteller, are perfect circles: they begin, they end, the lights go out, the curtains close, the puppets slump lifelessly. But the lives of real people aren’t neat parables in which the lesson is learned, the villain slain, the hero triumphant. They have no defined shape. They are messy. In real life, no one knows how the story will end. Only the gods know, and they’re not telling.

Everyone has a story: the circle of their life beginning with their birth and ending with their death. My story begins in a small, remote village called Thamir, located on the furthest northwestern border of the kingdom of Ilirya. It is hard to live somewhere and not take on the characteristics of that place. Thamir was frozen, isolated, and fierce. It had to fight every day against the cold threatening to swallow it whole. Like a weed growing tenaciously on the side of a cliff, it defied nature’s attempts to smother it and if it didn’t thrive, at least it didn’t die. But then, that’s how life is; it refuses to give up even when the odds seem hopelessly against it.

Thamir was one of hundreds of small villages that lined the kingdom’s northern border, each a small island unto itself with little contact with the

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rest of the outside world. This string of villages was called the Ice Crown. Life in the Ice Crown was brutal. Even on the warmest summer night, the temperature could drop low enough to freeze water. In winter, death stalked the living relentlessly, killing remorselessly through cold or starvation. Because of how we lived and the people into which our environment made us, my father, Jax, used to say, “There are two types of people in this world: those from the Ice Crown, and everyone else.”

To my father, a city was an anthill: people swarming over and around each other, fighting for food and space. Therefore, the gift he gave his children was life, the knowledge of how to survive in the Ice Crown and to thereby live on their own terms. He taught me how to set traps, fashion a bow, skin a hare in a matter of seconds, track a deer through the forest, and read the sky for weather. He passed this knowledge as part of an unbroken line from my first ancestors who had arrived, cold and hungry, to the Ice Crown, to me. It was my birthright.

Thamir had no significance to the rest of the kingdom but for its location. It was the first in a string of lookout posts that would alert the rest of Ilirya if our northern neighbors, the Northmen, invaded. The one war we’d fought with Northmen, a hundred years before, had left bitter memories. Although it had been mercifully short, many Ice Crown villages had been snuffed out like candles before the King’s Army had arrived to stop the invaders. No Northman had been seen since the day they had been pushed back across the border, but the danger of another surprise invasion always loomed, and Thamir was the key to Ilirya’s defense.

Twice a year, the military garrison near Thamir rotated, and the soldiers passing through Thamir brought us news of the outside world. They were like the first handful of water after you’ve thirsted for hours. When you live so far from all other villages, any contact you have with other humans is a precious gift. The soldiers were one of the few links that kept us tethered to the rest of the kingdom and reminded us that we did not live alone in the world, surrounded by only snow and trees as neighbors.

The stories the soldiers brought were how I learned about the rest of Ilirya. I learned about farming from soldiers whose families farmed wheat and corn. I learned about deserts and oceans and mountains from soldiers who had seen them with their own eyes. I learned about hundreds of animals I’d never seen and never would. For me, a child full of fantasy and

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imagination, there could have been no greater gift than tales of this other, dream-like world. I inhabited the soldiers' stories, expanded upon them, made new worlds with them and then destroyed them. Sometimes I was a lady in waiting to the Queen, sometimes a knight's page looking across the battlefield at the enemy. I hunted with golden eagles in the southern mountains and fished for shimmering blue fish longer than I was tall in the great ocean at the kingdom's farthest eastern edge.

But even children know that dreams are not real. Although I loved the soldiers' stories, their fanciful worlds were not for me. After all, my future was inevitably rooted in Thimir's soil: I would become a trapper like the women in my family before me. I would live with my parents until the day I married and moved into a house of my own. This was how it had always been for the women of my village and how it would surely be for me as well. It was so simple it required no thought, no emotion. Why dream about a future that cannot be? My brothers Kem and Kyan and I were born children of the Ice Crown, and we would die children of the Ice Crown. Or at least, I thought so.

* * *

When I was eleven, a stranger arrived in Thimir. He came bundled head to toe in the pelts of dozens of white snow hares, with only his pale blue eyes visible, his blond eyelashes covered with ice and snow. He was traveling on the longest day of winter, when the temperature was low enough to freeze tears torn loose by the wind against your cheek and the sun shone for only a few hours before it was swallowed up by the darkness. He arrived silent as a shadow, slipping into the village by the light of the half-moon as the women and children sat around the communal fire talking and keeping warm.

"Oh!" Ma Ren squeaked in surprise when she caught sight of him. The women all looked at him, curious. A quiet murmur went up around the fire, muffled by the rules of politeness. I couldn't remember the last time we'd had a stranger come. Perhaps it hadn't happened at all in my lifetime.

"I'm sorry to have startled you," the man apologized in a low voice. "I was passing through not a quarter mile away and saw the light of your fire. I've been traveling all day and my feet are half frozen from the cold. Will you permit me to rest a minute by your fire?"

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“Oh yes, do sit down and warm yourself,” my aunt, Ofrin, said, shifting to make room on the thick log that served as a bench before the fire for him. “It’s a cold night.”

“Yes, it is.”

The man sat down and held his booted feet toward the fire. In less than a minute, a thin plume of steam smoked off them as the snow evaporated. He took his gloves off and rubbed his hands together to warm them.

“What in the world are you doing traveling this time of year?” Megin scolded him, rocking her child to keep him asleep. “The cold can kill a man.”

“That it can,” the stranger agreed in a slow drawl, “but I’m from Hargesa, and I’ve spent my whole life in the Ice Crown. The cold doesn’t scare me. It’s too late to continue on tonight anyway; is there any spare place here in this village to lay down my bedroll?”

“I have room,” Ma Ren offered.

The stranger nodded with a grateful smile. He lifted his pack and followed her back to her house, leaving his gloves by the fire. A few minutes later, the two returned. The man shook the snow from his clothes before sitting again. It fell heavy and wet to the ground. Snow was matted to his thin yellow hair at the edges of where the hood of his coat had been. It glistened in the firelight and began to melt, running down his cheeks and into his short beard, untrimmed and thin as his hair.

The village children gathered around the fire like forest animals: alert and curious to the newcomer but ready to bolt at any moment. They peeked out from behind their mothers’ knees or from around corners, their hungry eyes devouring him, longing to know from where he’d traveled and why. Their mothers had the same questions. Who would possibly come to Thamir and to what end?

There were few men in the village that night. Most had taken advantage of the moonlight and clear sky to hunt even though the night was biting cold. Only the older men of the village had stayed behind. One of these was the hermit, Firdas. Firdas was an oddity in Thamir. He wasn’t a hunter like all the other men. Instead, he lived by building things that he traded: nets for birds, ingenious cages for ermines, stoats, and other rodents, and even small toys for children. He also could repair any broken trap. Many trappers and hunters could make simple traps for themselves, but they were

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nowhere near the quality of what Firdas could make, and so many found it easier to simply barter with him. In return, Firdas gained the meat he did not kill himself.

Firdas was one of the oldest men in the village. Although he kept his hair and beard closely cropped, what grew was salt and pepper tending to white, and when he walked, he leaned heavily on his staff and limped haltingly on the right side. He was so thin he looked starving, and his hands were badly gnarled by arthritis. Firdas lived an austere and lonely life, keeping to himself in the small hut he built a mile away from the village and only visiting when he needed something from the villagers, such as rope for nets or more iron for the traps. Now he stood slightly beyond the light of the fire, watching the children inch closer to the stranger.

"I'm Panwel," the stranger said by way of introduction, "and this must be Thamir, if I'm not mistaken."

"Are you a trapper?" Cyan, a young girl of seven, asked shyly, fingering the white fur on the stranger Panwel's coat longingly. None of us had ever seen anything so fine, white hares being all but unheard of near Thamir. She had crept up in Panwel's shadow, quiet as snow falling.

"I'd like to think I'm more than that."

A broad smile broke out across Panwel's face. He was handsome, but starting to age. Thin lines were forming across his forehead and at the corners of his mouth.

"Like what?" Cyan's mother, Nyere, asked from across the fire.

"A storyteller. A dreamer. A lion among men,"

And he was. With his expressions and his dancing hands painting pictures before him, he started to spin a web about his life in Hargesa that drew us like flies into a spider's nest. We listened with rapt attention, our bodies leaning toward him, hungrily drinking up the story from another Ice Crown village. Panwel was well into a yarn about hunting a great white bear when, unexpectedly, Firdas limped forward to stand in front of him. Firdas' eyes were narrowed into tight slits as he glared at the stranger. He growled, "You are a liar."

"Alright, so maybe the bear wasn't as white as I said," Panwel replied with a wink and laugh to Cyan.

Firdas said flatly, "Beneath that mindless drawl you think is Ice Crowner, your accent is from King's City, and you are dressed as neither a trader nor

a hunter. If you have been to Hargesa at all, it was as a stranger. I'd bet my life on it."

"I didn't say I was a trader or a hunter, did I?" Panwel asked, wagging his long, graceful finger. He said the words not to Firdas, but to his audience of women and children. He seemed to be acting for us, inviting us to participate with him in a joke for which grumpy Firdas was the punchline. We laughed with him, happy to play along.

"What are you doing so far west in the Ice Crown?" Firdas demanded. "There's nothing here but trees and snow. Nothing someone from King's City would want."

Panwel sucked on his front teeth and gazed back coolly at the hermit, his head cocked at a slight angle.

"You speak as though you know about King's City. That's odd for someone Ice Crown bred. Do I know you?"

"No."

Firdas turned away sharply, the corners of his mouth tugging into a frown. He pulled the hood of his cloak up over his head.

"Really? You look familiar. Perhaps we've met. Have you spent time at Windhall, perhaps, or Graymere?"

Firdas said nothing. Panwel sighed, looking skyward as if the situation was hopeless.

"I'm just a traveler, friend. Just one more traveler far from home. Nothing more, nothing less. Come, sit. Standing doesn't suit those twigs upon which you stand. They look as though they'll snap in two at any moment."

"Only someone who doesn't want to be seen would wear all white in the Ice Crown. There are too many hunters who would mistake you for prey."

"Firdas!" Ma Ren scolded. "This man, Panwel, is our guest. It's inhospitable to insult him and interrogate him as you do. Surely he's tired from traveling and wants nothing more than to rest."

"Better to know his intentions than be surprised by them."

Panwel looked at Firdas hard. I noticed that the corners of his eyes were tight and tense. It reminded me of two stags facing off during rutting season, but I couldn't understand why. Why didn't Firdas like Panwel when they'd never met? The women must have felt it, too, because they shifted uneasily in their seats. Panwel touched his soft white furs lovingly.

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“I made these myself. It might be silly, but I have a certain attachment to them. Even if it...well, I shall say a prayer to the gods that I don't share the fate of the hares that made this coat.”

“A stranger in white appears in Ilirya's western-most border town on the darkest day of the year. There can be only one interpretation: you're going into the North and you don't want to risk the garrison here seeing you. Is that it?”

Firdas's words were like a key turning in a lock. Panwel stiffened instantly, his smile freezing in place. His face was now sharp, his eyes bright with suspicion. He said slowly in a tight, controlled voice, “There's no reason to cross into the North. The war's been over for a hundred years. You ask many odd questions, friend. Who are you?”

“Merely a poor old man living out his final days in the Ice Crown in peace. Nothing more, nothing less...friend. But I will tell you one thing: I have lived long enough to know to trust my eyes over the lying words of men.”

As he spoke, Firdas reached out the tip of his staff until it was touching Panwel's neck, then ran it along his collar. Panwel did not resist, but glared defiantly at Firdas. The tip of Firdas's staff caught the loop of a gold chain and lifted it free of Panwel's clothing. Attached to the chain was a golden medallion the size of a child's fist.

“The medallion of a King's Mage,” Firdas announced without any evident surprise. “Just a traveler from Hargesa, eh? You know there are no mages in the Ice Crown.”

Panwel snarled and batted Firdas' wood staff away, stuffing the gold medallion back into his shirt clumsily. Yet he said nothing and only glowered.

“What does the King want in the North? No, that's not right. You wouldn't have to skulk in the shadows past the garrison if the King had sent you. The King doesn't know, does he? You are acting outside of his authority. Does the Captain of the King's Regiment know? What are you up to?”

Firdas waited for an answer with narrowed eyes, but Panwel refused to speak. At last, Firdas threw up his hands.

“Always one conspiracy or another. One day, King's City will collapse upon itself with the weight of all the scheming that goes on in it. Well, I'm

sure you're no better or worse than the rest of them, gods help us. Just leave Thamir out of it. We don't need war here, too."

He turned abruptly and slowly limped away from the fire in the direction of his house. The momentum of the evening had shifted to something much more somber and uneasy, but none of the villagers knew what it meant. The words exchanged between Firdas and Panwel might as well have been in another tongue, for all the listeners could understand. Although the two men were clearly at odds, no one could say exactly what either had suggested or intimated.

As soon as Firdas was out of view of the fire, however, Panwel regained his audience. He grinned his biggest smile and pantomimed letting out a huge breath of air.

"Phew," he said, wiping his brow. "Such an inquisition as I have ever had. Your village is guarded by a true wolfhound. I'll take care not to cross *him*."

Dyar, who was only five, crawled forward and poked Panwel on the knee. He whispered in a voice small as a mouse, "Are you really a mage?"

Panwel looked down at him and smiled dazzlingly.

"I am, dear boy. Have you ever met a mage before?"

Dyar shook his head, his black hair whipping into his eyes. He had his thumb in his mouth and was sucking it nervously. Panwel put his hand on the boy's head in a fatherly gesture. He asked warmly, "Would you like to see what magic looks like?"

Dyar nodded, his eyes round as saucers. The exchange broke the last of the tension that Firdas had created. A crescendo of excited murmurs rippled through the assembled villagers like the sighing of wind through pine trees. According to Thamir's collective memory, no mage had ever passed through the village. Since no villager had ever had an affinity for magic either, seeing a mage now in the flesh was like seeing the ocean: something we had heard about but that no villager had seen in person. Firdas and his strange, angry, senseless words were forgotten in an instant.

Panwel reached into the dark brown leather satchel at his side and pulled out a bronze coin large enough that if he wrapped his index finger around it, the tip of his finger would barely overlap his thumb. The light of the fire danced red and gold along the coin's sides, inviting us to look. Panwel leaned forward at the waist and showed the coin to the small

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children clustered around him. Having shown it to them, he straightened so that the women around the fire could see him as well, and then held the coin out in front of him. His fingers flexed open, and he moved his hand slowly back, away from the coin. The coin floated in the air where he had left it, as though held by invisible fingers.

Panwel twirled his index finger in a tight circle, and the coin began to spin in place with the same speed. While the mage worked his magic, his hands glowed with a yellow light so pale and translucent it was almost invisible. Had the night not been so dark, the magic would have been impossible to see at all. It spread out from him like the gentle flame of a dim candle and traced a thin thread to the coin. The crowd of children whistled their approval and clapped wildly. Panwel snapped his fingers and the coin burst into bright yellow flames before disappearing completely. The children's mouths fell open and they gaped at where the coin had been. Panwel winked at them and clapped his hands once. Immediately, small red flowers fell from the dark night sky all around the fire.

Children and adults alike put out their hands in awe and caught the flowers, which collected in their cupped hands like tiny piles of snow. When I brought the flowers to my nose, they smelled as though they had recently been plucked. I had never seen flowers so red. I guessed they must have been a type of flower found wherever the mage was from, whether that was Hargesa or, as Firdas had claimed, not.

Panwel performed trick after trick for his audience, such as creating animals out of snow that he made walk around and dance. I watched his every move like a hawk watches a mouse in the snow, barely able to breathe. His magic was like an impossible, limitless dream. I remembered the words of two rough, grizzled soldiers sitting at that same fire discussing magic the summer before.

"The thing about magic is...you never know what you'll get," said the first. "Can you imagine only having an affinity for laundry?"

"Aye, but imagine if you had an affinity for metal! You'd never want for work," said the other.

An "affinity," we had long ago been told, was a person's particular magical specialty. Some mages could work fire, others water, others wind and so on. I didn't know Panwel's affinity, but I had a suspicion: illusion. The red flowers disappeared moments after filling our hands, and the snow

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creatures blew away with the wind. If Firdas was right, I realized, and Panwel was going into the North, this affinity might be the only thing that would keep him safe. If he wanted to, he could become invisible. He could look like a tree or a deer. The Northmen wouldn't be able to find him.

Right before he finished Panwel looked at me, reached into his heavy fur coat, and pulled out a flower no longer than his finger. The green stem was long and graceful, the flower delicate and white as snow. He gently passed it to me. This was no illusion. The petals were soft beneath my fingertips.

"The *Nix Flos*," he murmured softly, for my ears alone. "The snow flower. It belongs to the Ice Crown, like you. Keep it. It will bring you luck."

I clutched the flower tightly to my breast in trembling fingers, too awed to even thank him for the gift. Panwel gave a half-bow to his audience, then made a show of yawning and stretching and retreated back into Ma Ren's house to get a few hours' sleep before rising with the dawn to disappear among the trees. If he crossed the border and returned we never knew—because he never came to Thamir again. I kept the white flower ever after and thought of him often over the next few months. Wherever he had gone, and whatever he had done, I hoped that he was safe.

* * *

Panwel's magic was like the first whisper of spring after a long, cold winter: a promise of lightness and hope. As I lay restless on the floor that night, my mind raced, trying to remember everything that we had been told over the years about magic. The ability to work magic was rare, and magic was often capricious and hard to control. Nor did everyone who had magic become a mage. Being a mage required both enough magic and the training to use it properly. To become a certified mage, one had to attend one of the two mage universities in King's City: Windhall University or Graymere College. Gaining admission into either of them was both difficult and expensive. The schools counted on the fact that certified mages could expect to make good wages in a provincial capital after graduation and so demanded high tuition.

Mages were classified based on their power and ability. The best and most powerful mages might eventually become Great Mages, who sat at the apex of the mage hierarchy. From their ranks were drawn the King's Mages,

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who were hand selected by the King to serve in the King's Regiment, an elite fighting unit comprised of Great Mages and fierce non-mage soldiers. In the entire kingdom, there were at most thirty King's Mages. The whole of the Ice Crown was unlikely to ever see another King's Mage for a hundred years at least. I had truly experienced a miracle.

The next day, while the village children were still abuzz with retelling each other the tricks Panwel had performed, I told my brothers that I wanted to be a mage. I didn't have to be a Great Mage, any mage type would do. My face was flushed with hope and excitement. I loved my life in Thamir and wouldn't have traded it for anything, but the idea of magic was thrilling. It was addictive. I wanted more.

"Brave heart," Kem said sympathetically, patting me on the head. "Thamir's never had a mage."

"But we could!"

"Two hundred years is a long time," Kyan said. "What's wrong with being a trapper? Not good enough for you anymore?"

"No, it's not that," I protested.

"Don't go getting your heart set on it," Kem warned solemnly. "You'll only end up breaking it. Ice Crowners aren't meant to do magic. Too much ice in our veins, maybe. It freezes the magic."

I spent the next few weeks screwing up my face in a pained expression of concentration, trying to summon magic. I would sneak up behind my mother, Wren, and wiggle my fingers at her, willing her to turn into a rabbit. I tried to change the color of our lanky wolfhound Wolf's fur from gray to brown, but he only cocked his head at me and watched with his light brown eyes, his fur still gray. I tried calling clouds and melting snow, but nothing happened. There probably was a deep and abiding lesson to be learned from my experience about how determination and desire aren't always enough to overcome obstacles, but I was too young to learn it. I believed if I wanted something badly enough, I could have it.

The only thing that saved me from a deep and lasting bitterness about my lack of magical ability was that being a child, my passions shifted quickly. A month later, my dreams of being a mage had dimmed and were supplanted by my joy at my new bow and the long knife my father gifted me for my twelfth birthday. I thought no more of the impossible future I couldn't have, and instead focused on the present I did have. Indeed, I

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might have abandoned entirely my childish dreams of becoming a mage, even if I still saw Panwel making red flowers rain from the sky in my dreams, but fate relishes the unexpected. On my fifteenth birthday, I discovered I had magic.

CHAPTER 2

“Society would not exist without hierarchy. With no king, there is only chaos.”

—Hadriel IV, sixth king of the Lamid dynasty

“Mages? Mages bring nothing but trouble.”

—Eddick, Lord Chancellor

THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN watching someone pull back the string of a bow and pulling it yourself, feeling the rough hide dig deeply into your own fingers, your muscles trembling as they fight stiff, unyielding wood. A difference between watching the wind shake branches of a tree from the safety of shelter and feeling the wind batter and howl against you, tearing at your hair and slapping your cheeks until you're breathless. Before the first bolt of magic streaked from me—fiery, untamed, and brilliant blue—I had thought I understood what magic was and how it worked...all because of the stories of a few soldiers. I had thought magic was some sort of element that existed in the world like air or dirt or water, invisible as the wind. I thought mages accessed this magic the way I put a cup or a bucket into a stream to get water.

I was wrong.

If magic came from outside the body, a mage could have easily picked it up and set it aside at any time, like a favorite garment or a sewing needle. A mage could choose to never use magic at all and live their life no different from their friends and family. Everything about magic would have been a choice. But magic was like blood, not water. It wasn't a choice, and there was no setting it aside. It was something that came from inside each mage.

What's more, it demanded use, release. It roared, screamed, bellowed to be unleashed.

In the absence of someone in Thamir who had seen magic's fingerprints, who knew the signs of its manifestation and could identify its growth within me, I thought I must be dying. For months before my fifteenth birthday, fierce, ravenous fever ravaged my body. At night, I tossed and turned, burning like an untamed forest fire. During the day, I was restless and unable to sit still. I stalked through the woods alone, sometimes running ceaselessly until the heavy exhaustion in my legs numbed the flames that gnawed my limbs like a hungry wolf. My family did whatever they could to ease my suffering, but they were helpless and fearful that I would become one more headstone in the forest.

I thought the fire must surely be a disease that would slowly sap my energy until there was nothing left. I would become a husk, too weak to walk or eat, destroyed from the inside out. When fever twisted and distorted my world, I told my mother it felt as though something inside me was struggling to escape but couldn't find the way out.

On my fifteenth birthday exactly, as the sun began to rise, the magic at last broke through. I was standing by the hearth, alone in the house. I was swaying slightly, almost too weak to support myself after being sick for so long, when my palms began to burn as though I carried two burning embers in them. I cried out as my arms clenched in spasm, and immediately bolts of bright blue fire flashed out from my hands, hitting the wall beside the hearth and singeing two black holes into the logs. A pile of wooden bowls that had been carefully stacked beside the hearth fell over, clattering loudly. My mother, who had stepped outside to bring in wood for the cooking fire, heard the sound and rushed in.

"What—" she began to ask, her eyes concerned as they fell upon me.

"Stay back!" I yelled.

Instinctively, I raised a hand to keep her away, but when I felt the heat building within it, I dropped it immediately. The blue bolt that sprang from my palm splattered against the ground in an explosion of sparks.

My mother froze in the doorway, uncertain, an expression of shock on her face. "What is it? What's happening?"

"I don't know!"

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The heat began building in my hands again, and I looked for water in which to douse them. Could water cool this strange blue fire? There was no water, however, and I was out of time. The bolts flashed out again, hitting the wall with a sharp crack. I pressed my palms together, hoping that the fire would somehow be trapped there. I stuttered, "I need...I need to get outside."

Wordlessly, my mother stepped to the side and I fled past her, my hands still pressed together so tightly that my arms shook. My teeth were clenched against the pain of the burning, which, frustrated at being unable to find release through my hands, was now running up my arms like liquid fire. The pain was agonizing. I ran through the village mindlessly, my bare feet slapping the cold earth and my clothing flying around me like startled birds. I reached the surrounding trees and crashed onward through the forest, a voice in my mind screaming, "Away! Away! Away!"

After what could have been minutes or an hour, the fire was so hot within me that I could go no further. I collapsed in a pile under a pine tree. Sweat ran freely from my limp black hair into my eyes, making them sting, and down my back. I was too tired to hold my hands together anymore. I pushed them out in front of me and immediately the magic burst forth like the opening salvo of a summer thunderstorm. Blue fire rocketed away from me, hissing and sizzling as it shot into and past the trees. When a bolt struck, it sparked and burned, sending up a small plume of black smoke. Heat burned all the way up to my shoulders, making my eyes water with pain.

The barrage of blue bolts was pulling strength from me, the way a fire sucks the liquid from meat left too long over a low flame. With every discharge, it became harder to catch my breath, and my arms became heavier. I tried to force myself to keep my hands up and away from myself, but the bolts were hitting lower, sometimes plowing into the ground and scorching a black line through the pine needles that carpeted the forest floor. I worried what would happen if I inadvertently allowed my palms to face a leg or some other part of me. Surely I would be burned. At the same time, I was glad to note that for every bolt that left me, the burning feeling in my arms decreased. Eventually, I reasoned, if I could only hold on long enough, this frenzy would wear itself out.

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Long minutes stretched into what felt like days. The bolts began to come more sporadically, like an unpredictable cough, spluttering and bursting prematurely in the air. I knew when the last bolt left because the fire that had seared my limbs for months was at last gone completely. There was nothing left, only coldness and a weariness that penetrated from my skin to my bones. I curled myself into a tight ball, hugging my knees to my chest, and fell asleep.

When I woke, barely an hour had passed. Although my sweat-drenched hair had dried while I slept, I was still barefoot and not dressed to be out. The fire had returned to my hands, which was the only thing that kept me from shivering in the cool air. At the moment, it was like a warm hearth fire that radiates gentle heat rather than a raging bonfire, for which I was grateful. I didn't think the uncontrollable bolts of blue would return any time soon, but I had no way of telling when they would.

I picked myself up off the ground with great effort and looked down at myself. I might as well have rolled all over the forest floor. I was festooned with twigs and leaves, and my feet had turned brown from the dirt I had recklessly run over in my flight from the village. But things could have been far worse; I was unhurt, and I had not hurt my mother or caused our house to be destroyed.

I began to walk toward the small brook not far from the village. I was lucky that it hadn't frozen over yet; in a month more, it would be ice. When I reached it, I fell to my knees and cupped large mouthfuls of water to my lips. I hadn't realized how thirsty I was until the first drop hit my tongue. When I had drunk enough, I washed the dried, salty sweat from my face, scrubbing my fingertips vigorously against my skin.

My reflection looked back at me from the rippling water with tired, dark eyes red rimmed and framed by purple circles. My narrow face, with its sharp angles and high cheekbones, looked even thinner than usual. My skin, the pale white of an Ice Crawler, was tinged almost blue, my lips bloodless. I winced and slapped at my cheeks to bring blood to them, but the slaps were feeble and my arms sluggish to respond. I sat back, crossing my legs and wiping my hands on my trousers.

My mind churned slowly. Understanding came slowly through the fog of exhaustion. There was only one explanation for what had happened: I had magic. The soldiers had said that magic came on a person's fifteenth

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birthday, and what else could it be? I marveled at my hands, now alien to me. The fire seemed to burn more hotly for just a moment, as though responding to my thoughts. A laugh burst forth unexpectedly from my chest. In that instant, I was an eleven-year-old child again, telling Kyan and Kem that I would be a mage. I looked into the brook and the child looked back at me, smiling triumphantly. She had succeeded.

* * *

In the weeks that followed, I discovered magic was an untamed horse and I was its rider. No bit, no reins, no saddle, just the feel of my fingers clutching desperately to a gritty mane as I struggled not to be thrown. Sometimes I could summon the magic, but most often it flashed out on its own with little warning, disobedient and reckless as a small child. At those times, it was all I could do to try to point my hands at the ground to avoid hitting someone or breaking something. I didn't think that a stray bolt of my magic had the power to kill, but certainly it would leave a burn mark where it struck, and more than one villager had to yelp and duck for cover around me.

I was frustrated and sometimes afraid of the wild, rebellious magic. I hated that I lost control more often than I won. In my childhood fantasies, I had never really believed magic would be difficult to master, even though I had been told so. It had seemed an easy thing to have magic: all benefits and no downsides. The reality was different, and it took all and more of my strength and concentration to control even what I could.

And yet for all my family and the other villagers saw me struggle, they were proud beyond measure. I was Thamir's first mage. It was too soon to know what my affinity might be, they murmured to each other, other than the pesky blue lightning bolts, but perhaps I would be able to control the weather or animals. I should go to the provincial capital, Namoreth, and work there, they agreed. They didn't know what sort of job a forest-bred girl with magic might find, but in their eyes danced the luxuries described to them by the soldiers: soft cotton sheets, shimmering dresses, succulent fruits, and more. Ice Crowners may have loved the land of their birth, but they were a people of vast imagination. My parents couldn't afford to send me to a mage school, so I would never be a mage, but surely there was a bright future in Namoreth for a girl with magic.

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The intoxicating, delicious delight of knowing I had magic gave me the confidence to have dreams of my own. I didn't want to leave the Ice Crown forever, but I was determined to learn how to control magic the way Panwel had that night four years ago. What was wild now would not always be. I was like a flower on the cusp of blooming—and who knew what beauty lay inside? I was not grandiose in my ambitions; I did not dream of being a Great Mage. I did believe, however, that I could become an uncertified mage if I could only find someone willing to teach me. The soldiers had said there were mages willing to teach outside the university system. I should be able to find one in Namoreth. I wouldn't be officially recognized as a mage, but I would learn to control my magic. With so many kinds of magic in the world, surely my affinity would be something interesting and useful that could help me in the Ice Crown. I would see the marvelous, exotic world that the soldiers had told us about, and then when it was time, I would come back home.

With the goal of one day finding a mage to teach me, every day I practiced trying to control when and where the bolts hit. But trying to control the rowdy magic was like climbing a hill of tiny rocks: for every step I took, I slid that far down again. Days dragged on into weeks and then months, and my failures started to chip away at my confidence. What if I never was able to control my magic? We had been told there were some people like that, who could never live in society because they were too dangerous, their magic too wild. Could I be one of them? With no one to ask, the fear stalked me during my waking hours like a second shadow and bled into my dreams at night, doubt that I would ever be able to control the magic, concern about what might happen if I couldn't.

"It'll come yet, give it time," Kem said, giving me a kind smile. "Probably you're still growing into it."

The warmth and encouragement from my family only made me feel more hollow and ashamed. The pride I had first felt at having magic ebbed, and the spaces from which it receded were increasingly filled instead by frustration and shame. What had initially seemed a gift was now a burning symbol of my failure. I began doing everything I could to suppress my magic, to prevent it from spilling out around others, even when the supreme effort of control made my entire body feel as though it was being consumed by fire. If I couldn't control the magic, it was better to act as

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though I didn't have it at all than to allow it to escape and wreak havoc around me, embarrassing me and forcing me to apologize profusely when something broke or was scorched. In my childhood dreams, I had been able to summon powerful storms. Now, in reality, I was at the mercy of a willful, erratic power with which I fought daily and often hourly for control.

I still believed, at times with more desperation than true faith, I would one day be able to control it, but it was clear I would have to leave Thamir first and find a teacher. The knowledge of my inevitable, rapidly approaching departure from my home was bittersweet. While the village had long ago decided that I would one day leave Thamir to seek my fortune in Namoreth, I had expected to leave under happier circumstances, my head high as I started a new life of magical learning. Now it felt as though I would be leaving for exile, slinking away with my tail between my legs. I tried to avoid thinking about it, distracting myself with grim promises that I would, one way or another, control the magic before I left. I would not be chased out by my own failures.

Fired by this desperate determination, I dedicated even more effort to trying to teach myself to control the magic. I practiced it in secret, where no one could see me fail or be struck by the wayward bolts. I would creep deep into the forest in the early afternoon and practice there for hours, until I could no longer see anything but the blue light shimmering around my hands in the quickly falling dusk. Most days, when the darkness came, I quickly collected my bow and fled from the forest, shamed by my failures and furious at myself for being unable to fix them.

On the rare days in which I succeeded, however, when night stole away everything but the sparkling blue light of my magic, I was pulled into a world outside myself. Bodiless in those final moments, I was not an individual anymore but one with the world. I could not fail or disappoint my family or my village because I was as limitless as the sky, bright and untouchable as a star. When I breathed, it was not me but rather the world that breathed. Then, right when I would begin to think the moment might never end and I might stay that way forever, the sky would crack and shatter into a thousand pieces and I would be in my own body again, sitting on the forest floor with my legs crossed loosely. Exhausted by hours of practice, my magic would then flare out in one final, spectacular flash that would blind me momentarily with its brightness. Then my hands would lose their

glow entirely, and I would walk home with barely enough energy left to drag myself to the door and throw myself on my blanket before the fire, my arms wrapped around our wolfhound Wolf for comfort.

Slowly, clawing and scratching and scraping and fighting the entire way, I began to improve. After months of practicing for hours every day, I learned to stop the magic from shooting off in reckless bolts when it pooled in my hands and demanded immediate relief. I even managed to eventually float a small pebble a few feet off the ground. Although it was a relief to no longer fear hurting others or damaging their possessions, now the thought crept bitterly into my mind that at this rate, with luck and practice, in several years' time I might be able to build a small wall around a garden. I would do better to build it by hand. Perhaps I only had a minor, petty magic not worth developing. Was it worth stepping foot on the road to Namoreth if I would never amount to much as a mage?

One day shortly after midsummer, I found myself ready to give up entirely on magic. I had managed to lift a small stone from the ground and hold it in the air in front of me for several minutes, but I could not coax it to do anything else. I tried to force it to move in another direction, to turn colors, to change sizes, but it stubbornly refused to do so. It floated obstinately, a cold, lifeless piece of rock. Frustrated, I dropped my control of the magic within me and allowed it to flare out wildly. Large bolts of blue smashed into the trees around me, bursting into bright, shimmering sparks. Without my attention to keep it suspended, the stone dropped immediately to the ground. I picked it up and threw it angrily.

I saw movement where the stone landed and someone stepped out from between the trees. It was Firdas, the hermit. I instantly recognized his brown rabbit fur boots, woolen pants, and wolf fur shirt, all of which were worn and battered. In some places, the fur was so old that patches were missing. I quickly scrambled to my feet. Not only had I been discovered while practicing in what I had meant to be secret, much to my chagrin, but in a forest inhabited by hungry wolves and aggressive bears, a lapse in attention to what was around me could have been deadly.

Firdas bent down painfully, his spine twisted by age and wear, and picked the gray stone up in his palm, tossing it up and down slightly to feel its weight. My cheeks flushed with embarrassment, realizing that he probably had seen me practicing with it. The emotion quickly turned to

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anger, more at myself than him. I snapped, “You should’ve announced yourself!”

“My apologies,” he said stiffly, his voice creaky as though he hadn’t used it in days. He probably hadn’t.

His deep brown eyes were watery, and he seemed so frail that I immediately regretted the tone I had used.

“Sorry, you surprised me is all. I practice here sometimes. I’m... improving.”

“I can see that,” he said gently, with a nod, leaning heavily on his staff. “You must have worked very hard. You should be proud of yourself.”

I hesitated, warmed by his words and wanting to feel proud, but also feeling morose. I confessed ruefully, “I suppose there’s not much to practice, really. I don’t have much power. Lifting that stone is all I can do, and it took me months to even do that. I’m not a very good mage.”

“Oh? It seems to me you have lots of power. Weren’t those bolts of “power” that hit the trees all around you? I think that tree there is still smoldering a little.”

“Well, yes, but it’s not the same.”

“No? Why not?”

“I can’t control the bolts well. When I try to control things, it doesn’t work. Like that stupid rock. I can’t make it do anything.”

“Hmmm.” Firdas cocked his head to the side. “Sometimes, the solution to a problem is a matter of changing your perspective. I am reminded of something. Do you know how a watermill works?”

“A watermill?”

“Ah yes, you wouldn’t have seen one. In a watermill, some of a river’s water is diverted into a small channel in which a wooden wheel sits. The force of the water turns the wheel, which turns other wheels that grind wheat into flour. The key to a watermill is how the water is channeled: water, as you know, can be a very powerful force, but how powerful exactly depends on how quickly it runs and how much of it there is. A narrow channel causes water to flow more quickly. Put another way, a river a mile wide has lots of water in it, but if its current is slow, the water will have little power. The wheel will barely move. If one could take all the water in that river and channel it through a strait a quarter of the size, however, the river would become dangerously powerful.”

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“I don’t understand,” I said. I had seen the two wide rivers within a few days’ walking distance of Thamir several times, in addition to all the smaller streams that ran through the forest close to the village, but Firdas’ talk of wheels and channels was bewildering. What was he trying to tell me?

Firdas frowned thoughtfully, rubbing the white stubble on his chin with his knobby fingers. “What I mean to say is that it seems your magic is like a wide river: there’s magic everywhere, but it’s not focused. You need a smaller channel. When you try to move that stone, I can see you from a dozen paces away; you’re covered in blue, but that little pebble is barely moving. Do you understand? Your magic is spilling out from you in every direction, not only toward this tiny stone. If you could focus it on the stone, I bet you could do much more with it.”

“But I’ve tried! I’ve spent months trying to control the magic. It’s not easy you, know.” I kicked the grass beneath my feet moodily. I added with a disgruntled pout, “Perhaps I’ll never get any better at it. Perhaps this is as good as I’ll ever be.”

Firdas moved closer. He smiled lopsidedly, his eyes gentle but firm. “I doubt that very much, Aeryn, and I don’t think you believe it either. I may not know much about magic, but nature is nature—even a bird has to learn to fly. You’re still a fledgling. You have much more learning to do before you give up entirely. You’d hate to quit too early, wouldn’t you?”

He made a good point, but I refused to concede. I asked with frustration, “But *how* do I focus the magic?”

“I suppose if we were in a city there would be mages around who could teach you, but, well, Ice Crowners are resourceful folk; we’ll think of something. I have confidence that with a little thinking, we can find a solution to your problem.”

“I don’t think it’s that easy. It’s not like making a trap or a net, Firdas. I’ve been trying for months and have gotten almost nowhere.”

“Yes, it must have been very lonely. Here’s something that may help: many, many years ago, when I was a bit younger than you are now, a teacher taught me to meditate. You might say I was a little wild in my youth, and the purpose of meditation is to teach focus. If a headstrong young boy like me could learn it, there’s no reason you can’t as well.”

“Meditation?” I repeated. I’d never heard the word before.

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An almost imperceptible smile etched itself across Firdas's face, and he sat down slowly before me, wincing at the effort of bending his arthritic limbs. I noticed for the first time the deep lines around his eyes. The creases were so sharp they looked as though they had been carved into his face by a knife. I knew the only thing that could produce lines like that was an arduous, pain-filled life. At the same time, there were also fine lines that fanned out at the corners of his eyes, almost lost among the deeper cuts, suggesting he had once laughed much, too.

Firdas asked, "Will you try?"

"I couldn't possibly become *worse* at magic," I grumbled. "But why..."

"Very well then," he said, cutting me off. "I would like you to close your eyes and count as you breathe. Count from one to four as you breathe in, hold your breath for the count of four, count four again as you breathe out, and then hold your breath for four. You see? Four counts of four. Think of nothing but your breathing."

I opened my mouth to protest again, but his eyes closed and I was uncomfortable speaking, so I did as he told me, counting diligently as though he would know if I cheated. I counted approximately ten times and then opened my eyes ever so slightly to see what he was doing. He was still sitting motionless with his eyes closed, his shoulders rising and falling ever so slightly as he breathed. I chewed my lower lip, closed my eyes again, and resumed counting, pushing down the impatience with the monotony of the exercise that was starting to rise within me. After another round of ten, I snuck a second glance, but Firdas was as still as before. I closed my eyes with a frown and continued counting, wondering how long this would go on. This couldn't be *it*, could it?

My mind began to wander. I thought about a bird's nest I had found on the forest floor the day before and wondered whether the babies would survive. Then I remembered I needed to cut a new set of arrows and pondered which tree near our house might produce the straightest, strongest shafts. I thought about Kyan, sweating in front of the forge as he hammered away happily at an iron spearhead at Thamir's garrison, where he'd begun working just a few months ago. Kyan made me think of Kem and what he would be doing right now, deep in the forest hunting. Kem's wife Danver was with child and would be due in a few months. I wondered if it would be a boy or girl.

I began to feel silly. What were we doing sitting around in the woods with our eyes closed? What could this possibly have to do with magic? What would someone think if they stumbled across us at this moment? My eyes popped open. Firdas's dark eyes—at this moment so dark they were almost black—were watching me calmly.

“That,” he pronounced, “is meditation.”

“What? But we didn't do anything!”

“Of course we did. You started to learn to focus, even if for mere moments at a time. In time, with practice, you will learn to focus for longer periods, during which you'll feel your body in ways that you did not before.”

“I don't see what this has to do with magic. How will this help me get better?”

“Perhaps it will not,” he said, shrugging. “It is merely a suggestion.”

“But...”

He held up a gnarled finger to stop me. “I did not say that I knew how to fix your magic. But I am an old man, and I hope that after all these years I have gained some wisdom. Here is what I think: It seems you are trying to order the magic within you to obey, but what if magic is not something to be commanded? What if it is part of you, like a finger or a toe? Do you command your finger, or do you simply use it? You must become comfortable with this magic of yours. Once you have mastered that and gained the ability to focus, then I think you will be able to channel it.”

Firdas gave me a knowing look. “You will have to be disciplined. Minutes can seem like hours when you sit alone in a forest with only the clamoring of thoughts for companions.”

“But what if someone sees me?”

Firdas laughed. “Who will see you out here but trees and birds? The forest is vast. Your secret will be safe here. Besides, who's to say you're not taking a nap?”

I considered his words. His method seemed unorthodox at best, but then again, I couldn't possibly become worse than I already was. I truly had nothing to lose. Although it was deeply uncomfortable to sit and do nothing, Firdas was one of the oldest men in Thamir, and in the Ice Crown, age demanded respect. A person wouldn't survive long in the Ice Crown if they weren't smart, and to have lived as long as he had meant he had more

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wisdom than most. Moreover, there was something about him that made me want to trust him. That, more than anything, overcame my reluctance.

“I’ll try it. That’s all? Sitting and breathing?”

“To start. Pay attention to how it feels when your lungs fill with air. After several days, feel your heart beat instead. When you can sit and focus on these things, then feel the magic as it swims through you. Trace its path as it courses through your limbs. Find how your heartbeat sends it through your blood. Find where it burns on the tips of your fingers and in your palms.”

“Then what?”

Firdas unwound his long legs and groaned as he used his twisted wooden staff to stand. He leaned against it and breathed heavily, rubbing the stubble on his cheeks. He grunted. “Small steps first. How much practice did it take before you could shoot a bow and arrow? I can promise none of this will be as easy as you think. Those three steps alone might take a month. You must meditate in very short increments in the beginning. Focus is a difficult thing. As you improve, you can meditate for longer.”

He gave me a pensive look. “It’s not so different at all from shooting an arrow, really. In the moment that you’ve set your mind upon a target, your mind is clear and focused. Pull the string, breathe, aim, and release. If you can shoot an arrow and hit a target, I know you’ll be able to work magic, Aeryn.”

My hand reached instinctively to my bow that I had laid against the tree beside me while I practiced with my magic. I had made this bow myself, as well as the arrows I wore in a quiver on my back. My hand caressed the bow unconsciously, lovingly, running lightly over the smooth curve.

Firdas squinted at the sky. “You had better head home. A summer storm is coming.”

“It never rains this time of year. Besides, the sky is blue and cloudless.”

“Suit yourself. These old bones tell me rain is on the way.”

He started to hobble away into the forest. I could see how frail he was beneath the skins he wore; they hung upon him as though he was made of nothing but bone. Firdas coughed, and I thought with sympathy that he must always be cold. Whatever reason he’d had for coming so far north, it must have been a powerful one.

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“Thank you!” A thought came to me. “Wait! How do you know about the feeling of fire in my veins?”

“A guess,” he replied, without turning.

I stayed for some time longer in the forest, trying to count my breaths as I'd been taught. Firdas was right: it was hard. The more I tried to only think about breathing, the more thoughts came crowding in, tugging at my attention and refusing to be ignored. At last I gave up. Dark clouds began to fill the sky as I walked home. My parents and I were eating rabbit stew when we heard the first peal of thunder. My father, who had just returned home from a long hunt, looked up at the ceiling and murmured, “A storm's coming from the north.”

“Firdas said there would be rain,” I said. “I didn't believe him. The sky was clear when he said it.”

“Firdas? Did you see him today?” my mother asked.

“Yes, in the forest,” I replied, stuffing more rabbit stew into my mouth.

“He's like a ghost, that one,” my father said. “No one sees him coming or going.”

“But he helps when help is needed,” my mother said. “Remember when several homes burned down in the village after one was struck by lightning? Firdas helped fell trees to rebuild the houses and even dragged them back to the village all on his own. That was ten years ago at least.”

“He's not an Ice Crawler,” my father grunted.

“He's been here for so long, Jax. He might as well be.”

My father sniffed dismissively. Like most people born in the Ice Crown, he didn't have much respect for those born outside it, even if that person had lived in the Ice Crown for decades. Once an outsider, always an outsider. My mother disagreed. She said anyone who lived in the Ice Crown by choice should be welcomed with open arms.

“Do you know where's he from?” I asked.

“I don't believe anyone knows,” my mother replied. “He simply showed up one day many, many years ago. I was a young girl then. He's lived in that tiny house of his ever since. He built it himself, you know, with no help from anyone else. He's been here at least thirty years, if a day. He's never talked about his life before coming to Thamir, and I suppose no one wanted to ask.”

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Rain began to pound on the roof of the house. I thought of Kem, who was out hunting, caught outside in the rain. He would have found a fallen tree and dug a hole beneath it to take shelter in. Still, depending on how successful he was at it, he might become completely soaked anyway. It was bad luck for him.

“We haven’t had a storm like this in years,” my mother said.

“Maybe there’s a weather mage in the area,” my father said.

Both of my parents somehow managed, in that way parents have, to look at me without turning their heads. It was a good trick, one that I sometimes wished that I knew. My father didn’t really believe I had managed to summon rain though. More likely it was a random storm that had come from the north and was expending its fury on the Ice Crown. It only happened every few years, but it happened.

I didn’t respond, and my father didn’t expect a response. He was a quiet man, like most men in the Ice Crown. It was all but impossible for them to spend so much time alone in the woods hunting and not develop a strong habit of silence. Still, his comment bespoke an underlying tension in my family: the question of whether I would ever control my magic, and if I could, what I would be able to do with it.

“Just a little rain,” my mother trilled, trying to break the heavy silence that had blanketed us. “The rain will be good for the hunt. It will be easier for Kem to track. He’ll be needing to start smoking meat for the winter for Danver and the baby.”

I smiled involuntarily. I couldn’t wait to meet my new niece or nephew. I hoped the child would have Kem’s deep and thoughtful eyes and Danver’s playful temperament. We sat in silence, listening to the patter of rain outside and warmed by the glow of the fire. I enjoyed these quiet evenings like this with my parents. The house had been much rowdier when Kem and Kyan had both lived there.

My father said, “I’ve been thinking that maybe it’s time to take Aeryn to see Namoreth.”

My father hadn’t been there since he was a young man, when he had gone merely to gawk and gape. He told us later that his brief time there had only confirmed that he was not meant to live among densely packed buildings and houses. He needed the freedom of the forest, the refreshing smell of pine trees and snow. He’d never gone back. Panic gripped my chest

and started to squeeze the air from my lungs. I wasn't ready. I didn't know my affinity yet and worse, I wasn't ready to leave my family.

"No! It's too soon!" I gasped, my stomach knotting.

"It can just be a visit, Aeryn, if that's what you'd like. We'll go for a day and then return. It will be good for you to see what life in the city is like. It's very different from life in Thamir."

"I need more time! I'm not ready to go yet."

My mother put her hand on my father's. "Wait awhile. She's not sixteen yet, Jax."

"Kyan was apprenticed to the garrison blacksmith the day after his sixteenth birthday, Wren. The time is coming fast when our Aeryn will find her way, too. Just a few months more."

Faster than two fingers snapping together, I lost control of my emotions, and with them my magic. Blue fire exploded out from all around me in a giant bubble that crashed into the wall and ceiling. It shattered with a shower of blue lights like fireflies that faded away before reaching the floor. The fireball hit my parents, too, knocking them down away from the table. I screamed in fear, terrified that they'd been hurt, lurching from my chair to clasp my mother to me.

"It's fine," she said, disentangling herself from me. She rose from the floor and righted her chair, then smoothed her dress. My father, too, stood up and returned his chair to its rightful position. "You see? We're not hurt. It's fine, darling."

I broke down, weeping uncontrollably into my hands. I had almost unintentionally injured my own parents. Who knows how badly they could have been hurt, all because I lost control. Arms closed around me and held me tight as I struggled to breathe through the sobs.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I'm sorry."

"Of course not," my mother murmured, stroking my hair. "It was an accident. No harm has been done, see? You don't have to go to the city yet; you'll go when you're ready."

Her words made me cry harder. Everything was still broken, no matter how hard I tried. How could I ever make things right? My mother held me until I had no more tears to cry, then she kissed the top of my head and shoved the three wooden bowls into my hands. She commanded, "Now go use this rain to wash out these bowls."

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“But I’ll be soaked!”

“Yes, but then you’ll come back inside and the fire will dry you off. It’s only water, love.”

My eyes were still watery, but I smiled gratefully at her. Grateful I hadn’t hurt her. Grateful my parents could still love me despite all that was happening to me. Grateful that no matter what happened, I always had a place in this home.

That night, the dreams started.

CHAPTER 3

“The soldiers of the King’s Regiment serve for life, without exception. Some lives happen to be shorter than others.”

—Sir Eldir (a.k.a. The Mountain Fox), Sergeant
at Arms of the King’s Regiment

“Hunters are distinguished by their tenacity.”

— A Kingdom and Its People, 4th edition

A BIRD’S NEST IS ONE of nature’s most undervalued works. We walk past them all the time with little thought given to the effort that went into their creation. Many humans view them as ugly; from the outside, they look disorganized and sloppy. No one would call them beautiful. Yet nests are a testament to the resolve of their builders. They are built stick by stick, painstakingly over time. With pure and single-minded determination, the bird patiently makes trip after trip in search of the materials that will become its home. The bird understands that it might not carry much in its beak during each individual trip, but each trip is important to creating the larger whole. Even if the unfinished nest topples from the tree, the bird never gives up. It simply starts again.

I set out the next day planning to try Firdas’s strange practice of meditation. I was still skeptical, but I was out of ideas. If I didn’t like this “meditation,” I could always stop, but I was willing to try anything to prevent what had happened last night from happening again.

Meditating was hard, though. It was one thing to sit in the forest with Firdas and have him instruct me, it was quite another to try to meditate alone. The practice seemed even more foolish without him than it had with

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him. Eventually, however, I was able to relax. My shoulders felt heavy as they rose and fell. For the first time, the magic crackled and sang and filled me with warmth as it raced through me. My heart beat strongly in my chest. By sitting motionless, I was forced to take notice of all the motion that happened naturally inside my body.

After a week, I decided that I had done enough breathing and counting and moved to the next step Firdas had laid out. Firdas had told me to follow the magic as it moved through my body. It wasn't difficult; the magic was like liquid fire, and every vein through which it coursed tingled. When my magic flared, the feeling was exhilarating. For the most part, I had been so overwhelmed by the fear of failure before now that I hadn't noticed this feeling. Now every time I focused on my magic, I delighted in the brimming excitement that magic created, the sense of unlimited potential waiting to be fulfilled. When I breathed in, the fire bubbled and gently retreated away from the surface of my skin. When I exhaled, the fire flared through my core and raced to my fingertips.

Sometime during the second or third week of meditation, I discovered for the first time that by visualizing the fire moving in my body, I could actually make it move. When I didn't want to use the magic, I kept it dispersed throughout my body, running through my blood like leaves fallen in a stream. When I wanted to use it, I concentrated it in my hands until they glowed bright blue with fire. It was the breakthrough I had been waiting for, and I couldn't have been more excited.

Firdas had been right! If I learned to connect with the magic and work with it, I would be more successful than if I tried to control and wrestle it. I began to feel I'd finally found harmony with my magic. I advanced to the point where I could create a ball of bright blue fire and suspend it in the air above me indefinitely, shimmering and winking and beautiful. I could make the ball as big as my head or as small as the nail on my thumb. I could make the fire hot as the forge at the soldiers' garrison or cool enough to touch. Playing with magic like this was fun. Without realizing it, I stopped worrying about losing control and hurting others.

The only thing missing was to thank Firdas. I hadn't seen him since our last meeting, even when I purposely walked near to his hut several times. He seemed to have all but disappeared, like the ghost my father had called him. In his absence, I continued to practice alone in the woods, growing

more confident each day. Soon enough, I could not only lift the small stone he had once caught me struggling to raise, but even large branches that had fallen from the trees. In fact, I was doing exactly that when Firdas found me again.

“Big log,” his voice commented evenly from behind me.

I was so surprised by the unexpected appearance of another person in my secluded part of the woods, I lost my focus and dropped the branch. It crashed to the ground with a muted thud. Somewhere nearby, a bird cawed in alarm and flew away. I spun around and faced him, a huge smile on my face. It was all I could do not to hug him.

Firdas’ face was as tired as ever, but he seemed pleased. “You’ve improved.”

“Yes! And I have you to thank for it!”

“It was only a suggestion. I’m glad it seems to have helped. Come, show me what you’ve learned.”

I responded by creating a ball of blue magic in my hands. I showed him how the light could illuminate without burning me or how I could turn it into a blazing fire. Then I lifted the branch again, setting it gently on the ground when I was done. My chest swelled with pride.

“Maybe soon I’ll learn what my affinity is,” I said.

Firdas frowned. “But Aeryn, that *is* your affinity.”

Now it was my turn to frown. “What?”

“Mage fire. Well, and levitation, obviously. That’s your affinity. Did you think every mage could make fire?”

I guessed I had. Or rather, I hadn’t given it much thought at all. Now that I thought about it, however, I could recall only a few stories involving mages with fire. I concentrated my magic into another ball in my hands, making it hotter and hotter. If fire was my affinity, I wanted to see just how hot I could make it. As it heated, blue flames sizzled up the side of the ball and around my hands, although they didn’t burn me.

Firdas reached his right hand toward the fire and drew it away with a grunt well before he reached it. He rubbed his right hand with his left. “A useful skill for when winter comes. It will keep the cold at bay. I wish I had some myself.”

I barely heard him, I was so focused on the silent, dancing fire in my hands. The flames, all shades of blue, were mesmerizingly beautiful. Firdas

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took a step back to avoid the heat, which now rolled off the ball in roiling waves. My hands and face started to sweat, and my sleeves at the cuffs were beginning to smell burned, but I didn't stop.

I noticed an old pine tree twenty paces away. Its once green needles had all turned brown. It was dead; all it needed now was to be struck by lightning. Then it could fall and eventually turn to dirt. I could be that lightning. No sooner had I thought it than I acted. The fireball hit the tree and exploded, tongues of blue flame licking up the trunk. Within moments, the tree was bathed in shimmering blue fire. Although I hadn't expected that to happen, the sight was thrilling.

"No! Extinguish it!" Firdas shouted, alarmed. "Extinguish it before the trees next to it catch fire!"

"What?" I asked, confused, the magic's intoxicating spell over me broken.

"We're in a forest, girl! Wood burns!"

"I—I don't know how!"

I started to panic. What had I been thinking? The tree was glowing a deadly blue that was becoming hotter each moment. What had been a gentle glow in my hands only minutes before was now a raging, uncontrolled blaze.

"Find a way," Firdas snapped, "or we'll both be killed. A forest fire can outrun both of us."

As he said it, a blue flame jumped from the dead pine tree to its living neighbor. The green needles crackled and popped as the heat washed over them. The temperature around us rose as the fire grew in intensity around the dead tree. A thick branch fell off with a ringing crack, crashed into the ground with a loud thud, and lay burning on the forest floor.

"Now!" Firdas roared.

"What do I do?"

The panic was beating at me now. My legs felt weak with dread. My head swam.

"If you can start the fire, you can stop it. It's *your* magic; stop it from burning."

The blue fire devouring the trees didn't feel like mine at all anymore. Still, when I concentrated very hard, I could feel the tiniest connection between the magic in my veins and the fire raging before us. I followed that

connection, thin as the silk thread of a spider, from my body to the fire, then, concentrating as hard as I ever had in my life, sucked the fire from the tree and back to me. The magic pulled away from the tree willingly and traveled in a fiery line not back to my hands, but to my chest, where it drove into me so hard that it tore all the air from my lungs.

The feeling of the magic re-entering my body hurt like being speared through the heart, like being struck by lightning. I thought it might kill me on the spot. Now it was my own body, not the tree, that burned like dry kindling. I couldn't breathe. I collapsed, gasping for air, waiting for my heart to stop. My arms and legs began to convulse as my lungs seized. At least the trees are safe now, I thought as my back spasmed. No one would die in a forest fire.

Firdas fell to his knees beside me and held my head up in his lap to help me breathe. His knobby old hands shook. "Stupid. Foolish," he hissed. "*Never* do that again. Not ever, do you hear me?"

There was much more fear than anger in his voice, though both were there. My chest heaved, my pulse raced, and my ears rang, but I knew I would live. The magic in my veins roiled and crackled as though protesting having been recalled. I gasped, "No...forest...not again. Sorry. So sorry."

"This isn't about the stupid forest, girl," Firdas said.

He slipped out from under me, his face agitated. His twisted wooden staff lay several feet from him, and I heard him crawl on his knees to reach it. I lay on my back, staring at the dark tips of the trees stabbing into the pale sky above me, crippled by pain and half amazed to still be alive. My breathing was shallow and ragged. I saw Firdas' boots shuffling along the forest floor as quickly as they would go as he paced around my head. He said, "You could have been killed!"

"I won't do it again."

"No, you won't!"

He stopped pacing and stared down at me. His thin shoulders rose and fell as he took a deep breath to calm himself. His face was white. "You showed me that you could touch the magic without being burned. Why didn't you simply stop the magic from burning? Take away its heat? Why did you try and draw it back into you?"

"I didn't think of it," I rasped.

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Firdas pursed his lips unhappily and resumed pacing. "You have to be careful, Aeryn. This is no game."

I nodded obediently, feeling a deep and abiding sense of fatigue wash over me. The magic in my veins had now all but disappeared, leaving me cold. My palms were clammy, and the sweat that had broken out all over my body when I created the fireball was chilled by the cold air, making me shiver. Firdas reached out his thin hand and helped me stand. He was surprisingly strong, old as he was. I leaned on him heavily, unable to support myself.

"Promise me you won't try something like that again unless I am near."

I mumbled, "I promise."

"Good. Now let's get you home and cleaned up."

I pushed my hair out of my face and tried to wipe the sweat from my brow. I could still smell singed leather and wool. Firdas tugged on my arm and we started to walk slowly back to Thamir, me walking more slowly than even he. As we departed, I looked back at the old pine tree. The trunk was burned black and all the dead needles had fallen to the ground. On the branches of the trees next to it, the formerly green needles had been turned brown.

As exhausted and as scared as I was, I also felt a flush of pride. Although I hadn't expected to be a fire mage, it was clear I had some talent at it. Firdas pulled again on my arm and we continued walking back to the village without speaking, Firdas breathing heavily from the effort of holding me up as we walked. At the door to my house, he turned me to face him.

"Remember," he admonished, "no magic without me."

I nodded, too tired to argue, and he left, limping away on his spindly old legs. I stumbled into the house and collapsed on a blanket beside the hearth. I could tell from the headache that was beginning to pound behind my eyes and the shivers starting to run through my body that I was going to be sick with fever again. Wolf, who had been sleeping in a corner, padded over to me, wagging his tail, and licked my face. I wrapped my arms around him and buried my face in his thick gray fur and fell asleep that way, just as I had as a young girl.

The nightmares started as soon as my eyes were closed. In the first one, veiled eyes watched me from the darkness, stalking me through the forest. Anywhere I went, they were there already, waiting. I had seen them before,

in other recent dreams, but what did they want? The darkness, too, was alive, malevolent. It throbbed and pulsed around me as if I were standing in the heart of a giant monster. The air was thick and stale. Unsettled by the feeling of being observed, the hair on my arms stood on end.

The dream faded away, only to be replaced by one equally unsettling. In it, my magic started to burn until the very blood in my veins boiled. I scratched and clawed at the skin on my arms and stomach, trying to stop the pain by bleeding the burning poison out. I was desperate to find some way to stop the agony. Just when it seemed my own magic would burn me to death, the dream abruptly ended. The regular blackness of dreamless sleep took over, and I dreamed no more.

For the next two days, I was confined to the house, racked by a fever even worse than the fevers I had endured when my magic appeared. I shivered constantly from a bone-deep cold even as my skin burned hotter than Kyan's forge. I was too weak to walk, and even crawling on my hands and knees made the world spin around me. I was delirious more than half the time when I was awake, but was asleep more than I was awake, always pursued by the hunting eyes. When the fever broke on the third day, it was as though I had never been sick. Strength surged back into my body, and the magical fire blossomed once more in my veins, pulsing with life and energy. The feeling of relief was overwhelming. My mistake in the forest hadn't cost me my magic, and I had learned a powerful lesson about not trying to reabsorb my fire.

After being confined to my house for days, I could no longer bear to be inside. My legs, which hadn't been able to carry the weight of my body the day before, were strong and confident as I walked straight to Firdas's hut. I knocked on the roughly-hewn pine door, hoping he was home. The door creaked open reluctantly and for a moment I saw only blackness within. Then Firdas's face emerged, pale, with a few days' white stubble on his chin.

"Aeryn, I'm glad to see you've recovered," Firdas said, his voice creaking. "I heard you were very sick."

I nodded. I still half expected my head to swim when I moved it, but all the symptoms of the fever had well and truly dissipated.

"Would you...like to take a walk with me?"

Firdas had all but saved my life by stopping me from burning the forest down. Moreover, sometimes when my fever dreams over the last few days

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had become too awful, it was the appearance of his kind face that had chased the awful monsters away. I wanted thank him for his help and at the same time find out more about him, like what else he knew about the world outside Thamir.

“I would like that. Let me find my cloak.”

Firdas disappeared into his hut, leaving me standing on the stoop, and emerged a moment later wearing a heavy brown cloak. He closed the door behind him and we began to walk down a trail Firdas had obviously created through years of daily excursions. He sniffed the air suspiciously, then wrapped himself more tightly in his cloak. The skin of his hands looked thin as parchment. I could see the blue veins tracing their way under the almost clear skin. He spat, “Winter is coming.”

“It must feel especially cold to you since you’re not from the Ice Crown,” I suggested.

A flicker of sadness and pain flashed across his face and was gone so quickly that I almost didn’t see it. What would drive a man here, to the farthest reaches of the kingdom, but something terrible? I wanted to ask where he had come from and what had made him leave there to eke out a lonely life in Thamir, but before I could, Firdas said, “Our neighbors believe you will go to Namoreth soon.”

This time, I didn’t explode in a frenzy of emotion at the mention of the provincial capital. Now that I could control my magic, accident in the forest notwithstanding, I felt much more ready to leave Thamir. I was looking forward to the idea of developing my magic and seeing a city, even if the thought of leaving my family and not knowing when I would see them again made me queasy. It seemed at least for now, I would have to trade one thing for another: my family for my magic, or my magic for my family.

“The idea of leaving home scares me,” I said, twisting my fingers together. “But I’ve worked so hard on my magic that...” I blushed. “It must sound silly to you, but I want to see exactly what I can do with my magic. It’s like trying to see how fast you can run or how much weight you can carry. I know what happened in the woods was dangerous, but it was also... exciting. *I* created that fire. *I* had that power. And if I can find a mage to train me, I won’t have accidents like that again.”

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“I think anyone would understand the desire to see what limitations they may or may not have, and having the ability to create fire sounds thrilling. When will you go to Namoreth?”

“Soon. When I’m sixteen.”

I didn’t bother telling him how few weeks remained until then. We had reached the farther of the two streams from the village. For most of the year, it was covered by a layer of ice, but now it was still warm enough that a thin trickle of water flowed. Firdas bent down slowly, cupped his hand, and drank from the water that collected in his palm. I did likewise, wincing at how the freezing water made my hand and teeth ache from cold. Firdas stepped back from the stream and collapsed, rather than sat, against the base of a tree, stretching his long legs out in front of him. I sat, too, crossing my legs and pulling the needles off of a fallen pine branch.

“What will you do after you are trained?” Firdas asked.

“I’ll come home. Thamir is where my family has always lived. It’s where I grew up. I can’t imagine not living here. Maybe not immediately though. There are things in Ilirya I want to see, like the palace in King’s City and the ocean.”

Firdas’ white eyebrows knit together at the deep furrow above his nose. His expression was one of unhappy surprise. He ran his hand over his short hair with a shaking hand. He looked around us as though someone might overhear, but there was no one. “King’s City is not safe. There are many bad people there. Dark people with darker intentions and misguided beliefs about the world and how it should be. No, it is not safe for you to be there. Better to stay far, far from the capital.”

His eyes, such a deep brown that they were almost black, were unreadable. I didn’t know what else to say, so I dangled the pine branch in the water and watched the weak current run beneath it. When I looked up again, tears were running down Firdas’ face and into his white stubble. Although he cried soundlessly, his face was damp with the tears.

“What is it, Firdas?” I asked, alarmed at this display of deep emotion that seemed to come from nowhere.

“So many people killed,” he whispered hoarsely, his eyes haunted. “So many young lives snuffed out like so many candles, for no reason. No reason at all.”

“What? Who? Who are you talking about?”

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“So many years of war,” he moaned softly. “Endless war. The City ate them all.”

His eyes were unfocused and dull. What he saw was not here, not now. He was in another place, another time, and I was not there with him. Moving cautiously closer, trying not to startle him, I took his right hand in mine. It was light as a feather and just as fragile. I wasn't sure what to say, so I asked gently, “Did you lose someone you loved?”

“I lost *everyone*,” he replied, horror in his voice, still not looking at me. “All my friends, gone. And I, left alone to carry their memories. The only one who still remembers their brave souls. All turned to ashes now, all dust.”

“Firdas!”

I shook him slightly, trying to draw him out from the memories that pulled at him like quicksand. He blinked and his eyes focused once more upon mine. He shook his head and wiped away the tears with the back of his left hand, smiling faintly with embarrassment and withdrawing his other hand from mine. He said gruffly, “Forgive me. Just the feeble ranting of an old man and the memories of too long a life.”

My heart was breaking at the sight of the old man crying. I wanted to comfort him, but I couldn't see his ghosts to scare them away. Whoever they were and whatever they looked like, only Firdas knew. His dark eyes became piercing, his face serious. He said, “The kingdom has been at war with the Southlands for forty years. The Ice Crown, isolated as it is so far north, has been untouched by the effects of this war, but other parts of the kingdom have seen their populations decimated. It seems impossible, but a kingdom can eventually forget what life is like without war. The war becomes a story that is told between friends; mere words without real consequence. Provisions and soldiers are sent, yes, but for those who do not live along the battle line, the war is largely forgotten or ignored.

“But I tell you, war is a fire: it destroys everything that it touches and must constantly be given new fuel to burn. The rulers of Ilirya feed the blaze with the blood of young soldiers, knights, and mages. These are the people—unrecognized, unmourned—who pay the price for the folly of kings.”

I dropped my gaze, not knowing what to say. He was right. What did I know of Ilirya's war in the south? I didn't know why we were fighting.

Trying to console Firdas, I said, “Not everyone goes unrecognized. We still tell stories of the King’s Regiment’s battle to stop the Northman invasion a hundred years ago. And of Kjelborn, the King’s Mage who fought off a hundred Southerners at once by raising a ring of fire around them, then walking through it to kill the enemy’s best mage in single combat. See? We remember.”

Firdas stiffened, then let out a single bark of laughter more bitter than anything I’d ever heard. His face was a mask of pain, a cross between a sneer and a grimace plastered across it.

“Would these so-called heroes be happy to know what damage their legends have wrought? Would they feel shame knowing these stories are used like honey to draw in hundreds of soldiers, all of whom think they, too, might win lasting glory but instead find their death? If the truth of battle were told, the real horror of it, no one would ever volunteer to fight. War is brutal and ugly, Aeryn, make no mistake. The screams of the dying tear through your very soul and haunt you—waking and asleep—until you join them.”

I knew then that Firdas looked so tired because he did not sleep at night. I knew, too, why he couldn’t bring himself to kill animals by his own hand. I wondered how long he had fought in this war he so obviously hated. How long it had taken for the man he had been before the war to be broken? Firdas’s dark eyes glowed with intense passion as he looked at me. His hand scabbled for mine.

“Listen to me, Aeryn. The crown jewels of the King’s Army are its war mages. They are meant to rain death on Ilirya’s enemies and bring the kingdom victory. Mages who have the potential to become war mages are rare, however, and they are destroyed almost as quickly as they can be found. Much effort is put into finding them. Most affinities are not well suited to war, but fire—”

He stopped abruptly and did not continue. He merely looked at me, his eyes beseeching me to understand without him having to speak the words. So I said them for him. “You think I could be a war mage.”

Firdas’s lips pursed. “There is no such thing as a ‘war’ mage, do you understand? It is a name, nothing more. If there was no such thing as war, there would be no war mages, only mages. Just because one has an affinity that can be used with deadly effect—even something seemingly peaceful,

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like illusion—doesn't mean that she has to become a 'war' mage. You can choose to use your skills for other causes. You are more than your affinity."

I was stunned into silence for some time, trying to understand what I had been told. I supposed Kjelborn would have been a war mage, but Panwel? I thought back to the beauty of his illusions and struggled to see how he could possibly have used them to kill. And yet as a King's Mage, he must have fought as a soldier. "You were a soldier, weren't you, Firdas? Is that how you know all this? Because you saw it?"

Firdas's eyes became distant again. With great sadness, he said, "I've seen a thousand soldiers die in a single day, the ground so swollen with their blood that it could hold no more and wept red tears. I've seen mages rip other mages apart in an ecstasy of violence. And I, I was there adding to the bloodshed. Yes, I was a soldier. I killed because I was told to kill and because I believed at the time that it was the right thing to do. And then I ran from it because I could no longer face myself."

He closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, the intensity that had burned like coals within them was gone. He rubbed the knuckles of his hands, which likely ached from rheumatism. I thought fleetingly that they must have been fine hands once, for though now the knuckles were swollen and knobby with age, still the fingers were long and thin. He said, "You will learn one day that most things in life are a choice. Indeed, life itself is little more than the continuous interplay of choices and their consequences. I hope that when the time comes, you make the right choice and do not repeat my failings."

I wanted and tried to understand his words, but their meaning slipped from my grasp like water through my fingers. I waited for a moment, trying to make sense of even the smallest sliver of what he had told me, but it was too much for me, too distant and unimaginable. How could I understand the emotions of battle when all I'd known was my quiet life in the Ice Crown?

"Firdas," I said at last, "you said the kingdom looks for war mages. And you seem to think I could become one. Am I in danger?"

"You have not yet done anything that would catch the magic sniffers' attention, I think," he replied slowly. "The Army's scryers are very, very good, but even they have limitations. While they are able to detect the magic of others even at a distance, they cannot see every person's magic

throughout the kingdom all the time. They can only see powerful magic. It is much like a signal fire: the smoke from a small fire is difficult to see, but a big fire produces smoke that can be seen from all directions. I believe if you do any magic more powerful than what you have already done, it is likely to be detected. The signature of a potential war mage would be impossible to hide when using more.”

Firdas looked into the distance, his face pained. “I wish the circumstances were different, Aeryn. I wish you were free to explore your magic to your heart’s content and never have to worry about what might happen. I would not tell you to limit your magic if I did not truly believe it was necessary to save your life, but alas, it is. I tell you: to avoid being conscripted into the King’s Army, you must be careful of how much magic you use.”

I stared at my hands, feeling as though I had walked off the edge of a cliff and was in free-fall. All the silly dreams I’d quietly harbored regarding my magic were vanishing before my eyes. According to Firdas, I could train and explore my magic at the cost of being sent to war, or I could give up most of my magic and stay in Thamir. There didn’t seem to be a middle ground. “I guess there’s no use going to Namoreth now. What’s the use of learning about my magic if all it’s good for is killing people?”

“Your magic is not limited to killing,” Firdas replied, passion back in his voice “As I told you, what is called ‘war magic’ is comprised of many different affinities, including your fire and levitation abilities. We call them ‘war magic’ because they are useful in war, but they are equally useful outside of battle. The difference between the axe that chops firewood and the axe that smashes an enemy’s helmet is only in its application...and the intention of she who wields it.”

“I suppose that’s true.” I tried to look at the situation positively, but it was difficult. All I could see was the melting away of the future I’d been planning.

Firdas took a breath. “Still, as you say, it may be best if you avoid Namoreth. The magic sniffers likely have an outpost there. It would be much easier for them to find you in Namoreth than in Thamir. I’m sorry.”

There was nothing left to say. We sat in silence at the stream for several minutes longer, then Firdas grabbed his staff and staggered to his feet. “Would you like to go back now?”

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I nodded, and we walked slowly back to his hut, where I left him. Then I returned to my own home, dragging my feet as I went. It felt as though my body weighed more than all the houses of the village combined. I found my father sitting outside, sharpening his dagger with a whetstone, Wolf curled at his feet. He looked up as I approached.

“You look pale, daughter. What’s the matter?”

I collapsed into a pile at his feet, resting my head on his knees the way I used to as a child.

“Would you be upset if I don’t go to Namoreth?”

“Aeryn,” he said, laying the dagger down, “I want for you what every father wants for his daughter: your happiness. If going to Namoreth won’t make you happy, then you shouldn’t go. There’s no question.”

My father patted my head, and I remembered all the times he would brush my hair before bed at night when I was a small child.

“Did something happen?”

I shook my head, too tired to explain. Later, I would, but not now.

“Do you remember when you were young and wanted to be just like your older brothers? You were four years old and you stole one of my axes and Kem’s bow. The axe was more than half as long as you were tall, and the bow longer. You were so determined to prove you were as good as your brothers. It’s because of that determination within you, that unwillingness to ever give up, that I know whatever happens, you’ll be fine. You’re a fighter, Aeryn.”

I covered my face to hide my smile. My father patted my head fondly. “The light is fading now. Will you make me light so that I can finish sharpening this dagger?”

“Of course, Father.”

I quickly shaped a small blue ball of magic and hung it in the air above his head. There was still plenty of light to see by, but I appreciated his effort to make me feel helpful. I got back up to my feet and squeezed his shoulder as I walked past into the house. Although I still felt a deep, aching sadness that I would never be able to explore the full extent of my magic, at least I always had a place in Thampir.

* * *

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That night, my dreams reflected what Firdas had told me. In one, soldiers chased me through the forests around Thamir. I ran desperately from them, panting wildly, trying to find my way home, where I would be safe. But they closed in around me, encircling me, trapping me. The magic in me prickled suggestively, offering a way out. Asking me to be the war mage I could be, if I let myself. Without my summoning it, the magic pulsed and gathered in my hands, running up my arms and washing over my body. The blue light intensified and surrounded me completely, turning me into a single, glorious flame that reached high into the black night sky.

When the dream dissolved abruptly, all that remained was the single pair of eyes that had haunted my dreams for days. For the first time, they came into focus, emerging from the darkness. They were green, human. They looked at me, then through me, so deeply that my soul felt naked before them. I shivered and tried to will them to go away, but I couldn't. Slowly, they faded back into the darkness and I slept on with no more dreams.

I awoke the next morning covered in sweat, and was ashamed to see that I had left burn marks on the blanket under which I had been sleeping. Apparently, my dream had been more real than I thought. I hated these nightmares; they felt so genuine. Yet there was nothing I could do about them. All I could do was hope they would stop just as suddenly as they had started.

While my parents were still sleeping, I stole out of the house with my sweat-stained night clothing under my arm and jogged slowly to the closer stream. I carried a small bar of lye in my left hand, which I used to scrub the rough fabric in the freezing cold water. It was peaceful to be out in the forest alone at this time, when the birds were finishing their morning song. Judging from the sharp bite in the air, it would snow in the next few days, prompting some of them to fly south. On the way back, I stopped to pick up some small logs from the woodpile outside our house for the morning fire. Bringing them inside, I set them in the hearth and carefully lit a small fire using a spark of magic.

I hugged my knees to my chest, watching the fire crackle and enjoying the smell of the burning wood. Then, paying only half attention to what I was doing, I began creating tiny, heatless flames of blue magic the size of my fist that I released to hang just below the ceiling like stars. Once I had

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put enough “stars” in place, I lay back and watched them. I had tried to recreate the constellations as they were in the Ice Crown Sky: the Horse, the Monkey, the Twin Sisters, the Water Jug, and more. I wondered whether in the south of Ilirya the stars looked the same. Was the sky like a piece of paper, and I was reading the top while people down there were reading the bottom? Did they see constellations I didn’t, and vice versa? I would have to ask the next rotation of soldiers passing through en route to the garrison. After all, I would likely never find the answer to that question out myself.

There were other questions I wanted to ask them that were more pressing, however. First and foremost was whether Firdas was right about war mages. Although I trusted Firdas—after all, he had no reason to lie—he had not left Thamir for decades. Perhaps the kingdom had changed since he had last been out in the world. Perhaps the Ilirya in which he had lived, and which had scarred him so deeply, was now only a distant memory, a half-forgotten dream. There was still hope that I might be able to use my magic fully, although I wouldn’t tell Firdas about this hope. The garrison would rotate in a few months; I could be patient.

When I became bored of the stars, I pulled them together into a pulsing, swirling blue lake on the ceiling, then made the lake rain shining orbs of blue magic on me. The drops didn’t melt away when they landed on my skin; instead, they sat upon me like large snowflakes. My skin glowed with the blue color that was unique to my magic. It was a comforting feeling. Even if I could never be a mage outside Thamir, I would always have these little magical tricks. Eventually, I stood and swept the magic from me, watching as it dissolved when it hit the floor.

I ate a quick breakfast, then slipped out of the house before my parents awoke, strapping my bow and quiver to my back. Without knowing why, I walked to Firdas’s hut. I raised my hand to knock on his door, then stopped. It was still early. If he was sleeping, it would be impolite to wake him. I turned to leave right as the door opened. I squeaked in surprise and jumped backward. Seeing me, Firdas leaned on his staff and half-smiled, amused. The crow’s feet at the corners of his eyes crinkled good-naturedly.

“Good morning, Aeryn. I didn’t expect to see you so soon. I was just headed out to look for gooseberries. I find the best time of the day is morning, when the sun has risen and all is quiet and still. Care to join me?” He held up a basket that he’d woven from green twigs.

I smiled. "Sure."

We headed east toward the risen sun, walking at Firdas's slow pace, a few comfortable feet between us. I couldn't say why I'd sought him out. Perhaps it was because for now, only he knew the price I would be forced to pay to avoid becoming a war mage. Perhaps it was that vast sadness in him that made me pity him and want to offer some sort of solace in the twilight of his years. Or perhaps it was because he was grandfatherly, and I had never known my own grandparents.

To break the silence between us, I asked, "What did you do after you left the army?"

Firdas said nothing for a long time. Finally, he said, "I did many things. I tried my hand at being a groom, at being a locksmith, even at being a beggar. A man in need of work will do many an unexpected job. I'm lucky enough to be good with my hands. It's a skill that has served me well over time." He smiled wryly, holding up his gnarled hands. "Though you wouldn't know it to look at them now."

"Did you have a family?"

"No," he answered immediately, shaking his head with a small, sad smile.

"Did you ever want one?"

"It might have been nice, but it was not possible. First I was too busy and then, when I had too much time, I never stayed in one place longer than a few months. Eventually, I was too old; the time for families had passed."

"Brothers or sisters?"

"A brother. I haven't seen him in forty years, at least. More, I suppose. He may be dead by now. I don't know."

"Could you find him? If you wanted to?"

Firdas shook his head. "I don't see how. The kingdom is vast."

"I think you're very wise. I'm sure you could find a way."

"I will tell you the secret to being wise," Firdas said.

"What?"

"You must be very old," he said somberly, looking me in the eyes.

I laughed. "That's no help!"

He shrugged. "I didn't say the truth would be helpful to you now. In fifty years, you will be just as wise as I am."

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“If I live to be sixty-five years old.”

“May everyone have the chance to experience bad digestion, arthritic limbs, and failing eyesight,” Firdas said with pious sincerity. “I have a loose tooth, too.”

He caught my eye again and snickered. The sight of the old man giggling like a child set me to laughing, too. Wiping a tear from the corner of his eye, Firdas said, “I remembered something last night. It may not work for you, but I suspect it will. Call it a consolation. One of the possible war magics is perfectly true aim. It’s a small magic, one that should not be detectable to others, but for someone in the Ice Crown, it would be an invaluable gift.”

“But I’m already a good archer,” I said, puzzled.

“There’s a difference between a good archer and a war mage archer. A war mage never misses her target, however small or far away it may be. Take your bow and see if you can shoot that pinecone in the tree over there.”

He pointed at a tree one hundred feet away from us. It was so far away that I could barely see the pinecone as a smudge of brown against the green needles. I shook my head. “Firdas, no one could hit that pinecone.”

“Certainly there are some mages who could hit that pinecone. Let’s see if you’re one of them.”

I unslung my bow from my back, still shaking my head. I flicked the string, checking to make sure it was still taut, then pulled an arrow with brown fletching from the quiver. Notching the arrow and drawing back the string, I looked down the wooden shaft toward where I had seen the pinecone. I couldn’t see it now, only the pine tree far in the distance. I slowed my breathing, so similar to the meditation I had learned from Firdas, and on the next exhalation, I let the arrow fly. I didn’t see the arrow hit. I lowered the bow and looked at Firdas.

“Well?”

He didn’t answer, but instead scratched his head and began limping toward the tree. We searched around it but found no sign of the arrow.

“I told you it was impossible to hit that pinecone,” I said.

“If that was the case,” Firdas replied, “then where is the pinecone?”

I looked up and was astonished to see that where the pinecone should have been, more or less, there was nothing. No pinecone. I frowned. We searched around the ground some more, but couldn’t find it. I gave up and

reslung my bow. It might have been nice to have the small magic Firdas had described, but I wouldn't think too much about it. My aim was good enough on its own.

"We should go find those gooseberries. Are they around here?" I asked.

Before Firdas could answer, we heard the unmistakable crack of a tree branch that has been stepped on. We both turned to look. There, standing near to where we had searched for the pinecone, were three men and a woman in identical black armor. Firdas and I stared at them with open-mouthed surprise. Everything the four wore was black, from their black leather boots to their black breeches to their black breastplates emblazoned with the King's crest to their black cloaks. The thought flashed through my mind that Kyan would have given an eyetooth to be able to see and touch the workmanship that had gone into the black steel of their armor. Their wearers looked like ravens that had temporarily landed and would soon take flight again.

I also noticed, however, that the four were all armed with long, thin rapiers that hung in black scabbards at their hips, and one of the men had a crossbow strapped to his back. The wooden bolts—with black fletching, of course—were set in loops in a black leather strap that crossed his chest. Instinctively, I sensed something was wrong. These were nothing like the normal soldiers who manned the garrison. Who were they and why were they here?

A tall man with intense brown eyes stepped forward. He raised his gloved hand so that we could see. In it, he held my arrow. It had skewered the pinecone, which was stuck midway down the arrow. A thrill of pride and amazement ran through me; Firdas had been right.

"Impressive," the man said to me, nodding to the arrow.

"No," Firdas breathed beside me, his voice full of horror. His tone chilled me to the bone.

Firdas's left arm swept in front of me, pushing me back as he tried to put himself between me and the strangers. At the same time, his right hand dropped to grasp the head of an axe that hung at his waist. Had he always worn an axe? I didn't think so. Firdas didn't draw the axe yet, however. The strangers, who had instinctively put their hands to the hilts of their swords in response, remained tense and alert.

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“Easy now. We come as friends,” the man said, dropping the arrow. He held his hands up and took a step back.

“Friends come openly, not sneaking around in the woods,” Firdas snarled. He nodded at their unusual clothing. “You’re from the King’s Regiment. I know why you’re here.”

My knees went weak and my mouth became dry. The King’s Regiment was the vanguard that led the King’s Army into every battle. It made no sense for four of the Regiment to appear here in Thamir, unless...Firdas had known it the second they had appeared. The stranger pointed to me.

“We’re here for the girl.”

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DAUGHTER OF FIRE
CONSPIRACY OF THE DARK

BY KAREN FROST

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