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# Moonglow

From Charmed Destinies Anthology

By

**Catherine Asaro**

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To Mary Jo Putney, with gratitude,  
for welcoming me to this genre

Dear Reader,

I've always loved fantasy worlds and romances. When I combined that with my appreciation for the beauty of tessellated mosaics, the land of Aronsdale came to exist. Through the magic of shapes and colors, the mages of Aronsdale, mostly women, are able to bring light and healing into the lives of their people.

The kings of Aronsdale have always married the most powerful mages. I found myself wondering what would happen if a young woman didn't realize that custom would include her—and if her groom is the long-lost heir, a tormented prince who needs a healing greater than anything she could have imagined. She feels her love growing, if only she can reach through his barriers.

I've enjoyed the company of Iris and Jarid on their journeys of self-discovery and romance. I hope you enjoy their story also. I would love to hear from you at my e-mail [asaro@sff.net](mailto:asaro@sff.net). Or you can visit my Web site at [www.sff.net/people/asaro](http://www.sff.net/people/asaro).

Best regards,

*Catherine Asaro*

P.S. If you enjoyed the story of Iris and Jarid, be sure to pick up Muller and Chime's story, *The Charmed Sphere*, one of the first books in LUNA, available in February 2004.

## **Prologue**

Jarid jolted awake when his mother cried out. Their carriage was lurching through the night much too fast. His mother held him close, shielding him with her embrace. In his six years of life, he had never felt such

fear from her. It terrified him. Across the carriage, in the darkness, his father—Prince Aron—was half out of his seat, a dagger clenched in his hand as he yanked aside the curtains on the small window.

Yells erupted outside, chilling and wild. Jarid buried his head against his mother's side and squeezed his eyes shut. The carriage suddenly reared as if it were an enraged beast. Perhaps it *was* angry; made as a perfect sphere, the enchanted carriage focused the mage power of Jarid's mother.

"Mama!" He gripped her arm. "*Papa!*"

His mother thrust a large glass orb into his hands.

She spoke urgently, but he couldn't hear over all the noise. The carriage jerked again, and then they were tumbling, over and over, slamming from side to side in the darkness.

A horse screamed, its frenzied cry splitting the air. Jarid gasped as he was thrown across the carriage. His head hit a hard surface and he groaned, clutching the glass ball in his arms. His mother caught him, holding him so tightly he could barely breathe. With his cheek pressed against her shoulder, he heard her speaking an orb-spell. She curled her body and her spell around him, cocooning him in a protective sphere of life.

With a roar, the world exploded. Jarid hurtled through the air with his mother and they landed hard, slamming the air out of his lungs. Debris rained everywhere, splintering and furious. A shower of pebbles clattered from the sky, and a rock rolled against Jarid's leg.

Then everything became still.

Jarid huddled against his mother. "Mama?" he whispered. "Papa?" He clenched his small hands around the glass ball. "C-can we go home now?"

No answer.

Shaking, he lifted his head and peered into the night. Wreckage lay everywhere, scattered at the bottom of a cliff as if a great hand had flung it there. A chill wind blew his hair, making him shake.

Somehow, incredibly, his mother still held him. Only she didn't move or speak. She didn't even seem to breathe, but surely that had to be wrong. It *had* to be wrong.

His voice caught. "Mama?"

Words carried to him through the night. Jarid froze, desperate for help but afraid of who might be coming. Even the stars had deserted him, hidden behind clouds.

The voices came nearer, resolving into an argument. Two men on horses made black silhouettes against a charcoal-gray sky.

"Damn it all, it wasn't supposed to crash." That came from the man on the larger horse. "You swore we wouldn't hurt anyone."

A deep voice answered. "This makes our job easier."

"*Easier?*" The first man let out an explosive breath. "Gods, Murk, I never agreed to murder anyone."

"The highway doesn't come with guarantees." The other man, Murk apparently, stopped his horse near the wreckage. "You know the risks you take."

"You take them." The first man swung off his horse. "I won't be doing this again."

Murk jumped down beside him. "I never knew you for a coward."

The first man ignored him, the way Stone paid no heed to insults. Jarid immediately thought of him as Stone. While Stone approached the ruined carriage, Jarid huddled by his mother, hiding in the shadows, clutching the glass ball. He didn't understand much of what the men said, but one thing was obvious: they believed they had killed his parents. He wasn't sure what it meant to die, but when it had happened to Grandmother, she had gone to sleep and never woken up. Tears welled in his eyes. Surely Mother and Father hadn't done the same.

Stone suddenly swore. "It was an orb-carriage."

"Who cares about its shape?" Murk muttered. "Don't start on me with that blather about spells. Shape-mages are fakes, lording their supposed powers over the rest of us."

"The two soldiers we knocked out must have been their honor guard."

Murk stayed by his horse. "If people in this carriage were mages, why did they have such a small honor guard?"

"I've no idea."

Jarid could have told them; their carriage and the two guards had been cut off from the rest when an old bridge collapsed back at the river. So the driver had been taking them on to the next bridge. Father had said it would be no trouble.

For the first time in his life, Jarid understood that his father could be wrong.

Stone knelt by the body of Prince Aron. "Maybe he was the mage."

"None of them were mages." Murk crossed his arms. "Mages don't exist."

Stone looked around. "How many bodies do you see?"

Still refusing to come closer, Murk motioned at the rubble. "Two over there and the driver beyond."

Holding his breath, Jarid tried to vanish. He wasn't certain how he had survived the crash, but he remembered what his mother had taught him about shape-mages: *Your power is as strong as a life. One life, no more.* The power of a life. It couldn't be. His mother couldn't have used all her power to protect him. Surely she could have saved herself and his father. She *couldn't* be dead. He wanted to cry, but he bit the inside of his mouth to stop himself.

Stone looked up, frowning. Then he rose and came over to where Jarid huddled. When the highwayman went down on one knee, Jarid cringed against his mother.

"Saints almighty," Stone said. "It's a little boy."

"What?" Murk finally came forward, stepping carefully through the wreckage. For all that he denied mages existed, his apprehension rolled over Jarid like clammy fog. Murk's bravado disguised a soul-parching envy and fear of shape-mages that Jarid barely understood.

Jarid thrust out his chin, trying to be strong. "Go away!"

Stone laid his hand on Jarid's arm. "It's all right."

"Tell the brat to shut up," Murk said. Unease oozed from his mind.

"Let him be." Stone gently freed Jarid from his mother's lifeless grip, which remained strong even now.

"Leave me alone!" Jarid wrapped his arms around his glass ball. "My grandfather is coming!"

"Your grandfather," Murk snorted. "Sure, and don't old men scare me."

Jarid wanted to shout that Grandfather was strong and fierce, that he had many shape-soldiers, that he was king in this land. But no words came. Instead, tears ran down his face.

"Hai," Stone murmured. "I am so very sorry."

"Don't bother," Murk said. "He's going to join his parents soon." Crouching down, he poked in the rubble until he dug up Prince Aron's gem-encrusted dagger, which he thrust into the sack he carried. "Take care of the boy. Fast. We have to get out of here."

Stone jerked up his head. "Are you crazy? I'm not going to kill a child."

*I will run*, Jarid thought, though he could barely move, he hurt so much from the crash.

Then Murk rolled over the body of Jarid's father and began ripping jewels off his tunic.

"Stop!" Jarid cried, trying to scramble to his feet. He made it to his knees before his legs crumpled and he collapsed. He was gripping the glass ball so hard, his arms ached.

Stone lifted Jarid into his arms and stood up, cradling him with unexpected tenderness. "It's all right. I won't hurt you." He touched a place on Jarid's neck that felt wet. "We can stitch this up."

"No!" Jarid fought hard, holding his ball with one arm while he flailed at Stone with a small fist.

Stone caught his hand. "I'll take you to a safe place."

Murk looked up from his looting. "We can't let him live. He's seen us."

Jarid froze, finally understanding. He could tell people what they had done, and he could describe them.

They would kill him because he could see, hear and talk.

"No." Tears ran down Jarid's face. "Please."

"Shhhh," Stone said. "Don't listen to him. We won't hurt you."

"Damn it." Murk jumped to his feet. "We have to get rid of him."

Stone tightened his hold on Jarid. "I won't do it."

Jarid pressed against Stone's chest, trying to hide. "I won't tell anything," he promised Murk, his voice shaking. "I'll never, never tell. I *promise*."

"Murk, listen," Stone said. "I'll keep him with me. You know where I live. Way out there, up in the mountains, he'll never see anyone, never have a chance to tell what happened. Hell, I've gone for years at a time without visitors." Under his breath, he added, "I should have stayed up there."

Murk scowled, fierce as he came over to them. "We have to get rid of him and get out of here before those guards wake up." He grasped the ball Jarid carried.

"No!" Jarid jerked back. "It's mine!"

Murk's fury sparked, so sharp that Jarid *saw* it in the air. "I'll take care of you myself, you little swamp wart." He wrested the ball away from Jarid.

"Don't hurt it, please." More tears ran down Jarid's face. Mage power saturated the night, straining to change Murk's cruelty, straining so hard that the spell distorted and the sphere began to glow.

"What the *hell*?" Murk hurled the ball away and it sailed through the night in an arc of violet light. Jarid felt power *reaching*, focusing through the perfect shape, the power of a shape-mage, of a sphere-mage, the highest form, *the power of a life*. Even now, the spell sought to help him, as if it knew his terror that Murk would kill him, all because Jarid could tell what he had seen and heard tonight.

As the ball hit the ground with a terrible crash, its distorted spell made one last attempt to save Jarid. Violet light flared—and when it died, it took with it Jarid's sight, his hearing and his voice.

## Chapter 1

### *The Hollow*

Iris Larkspur walked down the grassy hill, savoring the warm day. The sky arched above, as blue as glazed china. In a valley to the west, the village of Crofts Vale and its surrounding farmlands slumbered in the morning sun. Even after having been at Castle Sun-croft for a year, since her eighteenth birthday, she marveled at this mild climate. Spring came earlier here than in the rugged mountains of her home. These hills had already turned green and were bursting with new life.

Yet all this serenity couldn't heal her loneliness.

"Iris!" The sharp call came from behind her.

Startled, she spun around. Far up the hill, Delia No-Cozen, the Shape-Mage Mistress of Suncroft, stood with her hands on her ample hips, her gray curls fluttering in the breeze. Even from this far away, her frown was obvious.

"Aye, well, I'm in trouble again," Iris muttered, aware of the lilting accent that marked her as a stranger in this land, a commoner from the north. She hurried up the hill. In the distance, cresting a taller hill, Castle Suncroft glimmered in the sunlight, gold and bright, its crenellated towers topped by spires.

Seeing her wayward student returning, Delia returned to the cottage behind her on the hill. Iris sighed. A pretty cottage it was, but she felt suffocated inside. She missed her home, a tiny village in the Tallwalk Mountains. She had little to go back to, though. Her foster family had been relieved when she left; it meant they no longer had to feed or to house her. Her mother had abandoned Iris with them just days after Iris's birth, an unpromising start for what, until last year, had been an unpromising life. Although her foster parents hadn't ill-treated her, neither had they given any affection. They tolerated her.

Delia had discovered Iris during the mistress's travels through Aronsdale. Each year Delia went on a tour in search of village girls with mage talent. But Iris had never really felt accepted here, either, and Prince Muller had no reason to continue providing her room and board at the cottage if Iris never progressed in her mage studies with Delia.

Pah. As if Muller would care. Although his behavior was impeccable, she knew he loathed his duties. Regardless, he had to become king of Aronsdale; the true heir, Prince Aron, had died fourteen years ago in a carriage accident, along with his wife and son Jarid. Prince Aron's father, King Daron, had grieved for years. Iris thought it heartbreaking; a parent shouldn't outlive his children. Yet Daron had survived them by fourteen years. Now the old king had passed away and Muller, his nephew, would soon wear the crown.

As Iris neared the cottage, she saw a young woman in its doorway. Iris inwardly groaned. Well then, and here it was her bad luck to study today with Chime Headwind. Iris supposed she should be honored. Sure it was true, Chime would marry Prince Muller and be queen. By law, Chime had to marry him; she was the most powerful shape-mage among her generation in Aronsdale. Iris thanked the fates it was Chime and not her. She had no wish for the weight of such responsibilities, and the prospect of marrying Muller would have sent her fleeing to the hills.

Chime and Muller had a lot in common, both of them overly aware of their importance. Yet Iris wondered if their pride served as bravado to disguise their fears about becoming king and queen. Away from the royal court, they were an amiable couple. Given a choice, she thought they probably would have settled in the country as farmers. Many people might covet royal titles, but Muller and Chime weren't among them.

Right now, Chime was standing in the doorway, fixing her hair, carefully arranging the glossy locks. Her appraising gaze made Iris flush. She would never measure up to Chime's impossible ideals. The future queen seemed to care only about appearance. Iris told herself she didn't mind, that it only mattered what a person had inside, but it was hard to remember that when the rest of the world so greatly prized Chime's beauty. Iris's wild mane of chestnut curls would never tame into the sleek fall of Chime's golden hair; her full, curvy figure would never have Chime's willowy elegance; her face would never approach Chime's angelic perfection.

As Iris reached the door, Chime gave her a cool smile, "You look lively today."

Iris blinked. "Lively?"

"Wind-blown." Chime hesitated. "Your hair is a mess."

"I don't mind." Iris enjoyed the breezes.

Chime entered the cottage with her. Iris left her boots at the door, feeling as if she had lost the freedom of the outdoors. She didn't know why the cottage stifled her; it was lovely inside. Sunlight filtered through colored windows of many shapes: triangles, diamonds, hexagons, beveled squares, and others. They made graceful patterns around larger round windows with clear panes. Sunshine slanted through the glass, warming the well-worn tables and chairs, and vases full of colorful shape-blossoms brightened the room even more.

Delia No-Cozen bustled in from the kitchen and waved her hands at the girls. "Sit yourselves down, you two. What is all this playing about, eh? We have lessons."

Iris settled at a table beside a yellow window and tried to look contrite. She doubted she succeeded, judging by the way Delia frowned at her.

"Well then," the mage mistress said tartly. "Don't you look healthy today."

A flush spread in Iris's face. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Very healthy," Delia grumbled. "What with all the fresh air you get, out who-knows-where instead of studying."

"Aye, ma'am," Iris said, mortified.

"Aye, ma'am?" Delia crossed her arms. "I would rather hear, 'Aye, Mistress No-Cozen, I will be on time from now on.'"

"Aye, ma'am. I mean, I willna be late, Mage Mistress." Iris winced, knowing her voice lilted even more when she was nervous.

Delia said *humph* and bustled off, probably to retrieve their class materials from her office.

Sitting at the table, Chime brushed an invisible speck of dirt off her sleeve. Then she smiled sweetly at Iris. "Yes, let us proceed, now that everyone is here."

"I didna come that late," Iris grumbled.

"Did I say that?" Chime asked, all innocence.

"Well then, is'n that what you meant?"

"Perhaps we have a language difficulty."

"Nay, Chime, I donna have a language difficulty." Iris felt her face heat as her accent thickened.

"I'm sure you can't help it," Chime murmured.

Iris poked her finger into the petals of a green box-blossom in the vase. "An' I'm sure you canna help but notice, aye?"

"Language, like appearance, is an art form," Chime explained. "Some people have the gift for its graceful expression. Others don't. It isn't their fault."

Exasperated, Iris resisted the urge to snap the box-blossom. Chime, she decided, had been sorely misnamed. "I swear, I do truly think sometimes you clang."

Chime blinked. "Clang?"

"You know the word?"

"Of course." Chime hesitated. "Don't bells clang?"

"Aye, they do certainly."

Chime looked bewildered. "But I'm not a bell."

Iris held back her sigh. It was difficult to make a witty comeback with someone who couldn't figure out what the comeback meant. "It is'n important."

"Your speech is so quaint," Chime said.

*Patience*, Iris thought. *Be serene*. She felt more like pouring the shape-blossoms out of the vase onto Chime's head. But she shouldn't think such thoughts about the future queen. Really.

"Why are you smiling like that?" Chime asked.

"Smiling?" *Hail* She had to stop this. Antagonizing Chime would only lead to repercussions from Muller. Iris made a valiant effort to be polite. "I was thinking you look radiant this morning." That was certainly true. Chime was maddeningly beautiful even just after she woke up.

"Oh, well, in that case." Chime smiled. "Of course."

"And humble," Iris added under her breath.

"What did you say?" Chime asked, friendly now.

"Uh... bumble." Iris tried to think of a way out of the insult she had almost given. "Bumblebees."

Chime looked bewildered. "Bees?"

"They are, uh, sunny and bright. like you."

"Oh." Chime gave her a confused smile. "Thank you."

Delia came back before Iris could cram her foot any further down her own throat. The teacher opened a scroll on the table before them. "Here."

The scroll delighted Iris. Inked in bright colors, with finely drawn vines curling around the edges, it showed the shapes that mages used to focus spells. For all that Iris had yet to succeed with even a simple spell, she felt the power in those beautiful forms.

"We will start with the basics." Delia lowered her plump self into a chair. "Iris, how do we use the shapes?"

The easy question relieved Iris. "They focus our gifts. The more powerful the shape, the better it concentrates a mage's power." She paused, but the answer felt incomplete. "If a mage tries to focus through a shape too powerful for her ability, her spell will dissipate."

"Good." Delia turned to Chime. "And what determines the power of a shape?"

Chime hesitated. "The, uh... number of its sides?"

*Ach, everyone knows that*, Iris thought. Then she reminded herself she was being serene toward Chime.

Delia, however, scowled. "And?"

Chime blinked. "Ma'am?"

"How do the number of sides give a mage power?"

"The more sides a shape has, the greater its power?"

"The shape itself has no power," Delia reminded her.

"Oh. Well, yes. The mage has the power."

"Go on."

"The shapes focus her power?"

"All right. How?"

After a moment Chime said, "I don't know."

Delia sighed. "Try, Chime. Take your time."

Iris knew Delia wanted Chime to describe what a mage could do with her power. Although Chime should have known, Iris sympathized with her confusion. If they could already use shapes to focus their power, they wouldn't need to be here.

Iris touched a glimmering silver triangle on the scroll. She traced her finger over the shapes in order of increasing power: squares, diamonds, pentagons, hexagons and more, the number of sides increasing until the shape resembled a circle. With an infinite number of sides, it *became* a circle, the most perfect flat shape. But those weren't the forms that captivated Iris. She loved three-dimensional shapes: pyramids, boxes, octahedrons and so on, their forms becoming rounder as their number of sides increased, until they resembled faceted balls. With an infinite number of sides, a shape became the most perfect form of all: a sphere. Only the most powerful of all mages could focus through such a shape.

Delia was watching Iris now. "Tell me what you see in the shapes."

Frustration welled within her. "To what purpose? I canna use them for even the simplest spell."

"You will," Delia said. "You have the talent."

Iris couldn't fathom why Delia believed such a thing. Iris had never managed to focus power through *any* shape, not even flat triangles made from red sticks.

Excitement sparked in Chime's voice. "Delia, I used a ten-sided shape in my exercises this morning, a blocky ball like my little brother plays with."

Delia's expression softened. "I'm not surprised. I'm sure you can go even higher, maybe to twenty sides."

Chime's gaze widened. "That would be almost a sphere."

Iris smiled, caught by Chime's excitement despite herself. "Well then, and sure it is." She tapped a picture on the scroll, a faceted sphere with many faces. "This is your mage shape, Chime." The other girl beamed at her.

"Let's try." Delia went to a cabinet by the wall, one with shape-blossom vines engraved on its doors. She opened it to reveal shelves of solid objects. From one shelf, she took a polished jade ball with faceted sides; from another, she took a pearly disk, a lower level shape than the ball, but highest among the two-dimensional forms. Returning to the table, she set the ball in front of Chime and the disk in front of Iris. Then she settled in her chair.

"So." Delia tapped the faceted ball. "Chime, try a ruby spell."

Chime squinted at the ball, as if it could reveal the spell she should have memorized. Iris wished she could help. It seemed unfair Chime had so much trouble learning, given the effort she put into her studies. Iris had to respect her for that; Iris could barely make herself stay indoors, let alone study. She often *thought* about doing her studies, but no matter how earnest her intentions, she usually ended up wandering in the woods instead.

The universe had no justice. Chime had great mage gifts and the will to study, but she struggled to learn the simplest uses of her power. Iris learned easily, but she had neither the power to perform the spells nor the will to apply herself. If she and Chime could have combined their strengths, together they might have become the student Delia wished.

Even if Iris couldn't do spells, though, they fascinated her. They were a rainbow: red spells created light, orange soothed physical pain, yellow eased sorrow, green revealed the emotions of others, blue healed physical injuries and indigo healed emotional injuries. A mage worked spells at her color and below. Most could do red and orange. It was more difficult to soothe emotional rather than physical pain, and it took a strong mage to do yellow spells. Green mages were rare; feeling emotions was harder than easing them, because a mage could soothe the pain of another person without actually experiencing it. Blue mages were almost unheard of; only the strongest could heal injuries, treating the source of the pain rather than just the symptoms.

No indigo mages existed. How did you cure grief, anguish or misery? Only time could truly heal such wounds. Legend claimed the royal line of Aronsdale, the House of Dawnfield, had once produced indigos, but the historians had never found reliable records of any such mages.

In all Aronsdale, Iris knew of only two mages who had the strength to call on three-dimensional forms—Chime and Delia. Right now Chime was squinting at her blocky globe. When she murmured, rosy light flickered in the ball.

"You can do better," Delia prodded.

A flush stained Chime's delicate cheeks. As her forehead furrowed, the light within the sphere flared and turned green. A sense of well-being spread through Iris, and she no longer felt so painfully homesick. Her crushing loneliness eased for the first time since she had come to Suncroft.

Chime smiled angelically at Delia. "You're frustrated with Iris. You worry she will never achieve her potential."

Iris's good mood crashed down. Only Chime would show her ability to do green spells by speaking Delia's disappointment in another student.

"Well then." Iris's voice caught. Dismayed to have her failure made so obvious, she rose to her feet. "And it be a pity for us all."

Then she escaped from the cottage.

Iris ran through the woods. She hadn't stopped to put on her boots, but it made no difference if someone saw her tearing about in stockings and disapproved. She wouldn't be at Suncroft much longer. Chime had only spoken what they all knew: Delia had erred. The talent she believed she had seen in Iris was no more than a ghost that didn't really exist, like drifting mist that, for a moment, seemed to take form but then dissipated.

She came out on a bluff above a valley. To her right, Castle Suncroft stood on its hill, golden in the sunlight. The nearby village of Crofts Vale nestled in the valley, pretty houses with thatched roofs. Vines bloomed everywhere, with rosy pyramid blossoms, green and blue box-buds, orange ring-flowers and violet orbs. They climbed trees, spilled down trellises and brightened gardens.

Iris knelt in the grass and bowed her head. A tear ran down her face.

"What is this?" a voice said. "We've hardly started the lesson and already you are leaving."

Iris looked around. Delia stood a few paces away, her hands on her hips and a scowl on her face.

"Hai, Delia, admit the truth." Iris rose wearily to her feet. "I donna have it in me to be a mage."

Delia came over to her. "Is that so?"

"Aye, that be so."

"So now you think you can take my place?"

"Well, sure as the sun shines, I would never be thinking such a thing."

"No?"

"No, ma'am."

Delia glowered. "I am the one who decides if you have what it takes to study with me, young woman."

"Butlcanna—"

"Pah." Delia motioned around them, taking in the sky and the distant hazy mountains. "You see all this?"

"Aye, ma'am."

"What is it?"

"Aronsdale."

"Aronsdale, Hairs-in-Dale, that isn't what I meant."

Iris gazed over the enchanting panorama and breathed in the crisp, pure air. "It is a place of beauty and serenity."

"Serenity, pah. Aronsdale is a mess."

"It is?"

"It will be, after Prince Muller's coronation."

"Delia!"

"Well, it's true."

"You shouldna speak of His Highness so."

Delia exhaled tiredly. "Then who will? He doesn't want the throne."

Knowing Delia loved the prince as if he were her own nephew, Iris understood what it took for her to make such an admission. "He is the heir."

Delia's voice quieted. "I speak to you privately, Iris, as one of the king's advisors. We have delayed the coronation because if we push Muller, he may refuse the crown."

"But then who will be king?"

"We don't know. Probably another of his advisors, perhaps Brant Firestoke."

Iris didn't doubt Lord Firestoke would make a good ruler. But Aronsdale needed the royal family; the House of Dawnfield was the symbolic heart of the country. Their loss would devastate the people. "Canna Chime reassure Muller? She is well an' sure a green mage, Delia. I felt it this afternoon."

"She does have great gifts." Delia hesitated. "But one must also know how to use such gifts."

"It is only that the spells are new. She will learn." Delia sighed. "You are kind, especially given how she speaks to you."

Iris hadn't realized Delia saw the tension between her two young charges. "I think it frustrates her to learn the spells so slow. When her words bite, it is only her fear speaking. She has a good spirit."

"Now you sound like a green mage."

"It is only common sense, no feeling of emotions."

"You think so? I see the power in you." Iris answered dourly.

"You are the only one who does."

"Well, of course." Delia actually smiled. "Why do you think I am mage mistress here? It is one of my best skills, to see gifts in others." Her smile faded. "I saw it even in Prince Jarid, the boy who died in the carriage crash."

"A boy mage? Nay, it is impossible."

"Improbable, but not impossible. History tells of a few. In the Dawnfield line, they seem to skip every other generation. And Jarid's mother, Lady Sky, was one of the strongest shape-mages Aronsdale has known." Delia's mood turned pensive. "She and Prince Jarid had so much promise."

Iris sensed her grief. "Their deaths were a great sorrow."

"Aye, all of them." Delia took a moment before she continued. "After King Daron lost his son, Prince Aron, his advisors urged him to remarry and sire another heir. But he had never stopped mourning his first wife, who had died many years before. And he refused to see the truth about Muller, his nephew, that the boy had neither the interest nor aptitude for the title." She sighed. "If Daron had a fault, it was that he loved his family too much to acknowledge their flaws."

Even now, three turnings of the moon since Daron had died, Iris found it hard to accept he was no longer with them. "He was a good king."

"He was." Delia spoke quietly. "Aronsdale is a small realm. We don't have much else to live on besides farming. The land can offer a good life, yes, but during drought or famine, we have few resources to fall back on."

Iris's mood dimmed. "I often saw such in my village."

"We need a strong king who can guide Aronsdale." She paused. "We have Muller."

"Aye." Iris thought it best to say no more.

"He needs capable advisors, people with intelligence, compassion and foresight." Her gaze didn't waver. "Someday you could be one of those advisors. You have both the strength of character and the mage power." Softly she said, "Don't give up now."

Iris felt as if she were breaking inside. "I canna pretend to gifts I donna have."

"The power is there." Delia made a frustrated noise. "I just don't know how to help you find it."

Iris indicated the woods that spilled down the hills around them. "This is the magic—trees, sky, flowers."

Delia's expression turned thoughtful. "The harder I push to make you study, the more you want to come out here."

"I donna mean disrespect, ma'am."

"I know, Iris." Delia considered her. "It's as if your studies *drive* you to seek the outdoors."

"It does feel that way," Iris admitted.

"Do you have a special place here, one that makes you feel even closer to the land?"

Iris hesitated to reveal her secrets. But in her own gruff way, Delia had mothered her this past year, trying to ease Iris's loneliness, to provide her with a home in the cottage, more than just a place to live. Iris felt she had given back so little, no hint of the gifts Delia strove to awaken.

"I have a place where I go to be alone," Iris offered.

"Will you take me there?"

Softly Iris said, "Aye."

Trees and ferns enclosed the glade, curving around on all sides and overhead, hiding this secret hollow from the rest of the woods. A stream flowed off a stone ledge and fell sparkling into a pool. Shape-vines threaded the trees and draped the falls.

Iris sunk into the soft grass by the water. "I come here whenever I can."

Delia turned in a circle. "It is lovely."

"It soothes."

"Don't you see what it is?"

"What do you mean?"

Delia's voice gentled. "Look at the shape."

For the first time, Iris took in the form of the hollow rather than its beauty. "Hai! I'll be a frog in a fig. It's a sphere!"

Delia chuckled. "In a fig, eh?" She settled next to Iris. "I have been through these woods many times and never seen this place."

"It's always been here."

"I recognize the waterfall and some trees. But a sphere? It wasn't like this before. You have changed it."

"Nay, Delia. How could I?"

"Perhaps the plants respond to your mage power."

Iris didn't see how such could happen. And yet... each time she visited this hollow, it soothed her more than the last, giving her peace that eluded her elsewhere. Could she have somehow been changing the shape? "It seems impossible."

Delia's eyes lit up. "Iris!"

"Aye?"

"Make a spell here."

"Why?"

"Maybe you can do here what you can't do in the cottage."

Iris squinted at her. "That is an odd idea."

"An odd idea may be what you need."

"I have no shape to focus my power."

"But you do." Delia indicated the hollow.

Iris flushed. "Well then, sure, it be a sphere, too much for me."

"Try."

"I canna do it."

Kindly, Delia said, "You won't know unless you try."

Iris feared to try, lest she fail yet again. But if she never took chances, she might as well live her life in a hole. She breathed deeply, centering herself, thinking of the round hollow. The waterfall shimmered with rainbows and blossoms hung from the vines, all colors, like mage spells—

Red.

Orange.

Yellow.

Green.

Blue.

Indigo—

With a great surge of power, her mind *opened*.

## Chapter 2

## *Jarid*

Darkness and silence filled his life.

Jarid was sitting in his favorite spot, a corner of his room. He preferred the floor, where he couldn't fall. Blind and deaf, he lived in an isolation eased only by familiarity with his surroundings. Stone, his foster father, had long ago stopped trying to make him use furniture; after Jarid had grown larger than Stone, he had simply refused to move when Stone tried to put him in a chair.

Today, he imagined shapes in his mind, beautiful spheres, glimmering and vibrant. Over the years they had helped him focus on Stone, until now he could sense his foster father's every mood. Lately, Stone worried that Jarid would become so immersed in his meditations, he would forget to eat.

Jarid sighed without sound. Meditation was his escape. These past fourteen years, he had neither seen nor heard, and he had never spoken. He knew about the rare visitors to the cabin only because their emotions differed from Stone's. His foster father loved him; others found him strange and disturbing. Mercifully, almost no one visited. He and Stone lived alone, cut off from the world, never communicating with it. From Stone's mind, Jarid knew he had no idea his foster son was heir to Aronsdale. Jarid wanted it that way. He strove to forget who he had been, because of what he had become. Never would he be king.

A vibration came through the floor, the tread of Stone's feet. The aroma of meat tickled Jarid's nose. He had distant memories of eating steaks from gold platters, but he wondered now if his recollections of loving parents and a grandfather who ruled as king were no more than a fantasy he created to fill the void of his life.

Jarid concentrated on the air currents, feeling them change against his face. He caught that blend of pine, wood smoke and sweat smells that defined his foster father. He thought Stone was kneeling in front of him; sure enough, someone took his hands and gave him a plate. Jarid smelled the meal so clearly, he could almost taste the meat, gravy and vegetables. He accepted the rough plate, but only to calm Stone. After his father left, Jarid set the plate on the floor. Then he sat enjoying the sunlight on his face. On these rare bright days, Stone opened the curtains, knowing his son enjoyed the warmth.

Eventually the sun moved on in its journey across the sky. Sorrow at its passing came to Jarid; so little in his life gave him pleasure. He rose and exercised, working any part of his body he thought needed training. It meant a great deal to him that he could do this without help. He worked out constantly, having little else to do but the simple chores he could manage. His only other diversion was sitting outside on those rare days when the cold, damp weather cleared.

After he tired, he settled on the floor again. Later he would go into the other room and weave more of the aromatic thatching Stone used to repair the roof. For now, he ate dinner. The meat had gone cold and the gravy congealed, but he didn't mind. Nothing much bothered him anymore. When he had first lost his senses, he had cried in silence for days, months, forever it seemed. He couldn't even feel the vibrations in his throat that would have come had he been making sounds he couldn't hear. Over the years, he had become numb. He locked away his emotions, protecting himself from pain. Now, full from his meal, he closed his eyes, more out of habit than for any need, and rested his head against the wall.

Shapes evolved in his mind.

He loved spheres. Even in that distant time he barely remembered, they had fascinated him. They'd helped him focus his spells. As a child, he had never understood why adults had insisted he couldn't feel

the moods of other people, or that even a fully matured mage would have trouble doing what came so easily to him. They had also claimed he couldn't heal, though he had made his kitten better when it had the wasting illness. So he had stopped telling people, except for his mother, who believed him. She had encouraged him to play his shape games and helped him learn to focus.

Now he had nothing but those bittersweet games.

Jarid imagined cubes, rings, pyramids, bars, polyhedrons and especially spheres, all glistening in gem colors so lovely they made his heart ache. They were works of art he had been refining for fourteen years. He knew, from Stone's mind, that he could light up a room if he chose. It didn't matter to Jarid; he never saw the light—indeed, he had seen nothing since the night Murk had shattered his life.

Fourteen years ago Jarid had hated Stone, pounding him with small fists even as a blind and deaf six-year-old. Over the years, his hatred had faltered in Stone's unexpected kindness. Jarid knew he soothed his foster father just by his presence, and that he helped heal the emotional scars Stone had suffered in the lonely destitution of these rocky hills. But nothing could ease Stone's crushing guilt.

Jarid knew that guilt.

Stone felt it every time he looked at his young ward, every time he struggled to understand Jarid's needs, when Jarid could never ask or answer. If Stone had once been hard, these years had cracked his granite heart. Jarid didn't know how he could both hate and love his foster father, yet he did. It made no difference that Stone wasn't the one who had killed his parents; Stone had helped Murk attack the carriage. Yet since that day, Stone had been a compassionate guardian, at first out of guilt, but later out of love, an emotion he couldn't hide from Jarid. In spite of Jarid's intent to remain cold, he had come to love his foster father.

Isolated high in the Boxer-Mage Mountains, above even the most remote hamlets of the Tallwalk Mountains, they scratched out a living. Jarid helped as best he could, stacking firewood, digging, carrying heavy loads, making ropes and tools. Their poverty mattered little to him; all he truly cared about had died on that long-ago night. He was no longer whole. Stone had offered him a refuge where he could withdraw from humanity.

Jarid had no idea how he appeared to other people, but he thought he must be hateful and hideous. He had felt that way since his parents died. Stone seemed to find him tolerable, but in the harsh reality of their world, anything that wasn't actively lethal was tolerable. Jarid knew he should have prevented the crash, though *how*, he had no idea. His mother should never have died to save his life.

Moisture gathered in his eyes. Angry, he wiped it dry. Struggling to push away his tormented memories, he filled his mind with spheres. His thoughts easily expanded out from his center.

And yet... today something was different. A tension pulled him, *straining*. He suddenly remembered the sphere that had strained to protect him all those years ago against Murk's murderous cruelty. Jarid felt a similar sensation now, but gentle instead of desperate. The shapes in his mind blurred into a luminous rainbow fog.

Straining.

Reaching.

Seeking.

In his mind, a vine of shape-blossoms curled through the mist. Sweat broke out on Jarid's forehead.

What invaded his solitude? He clenched the rough cloth of his trousers, resisting the presence that reached for him, unaware and unknowing, but coming closer, closer...

*Leave me alone!* The cry reverberated in his mind, and he felt foolish, reacting with such dismay to his own thoughts. For surely this "intruder" was no more than his own fevered imaginings.

But no... he still felt someone seeking, coming closer, so close. A green sphere vibrant with ferns appeared in his mind and a waterfall of light poured into a bright pool.

Beautiful sphere.

Sphere mage.

Rainbow.

And then he touched her mind.

"No!"

Iris's cry rang through the hollow. She mentally recoiled from the cold, silent darkness that had enveloped her.

"What is it?" Delia was holding her shoulders. "I felt the surge of power!" She could barely contain her excitement. "What happened?"

"I—I touched his mind." Iris couldn't shake the overwhelming loneliness of that moment.

"His?"

"Another mage." Iris's pulse hammered. "A mage of power. But... but for this man, power has many forms."

"You know who you reached?"

"Yes." Iris stared at her, unable to believe this discovery. "Prince Jarid."

## **Chapter 3**

### *Homecoming*

His Highness, Prince Muller Dawnfield, paced in front of Iris, his boots loud on the parquet floor. The receiving hall in the castle was much longer than wide and drenched in sunlight from its many tall windows. The walls and columns gleamed with gold, blue and white mosaics, tessellated patterns that had fascinated generations of shape-mages. Usually, Iris loved studying them, searching out patterns in the designs, but today she had no time for such games. She sat in an ivory-and-gold chair, her spine straight against its back, her hands folded in her lap.

"Are you certain?" Muller demanded for the fifth time.

"Aye, Your Highness," Iris said, also for the fifth time.

"But Jarid is *dead*!" Muller stopped and glowered at her. A slender man with white-gold hair brushing his shoulders, he was a full head taller than Iris when they were standing and nine years her senior. His cream-colored trousers accented the length of his legs and his gold tunic was designed in a futile attempt to make his narrow shoulders appear wider. Iris had always thought him beautiful, like a leggy and graceful wild animal, more suited to running in the forest than to the confines of his enchanting but inanimate castle. She doubted he would appreciate her comparison, though; he had always wanted to be seen as strong and powerful, not graceful and flighty.

Right now his changeable gray eyes reminded her of an overcast sky. He frowned. "My cousin, may he rest in peace, has been dead for fourteen years."

Delia was standing by Iris's chair, one hand on its high back. "His body was never found."

Muller resumed pacing, adjusting his tunic to smooth out minuscule wrinkles. "The rescue party said he must have been thrown from the carriage when it rolled off the cliff. He could have fallen in any crevice. The caves and chasms in those mountains are a maze."

"It does seem impossible he survived," Delia admitted.

"Nevertheless," Iris said. "He did."

Muller slapped his palm against his thigh. "If that were true, he would have come home."

"How?" Iris asked. "He was a little boy."

"Not anymore," Muller said. "So where is he?"

"I donna know."

His voice quieted. "You say he exists, yet you don't know where."

"I can find him." Iris had no wish to revisit the cold emptiness where she had found Jarid, but she would do it if necessary.

"Very well." Muller stood straighter. "Find him. Bring him here."

"Your Highness—" Iris hesitated.

"Yes, yes, speak up."

"Prince Jarid is the heir."

"I know that."

"He can claim the crown."

Muller waved his hand. "I doubt you will find him, but if by some incredible chance you do, he can have the title."

It unsettled her to hear him make such a proclamation. He was undermining his own reign before it began.

"Your coronation is in ten days," Delia said. "That hardly gives us time to look."

Muller shrugged. "Then delay the coronation."

"I think it unwise," Delia said.

"It's been months. A few more days won't matter."

"It's been too long already." Delia exhaled. "Saints, Muller, you know the people are mourning King Daron. We've just come through a hard winter. They need the coronation as a symbol that life will continue. And Aronsdale needs a committed leader."

"The bishop canna coronate Lord Muller," Iris said calmly. "Prince Jarid is the heir."

Muller stiffened at her use of the word "Lord." Unlike in other realms, in Aronsdale only the heir to the crown had the right to the title of prince; Muller hadn't come into it until after Jarid died. Iris suspected he might find it harder to give it up than he claimed.

He drew in a deep breath. "If my cousin is alive, bring him to me."

Jarid sensed the threat even before he felt the vibration of too many footsteps. Usually he had to be in the same room with Stone to pick up his emotions, but today when his foster father became alarmed, his reaction surged with such strength that Jarid felt it from another room.

Lurching to his feet, Jarid pressed his back against the wall, his fists clenched as he prepared to face his silent, unseen enemy. A draft blew across his face: someone had opened the door. Unfamiliar and unwelcome scents assaulted his nose: dust, mud, wet wool, leather. Many people were entering his room, their emotions creating a muddle he couldn't sort. He fortified his mind against them.

Then he felt *her*.

It was the rainbow woman he had touched two sleeps ago. He had no real idea of how much time had passed since then; "day" had little meaning when he saw neither the dawn nor the darkling twilight. He slept when he was tired, but if his sleeps had any relation to the rising of the sun, he neither knew nor cared.

A hint of flowers scented the air. Was it her? Jarid waved his arms in front of his body, but he touched no one. He felt the tension of his visitors, but he couldn't tell anything more about them. Had he been inside one of the spheres he often imagined, instead of this boxy room, he might have focused better, perhaps enough to sort out their emotions.

Fingers brushed his shoulder.

Startled, Jarid swung his arm and his hand thudded into a soft surface. A shoulder? Whoever he had hit moved away. He struggled to subdue his panic. He didn't know what these people wanted, and he couldn't locate Stone clearly among their minds, though his father was definitely in the room.

*Leave!* He wanted to shout at the intruders, but he had no words. When he had first become mute, he had tried for days to scream, until he thought he would die. Tears had run down his face, but no sobs broke his silence. He hadn't even been able to cry aloud for his parents.

Again someone brushed his arm, softly. He reached out, searching, fighting to hold down his alarm—and then a large hand grasped his other arm and pulled him away from the wall.

Jarid snapped then, losing his battle for control. When the strangers tried to take him away, he fought them with the single-minded ferocity that had sustained him all these years. The physical strength and skills he had developed from his exercise regime served him well against his would-be captors, but every time he freed himself from one, another caught him. It only provoked him further. Yet no matter how well he fought, he faced too many of them—and they could see.

Three pairs of hands pressed him against the wall and someone put a damp cloth over his face. Jarid held his breath, but he couldn't do it for long enough, especially while he was struggling. A cloying smell overpowered him and his awareness ceased.

Iris sat by the bed, watching the man sleep. She had hardly been able to pull her gaze away from him since they had found him high in the north, living in a dilapidated shack that could barely keep out the rain let alone protect him from the severe climate of the Boxer-Mage Mountains. The range had taken its name centuries ago from a box-mage who had retreated there to finish out his days as a hermit. Only the desperate lived in those cruel peaks. Beyond them lay the wastelands of Harsdown. Iris had spent her entire life in fear of an invasion by the Harsdown armies, and she understood the need for a strong king to hold Aronsdale against them.

The man they had found in the shack now lay on a bed in a tower room of Castle Suncroft, on his side, his wrists tied to one post. She hated the bonds; if the soldiers had just given her time to allay his fears, she was certain she could have coaxed him to come with them of his own free will.

At least they understood her dismay at seeing him bound. Who wouldn't recognize this man? He had the same dark curls as the man in the portraits of King Daron as a youth, the same handsome features and broad shoulders, and the Dawnfield long legs. Aye, he was like King Daron—but stronger, taller, even more fine of feature.

However, the resemblance ended there. The late king had been a sovereign of elegance and culture. This man was wild. His rough clothes were made from rags, all dull gray. A scar ran under his ear to his shoulder. His hair hung down his back in thick, matted tangles and stubble covered his chin.

Yet for all his untamed ferocity, he drew her the way a flame drew a moth. She wanted to touch the muscles that bunched under the thin fabric of his shirt. She flushed, embarrassed by the thought, especially for a prisoner they had taken against his will.

The man stirred in his sleep, his face contorting as his wrists pulled against their bonds. It violated Iris's sense of right to see this man, surely Prince Jarid Dawnfield, tied up like a criminal. She leaned forward and worked at the ropes. His bonds were tight, but she managed to free him.

Still sleeping, he pulled his arms down and rolled onto his back, one palm lying on his stomach.

Iris stroked a dark curl off his forehead. "Are you Jarid?" she murmured. "Can you be the mage I touched in that lonely place?" She didn't see how he had reached her from so far away, but even now, as he slumbered, she felt the luminous strength of his mage gifts.

A voice spoke tiredly behind her. "Muller has made the announcement."

Iris turned with a start. Delia was standing in the doorway, leaning against its frame. Dark circles rimmed her eyes.

"He stepped aside for Jarid?" Iris asked.

Delia said, simply, "Yes." She came over to sit in a chair next to Iris. "It is official. Muller accepts this man as the heir to the crown."

Even knowing what Muller had intended, Iris felt stunned. This had all happened too fast. She believed the man they had found was Jarid, but they had no proof. Nor was he in any shape to accept the crown.

"Will Muller help us with Prince Jarid?" she asked.

Delia pushed back a tendril of her gray hair. "He plans to leave Suncroft. He thinks it best."

"But, nay! He canna just walk away."

"I'm afraid he can."

Iris didn't understand Muller's withdrawal. The king's advisors were keeping Jarid's condition secret from the people, but they had told Muller what they knew. Why would he leave this way?

"He must realize Jarid canna rule," Iris said.

"He says the king's advisors can help." Delia sighed. "What can they say? Muller knew they expected to do exactly that with him. He says Brant is better suited to govern."

"Muller is angry."

"Perhaps. But he believes what he says." Delia watched the man sleeping on the bed. "You shouldn't have untied him."

Iris spoke dryly. "What will we do, take him to his coronation in chains?"

"If we must."

"This is all wrong."

"Iris—"

"Yes?"

"I'm afraid there's more."

Ah, no. "More what?"

"From the king's advisors."

Iris didn't see how they could advise a man who couldn't hear. But then, in her experience, people rarely listened to their advisors even when they could hear. "What do they say?"

Delia spoke carefully. "We are all in agreement."

Well and sure, that didn't sound good. "About what?"

"Only a sphere-mage could have reached across the great distance that separated this man from you."

Ah. Now Iris understood. "Aye, Delia, I think it is true. His talent is incredible."

"I didn't mean him."

It took Iris a moment to absorb her meaning. "Well and sure, it couldna been me."

"No one else."

Iris pushed her chair back from the mage mistress. "It was him who touched my mind."

"I was there. You initiated the contact."

"That canna be! Never have I even lit a room."

Delia's stern visage softened. "A room, no. But the trees and meadows, I think yes. The countryside stirs your power. That is why you have had so much trouble making spells. Inside the cottage, you didn't know how to reach the core within you."

Iris wanted to protest, but she couldn't deny the land had always called to her.

The man on the bed turned his head, restless, his dark lashes stirring. Iris leaned closer. "Who are you truly?" she murmured.

"Iris, listen to me," Delia said.

Reluctant, Iris turned back to her. "Aye?"

"We have already spoken with Chime."

Hai! No wonder Delia was so upset. "She must be devastated. I think she genuinely likes Muller."

"She and Muller still plan to marry."

"But she canna do that."

"Our greatest shape-mage must marry the king." Delia had a strange quality to her voice now.

"Aye. Chime."

"No. Not Chime."

Iris suddenly felt as if the floor dropped beneath her. "Nay, Delia! I canna be queen!"

"You must."

"Nay!" They couldn't expect her to marry this stranger—a wild, injured creature who didn't even know her name.

It couldn't be true.

Delia had always found the counsel of Lord Brant Firestoke invaluable, but tonight, neither of them had answers.

"It is a disaster." Brant stood at the tower window, his gray hair brushed back from his face, accenting the widow's peak on his forehead. The night shadowed his austere features. As the ranking lord among the royal advisors, he had served the previous king for two decades.

He and Delia gazed out at a nearby tower, where they could see into a room lit by orbs-bud candles. Iris sat next to a bed there, keeping vigil on their slumbering prisoner. The man might indeed be the lost heir of Aronsdale, but he couldn't act as king. Iris would soon have to shoulder far more responsibility than

her nineteen years of life had prepared her for. Not only did she need to learn the duties of the mage queen, she would probably have to assume many of her husband's tasks, as well.

Delia shook her head. "This matter of heredity reeks. We are asking children to do jobs that people twice their age would find difficult." Jarid was only a year older than Iris, barely twenty. Muller, at twenty-eight, showed little more desire for responsibility now than he had at their age.

Brant watched Iris with a brooding stare. "She has no idea what to do."

"She is intelligent," Delia said.

"That isn't enough." Brant turned to her. "We cannot coronate that man tomorrow. What if he goes berserk during the ceremony? Our people are already discontent. If they think we are giving them a lunatic for a king, saints only know what will happen. Aronsdale is weakened, easy prey. Without strong leadership, we may fall to Harsdown."

Delia knew all too well what he meant. Armies from the untamed lands of Harsdown beyond the mountains had long sought to conquer Aronsdale. They had power, strength and will to fight—but no shape-mages. Aronsdale held her own against Harsdown, despite being smaller and gentler, only because she had shape-mages. They could use spells to heal the wounded in battle, buttress the morale of Aronsdale soldiers and predict strategies of the enemy based on their emotions. Aronsdale needed a king to lead the armies and a queen to lead the mages. Theirs was a fragile realm; if their will faltered, they could fall to Harsdown.

"And if we cancel the coronation yet again?" Delia asked. "What message does that send—that Aronsdale is such a mess, we can't choose a leader months after the death of our previous king?" She scowled. "We put off crowning Muller too long."

"With good reason. The boy was ready to bolt."

"Well, now he has bolted," Delia said flatly. "The situation isn't going to improve. I say this—clean up this man, bring him out tomorrow, put the crown on him and let Iris rule."

Brant frowned. "She has no training."

"She has aptitude."

"That isn't enough."

"We can guide her."

He gave her an incredulous look. "And just how do we explain her husband? He may not even make it through the ceremony without losing control."

Delia thought back to how they had found Jarid. "Bring his foster father here. He seems to calm the boy."

Brant's gaze narrowed. "No."

"Why not?"

"I don't want that man exerting any more influence on Jarid."

Delia crossed her arms. "And just how long are your men going to hold him in custody, up there in the mountains?"

"It is better we separate Jarid from him. The boy needs a fresh start."

"And if Jarid wants him at the coronation?"

"We delay the ceremony." Brant didn't look persuaded by his own argument.

"We can't. You know that. We have waited too long already." Delia suddenly felt tired. "Convincing Muller he wants the crown has become irrelevant. We must work with what we have. Waiting won't change that."

It was a long moment before Brant answered. Finally he said, "Very well." He gave Delia a dour look. "Just pray we all survive the ceremony."

A touch disturbed Jarid's solitude. The hand stroking his forehead didn't belong to Stone; this one had longer fingers, with fewer calluses, and it was too small. A woman.

He caught her hand. As she froze, he became aware of another sensation. His wrists hurt. Why? What had these people done to him? Images of boxes formed in his mind, focusing his spell enough for him to pick up her mood. She was... in pain?

Startled, he realized he was gripping her wrist too hard. He let go and she pulled away her hand. Her scent came to him: woods, fresh grass, piney soap. He caught other smells, too; this place was cleaner than the cabin where he lived with Stone. The fragrance of orbs-bud candles filled the air, releasing a flood of his memories: the dinner chamber alight with hundreds of candles; his mother's wedding ring agleam, a gold circle inset with diamonds and amethysts; his father bidding him good-night and blowing out candles in his room.

*What is this place?* Jarid had no voice to ask his mysterious companion. Although he felt her mage power, he couldn't tell what she wanted from him. He wasn't certain she knew herself.

As the sleep cleared from his mind, he slid his hands over the quilt under his body, trying to understand. It had a finely woven feel to it, downy and well-tended, suggesting a prosperity unlike any he had known for many years. When he reached above his head, he found a post of the bed, its wood carved with shape-blossoms, their petals forming boxes, polyhedrons and orbs. The designs felt familiar.

Agitated, Jarid struggled into a sitting position. Stone would never have willingly let these people take him away from the cabin, and not only because Jarid could implicate him in the crimes of that long-ago night. Stone also feared what his young charge might do with his uncontrolled mage power.

But... Stone wasn't here.

Jarid searched with his mind, spinning orb images to focus his power. He found no hint of his father's emotions, only those of guards posted outside this room. They hadn't come in here because the woman hadn't let them know he had awaked, though they seemed to expect that she would alert them if he stirred. Her mind glowed, ruddy flames lighting his isolation. Warm. Inviting.

*Go away*, he thought, afraid of that warmth.

He knew when she moved because the air currents shifted. Although he couldn't be sure, he thought she had come to stand by the bed. He wanted to strike out, as he had done with his attackers in Stone's cabin, but he hesitated. Her mood came to him like sunlight. She soothed.

Jarid gritted his teeth. He didn't want to be soothed. He preferred anger. These people had drugged him

and torn him away from his refuge. He closed his mind to her mage gifts.

A hand touched his forehead and he jerked away, wincing as pain stabbed his muscles, which still ached from his fight with the strangers in the cabin. He slid across the bed, away from the woman, until he came up against a wall. Then he sat with one leg bent, his elbow resting on his knee, his hand curled in a fist.

The bed shifted, sagging with a new weight. Fingers brushed his arm and he jerked back, instinctively raising his fist. Then his mind caught up with his reflexes and told him that surely it was the woman who touched him, not a soldier. He lowered his arm.

She withdrew her hand, but after a moment she laid a clay tablet across his lap. Baffled, he ran his fingers over the tablet. Its disk shape helped focus his thoughts. He pressed the clay, noting its cool, grainy texture, making dents in it with his fingertips.

Her long fingers touched his hand, sending a chill down his back. That shiver had to be anger; her touch couldn't give him pleasure. He refused to let that happen. He would retreat into the fortress of his mind, which kept out pain.

The woman pressed her fingers into the clay, her hand moving against his so he could feel her actions. Then she brushed his hand over the dents she had made. It took Jarid a moment to understand; many years had passed since he had touched such shapes. Words. Pictures. She was writing to him.

Jarid shifted his weight, uneasy. It was true that by the age of six, he had learned some basics of reading. But he had done nothing since then and he recognized only a few of her symbols. The disk itself sharpened his mind, though, stirring memories. He traced one picture, a circle within a cluster of lines—no, an orb within crossed swords.

His family crest.

No! Jarid hurled the tablet away. He had no way to hear its crash, but he felt the woman scramble off the bed. He couldn't bear the truth she brought him, not after all these years—not after what he had done. His guilt was too big, the guilt he wouldn't say even in his own mind. But however much he fought it, deep down he had recognized the truth the moment he smelled the orbs-bud candles.

They had brought him home.

## **Chapter 4**

### *The Dais*

Iris retreated across the room, watching as Jarid slid off the bed and rose to his feet. The tablet lay in pieces, strewn across the floor. She knew Brant Firestoke would insist she bring in the hexagon lieutenants now that Jarid had awakened. But she didn't move. This wasn't the time to inflict more strangers on Aronsdale's heir. Jarid was standing next to the circular nightstand by the bed, his hand

resting on its surface, his head lifted as if he were trying to catch an unexpected scent.

The creak of an opening door came from across the room.

Iris jumped, whirling around. Ah, no. Muller stood in the open doorway like a prince of light, radiant in his white-and-gold clothes. Whatever Iris might have said to him died in her throat, lost to the intensity of his concentration on Jarid. He slowly crossed the chamber, never taking his gaze off of his cousin.

Jarid remained utterly still by the nightstand. When Muller stopped in front of him, the only sign that Jarid realized he faced a person was the way his forehead wrinkled. He and Muller were the same height, with similar features. They stayed that way, frozen in a tableau, the golden lord and the dark prince, one splendid in his perfection, the other wild and untamed. Light and dark.

Muller waved his hand in front of his cousin's eyes—and Jarid didn't even blink. He stood like a wild stag mesmerized by fire.

"Can you hear me, Cousin?" Muller sounded as if he were wound as tight as a coil.

Jarid's hand stiffened into a claw gripping the table. Even now his eyes weren't quite directed at Muller. Iris felt certain he knew someone stood before him, but she had no idea if he could recognize his cousin.

"Won't you speak?" Muller asked him.

Jarid tilted his chin, but he made no other response.

Muller turned to Iris. "It is true, then. He has no sight. He hears nothing."

Iris nodded yes, disquieted by his fierce concentration.

"He has no voice."

"None," she said, sensing Muller's conflicted doubts. If he changed his decision now to give up the crown, and revealed why, it would throw Aronsdale into a turmoil. Yet who could blame him?

He gave Jarid a long look. Then he spoke in a numb voice. "May your reign be long and full, my cousin." With that, he spun around and strode from the chamber.

Jarid reached out to touch his cousin, but he found no one.

The Great Shape-Hall of Castle Suncroft gleamed like the interior of a sun's ray. Hundreds of candles flickered in chandeliers and candelabras, and orb-lamps on stands added their luster. The high ceiling gleamed with gold-and-white mosaics and starlight glimmered outside, beyond the tall windows. Hundreds of guests mingled here tonight, the gentlefolk of Aronsdale, glistening all, the men in fine tunics of ivory and gold, their trousers tucked into polished boots; the women in close-fitted gowns that swept the floor, each dress a single color, making a rainbow throughout the hall.

Iris felt like a fraud. She had no business doing this. She was no one. No matter what Delia and Brant said, it felt wrong for her to stand here as if she deserved the title of queen.

Her new shape-maids had dressed her in a radiant yellow gown that clung to her body, and they had piled her chestnut hair high on her head, threading it with topazes. She stood now with Brant Firestoke and Delia No-Cozen at the head of a reception line to greet their guests. She would have rather hidden in the stables.

Iris had balked when they had tried to put her in the blue silk of a sapphire mage. She had no right A normal woman could wear any color she chose, but a mage dressed in the hue of her power. Iris couldn't wear blue when she had yet to light a room, the simplest spell. She felt foolish in yellow, but at least it was more realistic. Delia claimed she had achieved a great deal more by reaching Jarid's mind, but Iris didn't even understand what she and Jarid had done in that incredible moment.

In a pause between greeting people, Iris glanced up and glimpsed Muller and Chime strolling hand-in-hand, glowing like sunlight. They paused to peer at themselves in a mirror and then went on, out an archway to the gardens. They seemed happier than Iris had seen them in a long time. She had secretly hoped Muller would challenge Jarid for the crown, but neither he nor Chime showed any inclination to reclaim the weight of responsibility that Iris's one flash of mage power had lifted from their shoulders.

After the last person passed through the reception line, Iris drew in a shaky breath. She glanced uneasily at the dais at the end of the hall. She had no idea if Jarid had understood what she had tried to explain earlier today with the clay tablet. She shuddered, remembering his wrath as he hurled away her tablet. This stranger she would soon marry had shown no sign he wanted anything to do with her. Why should he? In his darkness, he probably saw her better than all these people who might be fooled by her elegant clothes and the court manners she had learned this past year.

And yet... Jarid drew her. Beneath his tangled hair, his torn and disheveled clothes, and his scarred neck, he had a beauty that had nothing to do with outer form. It came from within. He reached her in a way she didn't understand, making her want to brush back his matted locks, to press his long fingers against her lips.

One of Brant Firestoke's men, a disk-captain, came up to them. The officer wasn't a mage; his title came from his position in the King's Army. Each military rank subdivided into shape-ranks, with triangle as lowest and orb as highest. All captains outranked all lieutenants, so an orb-lieutenant had a rank lower than a triangle-captain but higher than a triangle-lieutenant. Tonight the disk-captain wore a dark blue dress uniform with darker boots. He and Brant spoke in low voices.

"Prince Jarid is calm," the captain said. "But we aren't sure how long it will last. The major wants to proceed now, while we can."

Brant nodded. "Very well. Begin immediately."

Iris stiffened, barely holding in her protest. *I'm not ready.*

The captain bowed to them and took his leave. As Brant offered his arm to Iris, he gave her an encouraging look. "Shall we?"

She wanted to run, but somehow managed to nod instead. Taking his arm, she walked with him down the hall, doing her best to respond gracefully when people greeted them. As they reached the dais, the power of the great disk vibrated through her. For the first time since her gifts had awakened in the woods, she dared trying to focus her power. The dais gave less strength than the sphere formed by her hidden retreat in the woods, but it was enough to weave a spell of soothing. Whether or not her fumbling mage attempts would actually work, she had no idea.

They went to the center of the dais: Iris, Brant, Delia and a military retinue. The Bishop of Orbs joined them, regal and tall, his white hair swept back under his miter. Two pages accompanied him, one carrying a tasseled cushion with two crowns. The gold circlets glittered, inset with diamonds and amethysts. Iris stood stiffly, aware of everyone in the Great Shape-Hall watching. All conversation had stopped.

The moment stretched out, seeming endless. Just when Iris thought surely they would all snap with

tension, another retinue appeared in an archway at the end of the hall. With stately progress, they approached the dais. At first Iris didn't recognize the tall man walking in their center. Then she froze.

It was Jarid.

Two shape-soldiers walked on either side of him, guiding him with touches on his arm, their help so discreet that had she not known he was blind, she wouldn't have realized they were helping him.

Her breath caught. Jarid was resplendent, a well-built prince shining in the light from hundreds of candles and orb-lamps. His gold brocade vest fit snugly over a snowy-white shirt with belled sleeves, and his ivory-colored breeches tucked into gold boots. Gone was the ragged hair that had tangled down his back; now glossy black locks grazed his shoulders, trimmed and brushed. It enhanced the classic lines of his face, his straight nose and handsome features. His unkempt hair had half hidden his eyes before, but now she could see their dramatic violet color. They were larger than she had realized and framed by a thick fringe of black lashes. The scar that ran down his neck added an edge to his breathtaking appearance.

"Goodness," Delia said at her side.

"Aye," Iris murmured. Jarid dazzled.

However, she doubted he felt as splendid as he looked. This whole business had to be disturbing for him. Concentrating, she used the dais to focus her spell. Jarid's emotions came to her, blurred and hazy; he was angry, bewildered, lost. He kept control of himself with an effort of will so great, Iris sensed it despite her inexperience as a mage. His inner strength was tangible, a strength that had carried him through fourteen years of a nightmare.

As Jarid's retinue joined hers on the dais, Iris felt as if she were a kite caught in a rushing wind, unable to stop her headlong passage. She and Jarid faced each other. He wasn't looking at her, but slightly to the side, his gaze unfocused. When Iris took his hand, his posture went rigid. She thought he would jerk away, but instead he clutched her fingers, his grip so tight it hurt. His confusion flowed over her; he had no idea who had brought him here. He wanted to fight his way free. He held back because he knew he was in his ancestral home, but his alarm and anger were rising, threatening to explode.

Iris offered him a spell of canning, like rain misting over flames. She tried a healing spell, too, but she had too little knowledge to make it work. Or perhaps whatever had hurt him went too deep for her to reach.

The Bishop of Orbs read the ceremony. Iris bowed her head, listening, while he spoke the ancient words in a resonant voice. The entire time she felt Jarid struggling to control his apprehension and anger. Strangers surrounded him, enemies who had taken him from his home by force. His grip on her hand never eased.

After the bishop finished, he asked Iris and Jarid to kneel. A hepta lieutenant on Jarid's other side reached out, obviously to guide the prince. Iris froze; Jarid might snap if a stranger touched him now. She shook her head slightly at the lieutenant, hoping he understood.

The officer hesitated, his hand above Jarid's shoulder. Everyone on the dais had gone still. Jarid tilted his head, turning toward the lieutenant, the tendons in his neck as taut as cords.

*We are friends*, Iris thought to her groom. *Friends*. She squeezed his hand and tugged downward.

Jarid drew in a sharp breath, turning toward Iris, his gaze still unfocused. She tugged his hand again, carefully, as if she faced that wild stag in the forest. He shuddered and took a deep breath—and then he

knelt with her, his motions stiff and uncertain, the two of them in front of the bishop. Relief swept over Iris. She bowed her head, aware of Jarid doing the same, though whether it was from instinct or a memory of his past, she had no idea. He had probably absorbed some court protocol as a small boy, but he had never seen a coronation.

Iris heard rather than saw the bishop place the crown on Jarid's head. She could imagine it sparkling in the candlelight that filled the hall, but she couldn't bear to look, to see that final symbol of the upheavals that had disrupted their lives. Jarid's confusion swirled around her—and also his understanding of what the weight of that crown meant. An immense grief came from him for his grandfather's death.

She barely knew when the bishop set a crown on her own head. The words of the marriage ceremony swirled over her like fog.

Then it was done: she and Jarid had become the king and queen of Aronsdale.

## Chapter 5

### *Shape Light*

One candle lit the tower room with dusky light. It had been Iris's idea to bring Jarid here after the ceremony; now, alone with him, she felt less certain. She couldn't stay; at least one of them had to return to the Great Shape-Hall. Given Jarid's situation, that he had been lost for so many years, she hoped people would accept his withdrawing from the celebrations early. They would be less tolerant if *neither* of the newlywed couple attended their own festivities.

Although very few people knew Jarid couldn't see, hear or speak, it must have been obvious during the ceremony that something was wrong. All in Aronsdale were waiting to see how this strange twist of events would play out, whether it would result in a better age for the realm or the fall of the royal family.

No one had wanted to leave her alone with her new husband. She had needed a calming spell focused by this circular room to allay Brant's fears, and she suspected her success had been less than complete, given the way he had told the guards outside they must enter here if they heard the slightest sound. At least he didn't seem to realize she had used a shape-spell on him. Even knowing she had become mage queen, everyone—including herself—seemed to have a hard time thinking of her as other than the apprentice who had yet to learn even a lighting spell.

*I belong here.* Perhaps if she repeated those words enough to herself, she would come to believe them. Belonging. That hope seemed like a diaphanous floating bubble out of her reach.

It said a great deal about the lack of confidence the king's advisors had in the sovereign they had crowned, that they feared to leave him with his wife, lest he attack her. Iris knew Jarid needed this time to himself, without their interference; she felt him holding on to his control by a mere thread that could break. She didn't intend to subject him to any more strangers.

Jarid was sitting on the edge of the four-poster bed, still in his wedding finery, his face shadowed by the sweep of his hair. He held his crown on his lap, running his fingers over its edges and gems. The sight broke her heart; no justice existed in a universe that would trap such a vibrant man in a prison where he could communicate with no one, save by the nebulous touch of his mage gifts.

Iris walked closer to Jarid, and he turned his head as if he sensed her approach. She set her crown on the round table by the bed. She wanted to reach out to her husband, but she hesitated, unsure how he would react.

Jarid raised his arm, his palm facing outward toward Iris. He cupped his hand as if to grasp a sphere. Tilting his head, he closed his eyes and slowly turned his hand over until his cupped palm faced the ceiling. Then he extended his hand to Iris as if to offer her the invisible sphere.

Touched, Iris folded her hand over his cupped palm. A tingle went through her, as if he actually held a sphere of power. He stiffened, and she feared he would rebuff her again, as he had done earlier today when he had broken her tablet. But this time he only opened his hand, relinquishing the imaginary orb to her. Calm spread through Iris as if she had absorbed a spell of healing. Her loneliness and her longing for her home in the mountains receded. She didn't stop missing her home, but it became more bearable, not the anguish that had torn her heart.

"Thank you," she whispered, uncertain about this remarkable gift he had given her. Had he soothed her pain—or healed it? Only an indigo mage could heal emotional wounds and no verifiable record of any such mage existed. Legends claimed the indigo gifts had long been dormant in the royal line, but Iris suspected those stories were fables concocted to increase the Dawnfield mystique. Even if such a mage did exist, he would need a real sphere to focus his power, not one he imagined in his hand.

Jarid had turned toward her, though his eyes were directed to her right. He reached out until his hand brushed her skirt. Taking a pinch of silk, he rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger. For the first time since she had met him, a smile played around his mouth, easing his dark manner. It made her want to take him into her arms. For all that they couldn't converse, they somehow communicated. She didn't know how to define the way he made her feel; she had too little experience with these emotions he evoked. She only knew she wanted to be near him.

With care, Iris sat next to him and laid her palm over his other hand, where it rested on his crown. He tensed, but then he curled his fingers around hers. They sat for several moments, neither moving, Iris barely breathing. A blush warmed her face. Did he realize this was his wedding night? That she found him attractive didn't mean he felt the same toward her. How could he? He knew nothing about her, not even her name or age.

When Jarid moved, Iris thought he would withdraw. But he only set his crown on the bed. Her pulse quickened when he took her face in his hands and moved his thumbs along her cheeks. His skin scraped hers, rough with calluses he would have never developed had he lived the life expected of a prince and heir to the realm. She felt him struggling with his thoughts. He had returned home, lost his foster father, become king and married, all in a matter of days. It left him reeling.

Jarid exhaled, a breath she felt on her cheeks rather than heard. He touched her face, exploring, and she held still, letting him. His feather-light touch sent tingles up her neck. When his fingertip lingered on her lips, he smiled, just the barest curve of his lips, but the room seemed brighter.

Uncertain how to behave with him, Iris traced her finger over the dimple in his chin. With an inaudible sigh, Jarid drew her hand into his lap, running his thumb over her knuckles. When he touched the ring on her fourth finger, with its distinctive arrangement of gems, his grip tightened. He hadn't given it to her; the

Bishop of Orbs had done it for him, sliding the ring on Iris's finger during the ceremony. Now *she felt* Jarid recognize the band. Yet he showed no surprise that she wore a wedding ring from among the heirlooms that belonged to his family.

Lifting her hands, Jarid pressed his lips against her knuckles. She inhaled, aware of the emotions tumbling within him, an engaging mixture of boyish wonder, sensuality, elegance, roughness and luminous inner strength. She also picked up the reason for his uncertainty; he had never touched a woman except as a small child, when he had hugged his mother. Iris had no experience with men, either, unless that peck on the cheek a valet had given her last year counted.

Iris slid her palms to his shoulders, wishing she understood him better. She could feel his moods, but nothing more specific. Softly she said, "I wish you could tell me what you are dunking."

Jarid didn't answer, didn't even seem to know she had spoken. He moved his fingertip around her ear, exploring, arousing her in the process of "seeing" her. Shy but curious, she laid her hands on his arms. His muscles felt firm under his rich garments. She wondered if he had any idea how fine he appeared. Unlike Muller, who knew his golden beauty well and expected everyone else to notice, Jarid seemed to have no inkling of the devastating figure he cut.

He caught her hand and touched her fingers to his lips. Then he mouthed one word: *queen?*

Iris's breath caught. Could they talk this way? Delicately, she put his fingers against her lips. "Yes."

He brushed his fingertip over her bottom lip.

"What happened?" she asked. "You spoke as a child. You saw. You heard. Why is that lost to you now?"

Although he still touched her lips, he didn't seem to understand. He drew her close, his arms around her waist, his embrace uncertain. When he rubbed his cheek against the crown of her head, his breath stirred her hair. He slid his hand down her back, and she sensed how much he liked her waist-length curls. She closed her eyes, pleased, and surprised, too, because she had always thought of her abundant curls as wild rather than beautiful.

Iris wanted to let him know she liked his touch, but she didn't know how to tell him. Tentative and unsure, she put her arms around his neck and rested her head on his shoulder. If only she could reach him through his darkness and isolation.

*Try*, she thought.

Just as she had done in the Great Shape-Hall, so now she formed a healing spell. An orange mage could soothe physical injury, but that only eased pain. It took a blue mage to heal wounds. Iris had never believed she had such abilities, but she tried to put aside her doubts and to concentrate, focusing through the cylindrical room.

Nothing.

She struggled with her frustration. This was exactly as it had always been when she tried spells. And yet... she *had* succeeded lately, a little, during the coronation tonight and even more in the forest. Drawing on those memories, she strove to reawaken the mental state that freed her gifts. She imagined herself surrounded by the sphere of greenery, her refuge in the woods.

Mage power stirred within Iris. Her spell became a waterfall, sparkling and bright—but instead of flowing into Jarid, it skittered off him like water splashing on rock.

Iris's head began to throb, warning that she was pushing too hard. She had to relax her focus and let the spell fade; otherwise she could injure her mind. Disappointment welled within her. She didn't know if her attempt had failed because she wasn't adept enough or because Jarid's defenses were too strong.

Jarid continued to stroke her back. He gave no sign that he realized she had tried a spell on him, but his mood had calmed, the last of his agitation subsiding. His mind shone, an inner radiance far more beautiful than the sunlight he never saw. Locked within his darkness, he had spent years developing his mage light, free of external influences, creating a purity of soul that graced her life.

Drawing back, she touched his cheek. "So beautiful, my husband."

His lips curved into a smile—a full smile, the first he had shown her—and it changed his entire face. Instead of a brooding stranger, suddenly he looked his age, a youth of twenty, hardly more than a boy. If she hadn't known better, she would have thought he had heard her compliment. Of course she would never tell a man he was beautiful if he could hear.

A thought jolted Iris; if she could feel his emotions, he was probably absorbing hers, too. Hai! That was embarrassing. She imagined a wall hiding her thoughts.

His smile widened. Then he drummed his fingers on the back of her hand.

Iris gave a startled laugh. "Aye, sure, I know that game. We played it all the time in my village." She turned her hands over so he was tapping her palms instead of her knuckles. That was the entire point of the game; to stop him from tapping the back of her hand. With a grin, Jarid flipped over her hands and caught her knuckles again.

Charmed, Iris tangled her fingers in his. It delighted her that a prince would play a commoner's game, but then, he had lived most of his life in mountains north of her home. He had probably learned the game from his guardian.

His hands stilled, his smile fading. He mouthed a word: *Stone?*

"Stone?" Iris brought his fingers to her lips. "What?"

He formed another word: *where?*

"I don't understand."

He mouthed, *Father.*

Sadness welled over Iris. "I am so terribly sorry about him, Jarid."

He seemed puzzled. She didn't understand why; surely he knew his father had died. A mage as strong as Jarid would have felt the loss intensely even at the age of six. It was hard to interpret his moods. If only she could breach his solitude. But his words were locked within him, trapped by his silence. Maybe one reason she felt so close to him, so soon, was that she recognized that sense of not belonging, of living with a crushing isolation from everyone else. She had known similar all her life.

Iris traced the gnarled scar below his ear. The accident that had killed his parents and caused this wound might explain his hearing loss, but it came nowhere near his eyes. She cupped his cheek, and he turned his head, pressing his lips into her palm.

"You have beautiful eyes," she said. "*Perfect* eyes. They have no scars, at least that I can see. Is it your emotions that were injured, never letting you see or hear or speak?"

Jarid gave no indication that he knew she had spoken. He embraced her as if she were an anchor in his sea of confusion.

"Hai," she murmured. If only she could help. She wanted to believe he possessed the legendary indigo gifts of the Dawnfields, but if he truly had such gifts, he could have healed himself. She pushed away the thought, refusing to acknowledge that her hope might well be useless. She had spent years unable to call on her mage light, unaware she even had such gifts; the same could be true for Jarid. Surely he might heal himself. She longed to see him regain what he had lost. She was grasping at mist, but it was all she had.

Jarid seemed to have no sense of his own radiance; he lived in the darkness of his loneliness and endured a shattering guilt she didn't understand. Why guilt? He had done nothing wrong.

Trying another healing spell, Iris used every shape in the room to focus: orbs on the bedposts, a half-sphere lamp with its flickering flame, star mosaics on the walls. Nothing helped. Her spell ran off Jarid like water.

"Why?" Moisture gathered in her eyes. "Why can I feel your emotions but I cannot give you light?" She imagined his sight filling, his eyes opening to color and clarity: *Gossamer dawn, brighten his life; tenuous hope, unlock his heart.*

Nothing.

Iris buried her head against his shoulder and his vest soaked up her tears.

"Look who has deigned to rejoin us." Leaning against a pillar on the edge of the Great Shape-Hall, Muller raised his crystal goblet. "To our new queen."

Delia followed his gaze. Across the hall, Iris was coming through an archway with her honor guard, a quartet of octahedron lieutenants. She glowed, from her yellow gown to the auburn curls tumbling down her back. But her eyes had darkened.

"And look at that," Muller added. "She's alone. Where could our new king be?"

His tone surprised Delia. Here, with just the two of them, he revealed a bitterness he had hidden before. Until this moment he had given her no reason to think he regretted his decision to relinquish the crown.

"It could have been your title," she said.

"I didn't want it." He was watching Iris intently.

Delia studied him, trying to fathom his mood. Although she was a green mage, her abilities were more jade than emerald; at her best, she could feel only vague emotions from other people. She touched the jade pendant around her neck; polished into a five-sided pyramid, it represented the highest shape she could draw on. It was too small to handle much of her considerable power, but it focused her gifts with a finesse she couldn't achieve using a larger or simpler shape.

When she focused on Muller, a general sense of his mood came through; he genuinely didn't want to be king, but he had more conflicts about losing the title than he had let anyone see. She wished she understood why. She strove to deepen her awareness, but the pendant couldn't carry enough power. She tried to draw on the Shape-Hall itself, but it had six sides, too many for her. Pain jabbed her temples. She released her concentration and the pain receded, much to her relief; she hadn't pushed hard enough to injure her mind.

Iris was moving across the floor, accompanied by Brant Firestoke, the two of them stopping often to converse with the guests.

Delia spoke quietly. "She needs your help, Muller."

"Whatever for?" He was clenching the stem of his goblet so hard, his knuckles had turned white.

"You've all made it excruciatingly clear you consider me unfit for the job."

She glanced up at him. "I've never said such a thing to you."

He tapped his long finger against her temple. "Ah, but you think it, my dear Mistress No-Cozen."

Delia didn't know how to respond. Although she had questioned his suitability for the throne, she had told only Brant and Iris, and neither of them were likely to have repeated it, especially to Muller. He had to be guessing her thoughts, rather than sensing them with a spell; her strongest gift was the ability to recognize other mages, and she felt no power in Muller.

She covered her unease with silence. She couldn't lie to him, but neither did she want to alienate him or undermine his confidence. They needed him. And she had always liked Muller. She had known him since he was a sunny toddler running across the meadows, laughing and bright.

Muller lifted his goblet to Iris. "May her reign be long and fruitful."

He never mentioned Jarid.

## Chapter 6

### *A Simple Radiance*

She was gone.

Jarid lay on the bed, fully dressed, unable to sleep, battling his unwanted longing for the woman who had held him and then left him here alone. Someone else was in the room now, a guard, maybe two. He sensed their unfamiliar minds, and the smell of oiled chain mail permeated the room.

He couldn't believe these madmen had *crowned* him. Even if he had been whole, he would have been unfit to rule. He clenched the quilt with his fist. He had to escape. But to where? He felt like a man trapped in a cell, pounding the walls for an exit he couldn't see.

Jarid recognized the castle from hints here and there: the turn of a hallway he had run along as a child; the feel of mosaics on certain walls; how the wind gusted in open windows; aromas wafting up from the kitchens. But this hadn't been his home for years. Its people were strangers. So far he had recognized only Brant Firestoke. Had he been able to see or hear, perhaps more of the people here would have been familiar, but as it was, they remained a threatening mystery.

He had no idea what they had done with Stone. Why hadn't his foster father come with him? Jarid needed him. That these strangers had cut him off from the one person he trusted made him want to strike out at them.

Nor did he know what to think of the woman. He tried to doubt her, too, but he wanted her to come to him. He loved the way she smelled, of fresh soap and wildflowers.

His wife. *Wife*. He had a woman.

She didn't seem to like him much, though, given the way she had left him alone on their wedding night. Not that he blamed her, having suddenly found herself bound to a violent stranger. And yet, incredibly, he felt no fear in her. She thought him radiant, of all the strange things. Perhaps she was deluded. Her emotions gave the impression of a gentle woman with a warm heart and strong character. He liked her for that as much as for the alluring curves of her body and the lovely heart shape of her face.

He wished she would come back. He wanted to hold her tonight. Touch her. The years had matured his body, tormenting him with a loneliness he didn't fully understand and a physical need he could never truly slake.

Jarid gritted his teeth. He detested this confinement they forced on him. He needed the hills and forest. He sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. When he tried to compensate for this mattress being larger and higher than his pallet in Stone's cabin, he overestimated and his boots came down hard, thudding on the floor. The vibration shook his legs. He felt a change in his guards, their somnolent thoughts jumping to attention.

Standing, Jarid reached for a bedpost to steady himself. Instead of finding support, his hand hit—what? Metal and leather. The chest of a man wearing chain mail? He wasn't sure; Stone had owned nothing resembling mail, but Jarid vaguely remembered it from his childhood. He jerked away and stumbled into someone else. Instinctively, he struck out, hitting another mail-clad chest. Someone grabbed his arm, restraining him. Agitated, he took the defensive stance he had learned from Stone, who had taught him to defend himself, an activity they could share that required no words.

When they tried to hold him back, Jarid fought his jailors, trapped within his darkness. He swung his fists, threw one man to the floor and slammed another against a wall. But in the end they prevailed. They bound his arms behind his back despite his being their king. Then they held him, one on each side, their mailed hands clenched on his arms. The emotions in the room had grown muddled and he was sure more people had entered, too many to distinguish individual minds. He snarled, his lip curling.

A hand touched his cheek.

Jarid froze. He knew that gentle touch, knew the soothing spell enveloping him. No! He wouldn't respond. He would be stone. Unmoved. Yet despite his intentions, his arm muscles relaxed, easing the pain from the ropes that bound his wrists.

Again her fingers came, brushing his lips. Jarid pulled back, embarrassed that she would touch him intimately in front of strangers. He wished he could pull her into his arms and enfold himself in her serenity.

Concern washed out from her mind, her emotions clearer to him than the moods of the others in the room. She ached to reach him, just as he wanted to hold her. She touched his lips again—and this time he held still, realizing her intent. Communication.

Jarid mouthed two words: *Free me*.

She lowered her hand. He sensed an argument among his captors, their determination to keep him bound. Another of the woman's soothing spells flowed over him, a backwash this time; she had directed this one at his captors rather than him. An odd weapon, using spells of calmness, but perhaps more effective here than fists.

Someone grasped his arms. Jarid held back the instinctual fear that drove him to resist what he could neither see nor know. He needed to stay calm. His wife was in the room. He didn't want her to see him go berserk.

A moment later he was glad he hadn't struggled, for they were untying him. As soon as he was free, he brought his arms in front of his body and rubbed his wrists.

The woman took his hand and led him forward.

A sparkle of stars lit the sky and the moon silvered the landscape. Iris walked with Jarid, who held the crook of her arm as they made their way down a slope outside the castle. The night was cool but comfortable. Six officers accompanied them, five decahedron lieutenants and one orb captain. Brant Firestoke walked a short distance away, respecting Iris's request for privacy but refusing to let her and Jarid out of his sight.

Her husband took each step as if he expected to fall into a chasm. Iris closed her eyes, trying to experience the world as he did, and she immediately stumbled on ground that had suddenly become unfamiliar and threatening, though she knew the land here well.

Opening her eyes, she murmured, "Would that I could light your vision the way Chime can light a room." She was speaking more to herself than Jarid, knowing he couldn't hear her.

Unexpectedly he stopped and faced her, his face gentling. It gave him a boyish quality, open and charming, the way he might have looked if he had lived a life free of such devastating losses.

He mouthed a word: *where?*

Iris had no idea where she was taking him, only that she had felt his need to escape the castle. She understood why he resisted its lifeless halls; she, too, preferred the forest and hills to the inanimate confines even of lovely Suncroft.

A wonderful idea came to her. She took his fingers and set them against her lips. "I will take you to a special place."

His forehead furrowed.

She spoke more slowly. "To the woods. A special place."

Jarid continued to look puzzled, but he nodded. He traced her lips, his fingers lingering until heat spread through her. As much as he stirred her, he also made her self-conscious, given how little privacy they had with the guards and Brant here. She lowered his hand to her side, intertwining her fingers with his. Rather than taking her response as a rejection, he squeezed her fingers. Then he set off again, walking carefully, holding her hand. It gratified Iris that he would trust her this way without any idea of where she meant to take him.

They entered the woods at the bottom of the slope, where the trees blocked the moon's glow. Iris paused while her eyes adjusted. Jarid waited next to her, his head tilted as if he were listening to the forest on a level beyond sound.

Iris made a decision then. She turned to Brant, who was standing by the moss-covered trunk of a nearby tree. "You must take these soldiers back to the castle."

He came forward. "Your Majesty, we cannot."

His address startled Iris; she couldn't think of herself with such a grandiose title. But she had no doubt about one thing. "My husband needs to know these soldiers are gone."

Brant showed no sign of relenting. "He has no way to know they are here."

She glanced at Jarid, who stood silent, his eyes dark in the moonglow that filtered through the canopy of branches.

"He knows," Iris said.

"We cannot risk it."

"It isn't my safety at stake, Lord Firestoke." Iris took Jarid's arm and he brushed his thumb over her knuckle. She caught a hint of his thoughts; he understood that she spoke on his behalf. Given that he had no way to hear her arguments, this trust he offered was a gift. It gave her a glimmering of how it felt to be accepted, making her wonder if she might have a place here after all. She hoped he didn't regret his choice to trust her.

"He must know he is not a prisoner," she said. "Well then, if we guard his every move, how will he feel free?"

Brant's face was shadowed. "We must guard his every move, lest he hurt you or himself."

"It isn't a risk." Iris willed him to believe her. She had no pure shapes to use here, only trees, rocks and ground. Her spells skittered around their incomplete forms and dispersed. But the woods and sky had an ancient power that called to her in a way the castle and its human-made shapes had never done. She reached to the moon itself. The disk wasn't quite full, and its face changed its contours, but it was enough.

Her power focused and the spell flowed through her with wonderful clarity. As it washed over Brant and his officers, she imagined soothing scenes, tranquil forest glades and burbling creeks.

Brant sighed. "Iris, you must stop trying to influence me with these shape-mage spells."

Hai! He had realized her ploy.

His stern visage gentled. "If I trust you, it will not be due to your spell, but rather because if you can calm me with such a strong spell, you can do the same for your husband." He glanced at Jarid, his austere gaze hooded. "I hope he appreciates his fortune in this marriage."

Iris thought of Jarid's inner light, his boyish mischief and his unspoken trust. "The fortune is mine."

"Ah, Iris," Brant murmured. "You are a jewel."

She stared at him, stunned. Never would she have expected to hear such from the formidable Lord Firestoke.

Then he became all business. "You must return to Castle Suncroft by morning. If you do not, we will come out and haul you both back regardless of what you say."

"We will be back before the sun clears the horizon," she promised.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Aye, I am."

"The castle is a place of more... comfort."

She wondered why he sounded so awkward. "Jarid and I find comfort in these woods."

"You wouldn't at least like a blanket?"

Iris flushed, finally realizing why he thought she wanted to be alone with Jarid. "My thanks, but no."

He exhaled, but then he motioned to his men. They bowed to her and Jarid, and took their leave. Their minds receded as they returned to the castle, until she could no longer sense them.

The entire time, Jarid had stood without moving, like a stag in the woods when a human ventured into his territory. When they were alone, completely alone, he turned toward her, his expression questioning. Iris took his fingers and set them against her mouth. "They have left."

He stroked her lips. Then he bent his head.

She didn't realize what he intended until his lips brushed hers. A tingle went through her, but the kiss was so unexpected that at first she couldn't react. She thought his feather-light touch would vanish, but instead he deepened the pressure of his lips. With a sigh, she closed her eyes and leaned into him, her arms going around his waist.

Iris had never believed a person could really feel the beat of her lover's heart through his clothes, but it was true; his came to her, strong and steady. His hands roamed her back, catching her clothes and pulling her curls, making her even more aware of how he did everything by touch.

Eventually he drew back enough to press his lips on her forehead. When he lifted his head, she took his hand and spoke against his fingers. "I have a gift for you."

He hesitated, and she could tell he wasn't sure what she had said. But he went with her as she led him deeper into the woods. They walked more slowly than before, Iris needing almost as much caution now as Jarid, with so little moonlight making it past the canopy of branches overhead. But in this forest she knew so well, she could have found the place she sought even if nothing at all had lit the way.

Spheres turned in Jarid's mind, spinning in an endless glistening dance. Never had he envisioned them with such clarity. Yet for all their beauty, even more than usual, they spun so fast that they gave him vertigo, which had never happened before. He shut them away, wanting to clear his mind of everything but the woman.

Breezes cooled his face, a change he craved after his imprisonment in the castle. He would have sung his joy at this freedom, if only he had the words. At Stone's cabin, he had known the land well enough to walk on his own as long as he didn't stray far. He had recognized all the many and varied scents of the mountains. He missed his home. He missed Stone. Surely he would know if these people had harmed his foster father. Jarid couldn't believe Stone would give him up so easily. No. Stone wouldn't do such a thing. The soldiers must have prevented him from following his son. Jarid vowed he would find a way to contact his father.

The woman guided him through a screen of heavy foliage. Branches snagged his clothes and he stumbled. He was surrounded, caught, penned in, imprisoned. *Suffocated.*

Just as Jarid started to balk, the woman pulled him free of the branches, into an open place.

Jarid froze.

Spheres!

They *jumped* in his mind, spinning, spinning, spinning, throwing off sparks of light. Dazed, he pressed the heels of his palms against his temples, trying to relieve the intensity of his reaction. Mist sprayed his face, hinting of a waterfall nearby. He smelled fresh water, a lake perhaps, more likely a pool, given the enclosed feel of this place. The fragrance of shape-vines tickled his nose and he drew pure air into his lungs.

The woman was taking his hands again. She put his fingers against her lips, those lips he wanted to kiss until she groaned, though he would never hear her pleasure. He hungered for her, all of her, but lost in his darkness and silence, he couldn't find a path to her through the maze of his emotions.

She spoke against his fingers. *Jarid. Husband.* Her full lips tantalized his sensitized skin. The scent of fresh soap and flowers hung about her like a delicate perfume.

He mouthed two words. *Your name?* When puzzlement came from her mind, he tried again. *Name?*

*Iris.*

Iris. It made her more real to him, less of a mystery, a woman of colors he felt rather than saw: the ruddy warmth of her touch; the gold of her emotions; the sunlight of her intellect; her fresh serenity, like leaves unfurling in spring; the open spaces she gave him, as blue as the sky he never saw; and her indigo moods, the sadness that so often filled her.

Frustrated by his inability to speak and aroused by touching her lips, he pulled her close, harder than he had intended, speaking with his body, his confusion mixed with his desire until he couldn't separate the two. Love and anger, tenderness and rough edges: his emotions all tumbled together. The silken texture of her dress was foreign, like a rich dessert he craved. The unfamiliar softness of her skin excited him. He held her too hard and her alarm sparked, but he didn't want to stop. Not now. He needed her. He *needed*. He didn't know what to do with that need, how to make her want him.

Then her hands moved, stroking his arms. Her orb-spell flowed over him, and he took an uneven breath, struggling for control. Instead of fighting him, she offered this spell of trust. It bewildered him, for she had no reason to believe he wouldn't hurt her.

Moving stiffly, Jarid knelt on the ground, drawing her down with him. The grass felt cool and succulent on his skin when he braced his weight on one hand, and the heady fragrance of shape-vines tickled his nose. He wanted to clench Iris until he sated his driving hunger. When he pulled her forward, pressing her body to his, she tensed and put her palms against his shoulders, trying to push him back.

Jarid knew he should stop. He had frightened her. But it was so hard to let her go. He forced himself to ease his grip enough so she could jump to her feet and escape. To his unmitigated surprise, she stayed put. Instead, she relaxed in his embrace and moved her hands down his arms in a caress.

*Let me*, he thought to her, but even if he could have spoken, he knew none of the sweet whispers a woman expected from a man. They were strangers; this fragile bond they were forging could shatter if he let his true nature show. His guilt went too deep. That crushing guilt. He pushed it down, refusing to acknowledge it. For this one night, he wanted to forget.

Iris stroked his shoulders, his face, his chest. The sensuality of the way she smelled provoked him past

reasonable thought, and the scrape of her skin against his, through a rip in his shirt, made his pulse leap. She tugged at his belt clasp and he would have groaned if he could have made a sound. Instead, he grabbed her wrists, his restraint crumbling. Pushing her backward, he unbalanced them both so that she tumbled onto her back in the sweetly scented grass. Before she could react, he stretched out on top of her, grasping at her small waist and full breasts.

When she stiffened under him, Jarid feared he had pushed too hard, too fast. But no—she was responding, caressing his back, tentative but without fear. He would have known if she acquiesced only because she was his wife. He felt her excitement. She wanted *him*, no one else. Realizing he kindled her desire that way aroused him more than any expertise on her part could have done.

Jarid kissed her neck, pressing his teeth against her skin, aware of how it gave under the pressure and hard edges of his bite. He must be too coarse; surely a man came to his wife more gently. But he didn't know how to love her. He had lived a life more secluded than any hermit.

And yet she didn't find him repulsive. Her response flowed over him. That she would accept him now, despite everything, made him light, airy, almost happy, an emotion he had had little familiarity with these past years. Right now it made no difference that his world was dark; he saw her with his hands and felt her light-drenched moods. Nor did his silence matter; his touch spoke to her in a language that needed no words.

Her healing spells wove around him, released by the power in this forest place. She had tried her spells earlier, in the palace, but he had been stone. Here in this enchanted sphere, his defenses weakened. After so many years, they finally eased. Her spells were pouring over him, through him, *into* him, with tenderness.

So the two of them came together, protected within a sphere of life, misted with water. Her pleasure answered his, their moods blending as they loved each other.

Sometime later, Jarid lifted his head. He was lying on his side now, tangled in Iris's arms, warm from their earlier joining. She slept beside him, her mind tranquil, her body soft and tempting. He should have been happy, content, pleased—but he was *breaking* inside, the way the ice on a lake cracked after a long winter. His passion had surged through him in a catharsis, a great release of energy he couldn't control. He hadn't the words to describe what was happening; he knew only that he was shattering. He thought of Iris and the pain surged. This pleasure she gave him came at too great a price; she had breached his defenses and left him vulnerable. He would have cried out, but he had no voice.

Panic hit. Jarid yanked on his trousers and shirt and lurched to his feet. The spherical hollow vibrated with energy, focusing his mind until he thought he would explode with the power coursing through him. A memory came to him from a night long ago, his mother weaving her final spell: *the power of a life*.

No! Jarid strode away without even lacing up his shirt. He was dimly aware of Iris waking, of confusion replacing her contentment. He stumbled into the pool and slipped, falling to his knees. Angered by his inability to see, he scrambled to his feet, spraying water everywhere. Then he strode away, swinging his hands in front of his body as if he were fighting the air.

A branch jabbed his palm. Ripping the foliage out of his path, Jarid plunged forward into the bushes that surrounded this hollow. He thrashed through the barrier, unheeding of how it tore his clothes and gashed his skin.

Then he was free and striding through the woods, his outstretched hands scraping trees as he escaped the unbearable radiance of Iris's mind.

## Chapter 7

### *The Power of a Life*

Iris sank down on a large boulder by a stream. Jarid wasn't anywhere. She had searched for hours. The tears that had streaked her face were dry now, but nothing could ease her heart. Last night she had thought she reached him, but it had all backfired; now he was gone, without food, shelter or warm clothes, unable even to ask for help. She had done this, insisting Brant Firestoke and the guards leave; now she had to go back and ask for their help in finding her husband, their king. She doubted Jarid would forgive that betrayal of his trust.

Last night she had thought they discovered a place together, a place where they both belonged, where they could discover what love meant. Jarid reached out to her in a way no one had done before. It didn't matter to him that she had no name except those borrowed from the Larkspurs, a foster family that didn't want her, or that she was the illegitimate daughter of a mother who had deserted her at birth. She and Jarid lived in their own solitude, different, yet they each recognized the loneliness of the other, the kindred spirit, building their trust.

Now she had to ruin it.

The woods were lightening; soon dawn would come. Weary, she rose to her feet and trudged toward the castle.

Jarid awoke. It was hard to tell if he had nodded off for a few moments or slept soundly, but the air felt different from when he had collapsed on the mossy ground. The scent of night-blooming flowers had dulled. From the force of habit, he opened his useless eyes.

Green.

For a long time he simply lay, absorbing it. His darkness had turned green. For years he had seen no colors except in his mind, and over time those had leached into shades of gray. Yet now, everywhere, he saw *green*.

Gradually he became aware of details in that living tapestry: a twig, gnarled and brown, poking through moss; dark soil, rich and loamy under the ragged carpet of leaves; a red pyramid-blossom in the pearly light that heralded the approach of dawn; iridescent dew clinging to leaves.

Jarid slowly rose to his feet. A pressure built in his chest until he thought he would burst. He turned in a circle, unable to believe. If he could have made a sound, any sound, a sob would have caught in his throat. His world remained silent—but he could *see* it.

He could see.

Forest surrounded him, hoary trees draped in moss, with more shades of green, gray and brown than he could count. Shape-blossoms added yellow here, violet there, a splash of orange. Tilting back his head, he saw slivers of gray sky between the overhang of high branches. He went to a tree and pressed his palms against its trunk. Beetles scuttled away and a miraculous line of ants wound along the bark.

Jarid didn't realize he was crying until a drop of water fell onto his arm. Pushing away from the tree, he wiped his face with the ripped sleeve of his shirt. He wanted to laugh, to cry, to shout his astonishment, but no sound came. The emotions welled up inside him and spilled down his cheeks as tears.

His walk through the woods was a miracle. Every sight seemed touched with magic, every leaf, bird and twig. He climbed a knoll, making his way through trees until he came out onto an open slope. When he reached the hilltop, he could look over the countryside in all directions. Woods and meadows rolled away everywhere, and in the north the castle stood on a higher peak, draped in shadows, waiting for the rising sun to turn it gold. Memories welled within him and made his eyes sting; he had often stood on this knoll as a child, cherishing this view.

Then he spotted a figure; to the north, in a meadow, a woman in a yellow gown was trudging toward the castle.

Iris.

Apprehension and anticipation leaped within him. It had to be her. Iris had long, full hair and so did the woman below, her mane gloriously unbound. He remembered enough from his childhood to know that women at balls wore their hair up on their heads. But Iris let her curls hang down her back, another reason she captivated him.

Last night, he had retreated from her, afraid she would melt the protective ice around his heart. He had no defenses against her. He knew she could hurt him, but now he could think only of seeing her face. This morning, in the pure light of dawn, he fought against his fear. He wanted to live again, not just exist.

Jarid started down the hill, tripping on rocks because he had so little experience taking himself anywhere. The world was too full of sights for him to absorb it all.

Birds chirped.

They sang everywhere, proclaiming the onset of morning. Grass crackled beneath his feet. As he gained confidence, he increased his stride, until he was running down the hill.

Iris heard the rustle just before the hand touched her shoulder. With a jump, she spun around.

"Jarid!" Before her fear of rejection could stop her, she threw her arms around him. He enfolded her in a hug and they stood together in the predawn light, holding each other so tightly, she could hardly breathe. This wasn't like last night, when he had clenched her with desperation; now his embrace seemed filled with joy.

It wasn't until Iris felt sunlight on her arm, where her sleeve had torn, that she came to herself. Pulling back, she looked up at him. He stared back at her, his gaze caressing her face.

His gaze.

Iris's breath caught. He was *looking* at her. When she gaped at him, his lips curved in a smile. Then he mouthed, *You are beautiful, Wife.*

"Lord Firestoke, wait!"

Brant Firestoke turned from the search party gathering in the entrance hall of the castle. A triangle page was running toward him, his young face red from exertion.

"Yes, what is it?" Brant barely managed to hold his impatience in check.

"Come to the Star Walk, Gracious Lord," the boy cried. "Come see!"

Brant wanted to put him off; he was too edgy about Jarid to let anything distract him from the rescue mission. But he knew this youth to be a steady fellow. The page's unusual behavior struck him enough that he went with the boy.

The Star Walk topped the great wall that surrounded the castle. It took its name from its star-shaped crenellations cut into the wall. Archers hid here during battle and fired through the openings, and the castle healer used the star shapes to focus her power when she tended injured soldiers. Brant prayed they wouldn't soon need those stars to defend themselves against the armies of Harsdown.

The page took him to a section above a meadow. "Look, Gracious Lord."

Gazing out, Brant saw two people crossing the grassy field, walking hand-in-hand. Iris and Jarid.

Brant let out a long breath. "My thanks, young man." He wondered if the depth of his relief was as obvious to the boy as to himself. At times like this it was hard to maintain his veneer of impassivity. When Iris and Jarid hadn't returned this morning, his fear for Aronsdale had flared like mage-light. Nor was it only Aronsdale; over the past year he had grown fond of Iris, who reminded him of his daughter, and Jarid brought to mind the late King Daron, whom Brant had served with loyalty, respect and the love of a brother.

Brant headed back to inform his men. As he descended the stairs, the clangs and calls of the waking keep came up from below. At the bottom, he walked out into the entrance hall—and found Jarid and Iris already there, surrounded by the search party. The two of them looked a mess, their wedding finery torn and stained with grass. Iris had a leaf in her hair.

Watching the newlyweds, Brant smiled. They seemed oblivious to everyone but each other. Exactly why Iris had wanted to take Jarid into the woods, or why Jarid had wanted to go, he wasn't sure. The closeness of nature seemed to comfort them in a way the castle could never do. He had little doubt about the success of their nuptials, given the way they were beaming—

Brant froze. Saints almighty, they were *looking* at each other, both of them, Jarid as well as Iris. Servants bustled about the couple, clucking at their disheveled state, having no idea of this amazing event because none of them had known their new king was blind.

Muller's voice rang out. "Jarid, what is this?" He stepped out of the shadows at the other end of the foyer, near the great staircase.

The king jumped, his dark hair brushing his shoulders as he turned toward his golden cousin. Muller came forward, but stopped several paces away, his face stunned as Jarid met his gaze. The servants melted away, taking their cue from the tension in Muller's body.

"It can't be," Muller said. "You can't see."

Iris answered with joy. "It is a miracle."

Muller swung around to her. "How could this happen?"

"What do you mean?" Her smile dimmed at his dismay.

Muller seemed to struggle with his words. "As long as he couldn't lead Aronsdale, it would have been all right. But this—" His voice shook with emotion. "Now he can rule, but imperfectly. It is wrong. Wrong! It will destroy Aronsdale."

Iris stared at him. "How can you say such a thing?"

Jarid was watching them, his miraculous gaze going from Muller to Iris, his expression darkening.

"Fate must be laughing at us," Muller said bitterly. "No matter what decisions we make, no matter how lofty our intentions, we pay cruelly in the end."

"I donna understand—" Iris broke off as Jarid left her side and strode toward the great staircase.

By the time Iris caught up with Jarid, halfway up the stairs, she was running. She grasped his arm, pulling him to a halt—and in that heart-stopping instant, he spun around and raised his fist. But he didn't threaten her. Instead he stretched out his arm, pointing at Muller, who had come to stand at the foot of the stairs.

"My cousin is right." Jarid's deep voice rasped with disuse. "Ask Stone."

Their tread whispered on the pitted stone steps as they descended to the underground levels of the castle, Jarid and his guards on the narrow stairs ahead of Iris and Brant, with Muller and more guards behind them. Iris wanted to hit someone. It was wrong; she was a mage, a healer, a bringer of light, not a pugilist, but even so, right now she wanted to take a good, solid whack at Brant.

It was bad enough that he had never told them he had ordered his men to bring Jarid's foster father back here; even worse, they had thrown the man into the dungeon. Iris doubted Jarid would ever forgive them now. He had withdrawn into a place so deep, he would respond to no one.

She spoke in a low voice to Brant. "You had no right."

"I had every right." His gray eyes could have been granite. "That man kidnapped the Dawnfield heir."

"He took care of Jarid like a son."

Brant's voice hardened. "He murdered Jarid's parents."

Iris jerked. "*What?*"

At her raised voice, several people looked back. Brant frowned until they turned away again. Then he spoke quietly, words only Iris could catch. "You heard me."

"I thought highwaymen attacked the carriage," she said.

"That's right."

"Including Stone?" She spoke the name Jarid had used for his foster father.

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

Brant tilted his head toward the soldiers with Jarid. "This 'Stone' matches the description given by those two. They were the guards that the highwaymen knocked out during the attack on the carriage."

"You canna be sure this Stone is the same man, especially after fourteen years."

"He admitted it when my men questioned him."

Iris thought of Jarid's desperate loneliness. "Why didna you tell me Stone was a prisoner here? You let us believe he intended to follow us to Suncroft."

"I didn't want to upset the king." Brant spoke quietly. "You've had an empathic link with Jarid from the start. I couldn't risk your knowing. I'm sorry."

Iris sighed. "It surely is a mess." She watched the rigid set of Jarid's back. Did her husband know his foster father had been involved in the accident? She guessed yes; Jarid didn't seem surprised by Stone's imprisonment. She couldn't fathom how he could have lived all these years with a man who had helped kill his parents. It must have been a nightmare.

At the bottom of the stairs they entered a rough hall lit with torches. The head guardsman took a hexagon of keys off a peg and led the way to a heavy door. While the guard unlocked the door, Jarid waited with several soldiers, his posture so stiff that Iris wondered he didn't crack. How would he respond, seeing for the first time one of the men who had destroyed his life? Stone may have spent fourteen years atoning for that crime, but nothing could give Jarid back what he had lost, neither his parents nor his childhood.

After the guardsman heaved open the door, two soldiers filed into the cell. Instead of following, Jarid turned to the people crowded behind him. When he held his hand out to Iris, her pulse leaped; it was the first time since Muller's outburst this morning that Jarid had shown any wish for human contact.

Stepping forward, Iris took his hand. His face was set with lines of pain he should never have had at his young age. His grief saturated her senses.

They entered a cell with rough stone walls. It was clean but bare, with no furniture or amenities except for a chamber pot in the far corner. Iris had thought they were underground, but the far wall must have been set in a slope on the northern side of the castle. Its barred window let in sunlight.

A ledge stretched along the wall to her right—and she recognized the man who sat there, watching them with the taut posture of someone who expected to soon face his execution. His mane of granite-gray hair swept down his neck and bushy gray eyebrows arched over his gray eyes. Stone. But this was no stone-hearted man. When he saw Jarid, he made no attempt to hide his joy. The six-sided cell focused Iris's mage gifts and she felt Stone's mood; he loved his foster son deeply—and he feared he had lost Jarid forever.

Jarid walked over to him, his face unreadable. Stone waited, his hands clenched on the edges of the ledge where he sat. And then, while everyone watched, the King of Aronsdale went down on one knee to a prisoner in his dungeon.

"What is this?" Stone spoke in such a low voice, Iris could barely hear him. "You kneel to me? Surely not." He was speaking to himself rather than Jarid; he obviously expected no response.

Jarid lifted his head. Then he answered in his rusty voice. "Surely yes."

Stone froze. "*Dani*?"

"Dani?" Emotion roughened Jarid's voice. "Is that what you named me?"

"I—yes, yes, I did." Wonder showed on Stone's face. "What miracle is this, son?"

Brant Firestoke spoke harshly. "Do not presume to call His Majesty your son."

Stone jerked up his head. "His Majesty?"

*Saints almighty.* Had they told him nothing about Jarid? It seemed impossible Stone couldn't have known. Only someone completely secluded after the death of Jarid's parents wouldn't have heard about their accident and the loss of their son.

And yet... remembering the desolate mountains where they had found Stone's cabin, many days' ride from any town, Iris realized it was possible he could have been that isolated, if Stone had chosen to withdraw from the rest of humanity. But why had he kept Jarid hidden for so many years? To protect himself?

Muller answered Stone, his voice icy. "Yes. His Majesty. That night you murdered the heir to Aronsdale."

Jarid rose to his feet. He started to answer, then stopped. Everyone remained silent, waiting while he struggled to do what most people took for granted—speak. Finally he responded, his voice rough. "Stone did not kill my parents. Murk was the one who drove us off the road."

"But I was there." Stone stood up next to him, watching the king with painful compassion. "I, too, am responsible."

Jarid raised his hand as if to touch Stone's face, the man who had taken care of him for so long. "Any sin you committed, even that Murk committed, was far less than mine."

His foster father answered in a low voice. "No."

"Stone—" Jarid's voice caught.

"Stone?" His father sounded subdued. "Is that how you thought of me?"

Jarid nodded. "For strength. A contrast to Murk."

"I don't understand," Muller said. "Who is Murk?"

Jarid tried to answer, then shook his head.

"Murk planned the robbery," Stone said. "He was the other highwayman."

"And you only *now* reveal this?" Muller demanded. "Better to protect your own, eh?"

Stone's gaze never wavered. "Aye."

"Nay," Iris murmured, using the cell to help her focus on Stone. "You did it for Jarid. You remained silent to protect him."

Stone blinked. "Jarid?"

"My husband. The King."

Stone's weathered face gentled as he turned to his former ward. "You have married this lovely young lady?" When Jarid nodded, Stone said, "It is a good thing." He hesitated, regret in his expression. "Jarid

is your name?"

"It is," Jarid said softly.

"I am sorry. I never knew."

Jarid touched his arm. "Do not be sorry."

"What does she mean, you remained silent about this Murk to protect Jarid?" Muller asked. "What lies have you told my cousin?"

"Told?" Stone answered quietly. "I have told him nothing and everything. I spoke to him for fourteen years, Gracious Lord, and he heard nothing. What did I tell him? That the boy punished himself for something not his fault? Yes, I told him. He never heard."

Jarid spoke in a rasp. "I am no boy."

"Enough," Brant said. "Where is this Murk?"

"Gone," Jarid grated.

"Gone?" Muller's forehead furrowed. "Where?"

Jarid didn't answer. Instead he walked to the window and gazed past its bars to the meadows below. Iris wanted to go to him, to offer succor for his grief over his parents. But his need for separation surrounded him like a shield; to approach now would be an intrusion.

"I cannot take you to Murk," Stone told them. "I am sorry."

Muller's jaw worked. "You will tell us where your partner has hidden."

"I cannot."

Brant spoke, his voice like the wind that scoured the land in winter. "We have been patient with you, highwayman. But that is done now. You will talk."

Stone's face paled, but still he said nothing.

Brant motioned to the soldiers. "Take him to the interrogation room."

"No!" Jarid spun around from the window, unsettling in his intensity. "You will not."

"Why?" Muller asked. "Why, Cousin?"

"You know the legend of indigo mages?" Jarid's voice had jagged edges.

Muller blinked. "Of course."

Brant was studying Jarid closely. "No indigo mage has ever been known."

"My mother," Jarid said.

"That cannot be," Brant said. "We have no records of such."

A voice came from behind them. "No. But I recognized signs of her ability."

Iris swung around. Delia stood in the doorway, her gray hair disarrayed around her face, her cheeks red as if she had run here through the wind.

"It is the legend of the indigo mages," Delia said, coming forward. "A mage's power is limited by the strength of her life. She can soothe, yes, but no more than she could soothe herself. She can heal only injuries she could recover from herself and feel only emotions she can recognize and endure." Quietly she added, "An indigo mage would have the greatest power of all."

"The power of a life," Jarid said, his gaze hooded.

Iris was beginning to understand. "An indigo mage can save a life. But only one, for she has only one life."

Delia's voice softened as she addressed Jarid. "Your mother saved your life in the crash, yes?"

His voice rasped. "She died so I could live."

"Nay, Jarid, it is'n your fault," Iris said.

"You must not punish yourself for their deaths," Delia said.

"You should have brought him home," Muller told Stone, his voice edged with anger. "How could you keep him in that hovel?"

"He didn't know who I was," Jarid said.

Iris watched her husband uneasily. There was more to this than his grief over his parents. But what?

Brant narrowed his gaze at Stone. "You could have made inquiries. You chose instead to protect yourself."

"Yes." Stone met his gaze. "I did."

"Liar." Pain etched lines in Jarid's face. "*Liar.*"

"Son, don't," Stone said. "Let it go."

"Why?" Jarid's voice grated as if it could tear his throat. "They should know the truth."

"What truth?" Muller asked.

"About Murk," Jarid said. "About me."

"Dani, stop," Stone whispered.

"Whatever you're hiding," Brant told Stone, "we will discover it."

"Stop." Jarid was facing them, tall and imposing, his body dark against the patch of light made by the barred window at his back. He lifted his arms from his sides until his hands were at waist level, his palms cupped upward.

Then it began.

Light filled his hands, as if he held a glowing red orb in each. He had a haunted expression, his face stark, lit from below by the orbs. The rest of the cell darkened about him.

Delia moved next to Iris. "A red mage?" she murmured.

Iris swallowed. "I think more. Much more."

Jarid continued to stare at Brant. The cell was growing hot, as if he held flames rather than light.

The spheres of light changed.

They turned gold—the aches and pains in Iris's body from her night in the forest vanished. When the spheres turned yellow, her grief for having never known her birth parents eased. The orbs turned green—and Iris knew, with a devastating clarity, the self-loathing that rilled Jarid. But why. Why? The orbs kept changing, sky-blue now, and the scratches on her arms faded.

The spheres turned indigo.

Tears welled in Iris's eyes as she realized what he had achieved. Incredibly, Jarid had within him the power to cure even grief, at least that of people other than himself. Yet for all its beauty, she resisted his healing spell. She wanted to overcome her sorrows herself, not through spells.

The spheres turned even darker.

Violet.

"Saints above," Delia whispered.

"The power of a life," Jarid rasped. "The power to give—or to take away." He extended his arm toward Brant, his hand filled with violet light. "I took Murk."

Brant stared at him. "I don't understand."

Jarid's words dropped into the air like stones. "That night when he murdered my parents, I reached out with my mind—and I killed him."

## Chapter 8

### *Prince of Sun and Shadow*

Della lit the candles in her cottage, one for each mage power: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo. Iris sat at the circular table and touched the indigo candle. "In a rainbow, violet comes after indigo."

"So it does." Delia wearily settled in a chair across from her. She seemed subdued, as if she had yet to absorb what had happened in Stone's cell today.

Iris spoke quietly. "Only a violet mage could have killed Murk. And Jarid was only *six*."

"Yes." Sorrow came from Delia's mind. "His mother's spell on the glass ball probably helped him focus."

"I've never even heard legends of violet mages." Iris found it hard to comprehend such power.

Delia shuddered. "It frightens me."

"He wouldna use it for evil." Iris wasn't sure if she was trying to convince Delia or herself.

"All mage powers have their dark aspects. One who can heal can also cause injury."

"But it never happens."

"It happens, Iris." Delia rubbed her eyes. "Shape-mages rarely abuse their gifts because it hurts the mage just as much as the other person. A healer who deliberately injures someone also experiences the pain herself. It is a powerful deterrent. But at the age of six, Jarid understood too little about his gifts—and the consequences of misusing them."

"He knows now," Iris said murmured.

"I'm surprised the spell didn't kill him, too."

"It came close, I think."

Delia nodded sadly. "If he had truly wanted to use his power for ill, he could have done so long ago, instead of locking his mind away."

"Locking his mind?"

"He made himself blind, deaf and mute as punishment."

The thought threatened to break Iris's heart, all the more so because she knew Delia was right.

Watching her, Delia said, "With you, he has begun to heal."

"I canna do enough. We are shadows to his brilliance." Iris thought of the wedding gift he had given her, the invisible sphere, a spell of good will she had taken into herself. "I donna think he even needs actual shapes to focus. He imagines them. Real shapes help, but he can use those he sees only in his mind."

"And yet he hides from his own power."

Iris could see, in her mind, the tormented young king, his palms filled with violet light, his gaze haunted as he confessed to murder. "If only he would let me go to him."

"Is he still secluded in the tower?"

"Aye. He refuses to let anyone near." She grimaced. "Muller hasna been much better."

"I don't understand Muller. He practically begged Jarid to take the crown when he thought his cousin was incapable of ruling." Delia shook her head. "Why is he horrified now that Jarid might actually rule?"

"Jarid killed a man with his mage power."

"Muller didn't know that until this morning."

Iris sifted through her impressions of the golden lord. "I think Muller sent us to find Jarid because he genuinely believed his cousin would make a better king. I donna know why."

"It makes no sense. Muller has spent years learning to govern. He had to know he was better prepared than Jarid." Delia's face creased with lines that had deepened over the past few days. "You would think he would have fought for the title."

"He didn't want it."

"I'm not so sure."

Iris exhaled. Neither was she.

*Prince of Sunbeams*, Iris thought. Muller stood at the top of a hill, facing away from her, gazing out over Crofts Vale in the valley below. Dressed in impeccable white trousers, gold boots and a gilded tunic, he glowed. The sun turned him radiant. Wind blew his hair back from his face, showing his regal profile, his features so perfect he never seemed fully real to Iris.

When she came up to him, he turned with a start, then relaxed when he saw her. He bowed deeply. "Good morn, Your Majesty."

This change of status between them unsettled Iris. Only a few days ago, she had bowed to him.

"Good morn." She gestured at the rolling green hills. "A lovely view."

"Like our royal family." Bitterness edged his voice. "Beautiful on the outside, rotted from within."

She responded gently. "That isn't true, Muller."

"Isn't it?" His fist clenched. "You heard Jarid. A shape-mage who can kill."

"He had provocation."

"And if he feels he has provocation again?"

"Saints, Muller, *look* what it did to him. It wasn't his mother's broken spell that left him unable to speak, hear or see. It was *him*." She searched for words that would do justice to what she had sensed in Jarid. "He felt Murk die. How could a six-year-old live with that? And he knew, even then, that killing opposed everything it meant to be a shape-mage. What if we hadn't found him? Would he have spent the rest of his life atoning for being a terrified little boy who defended himself from the monster who murdered his parents and meant to kill him? He's suffered enough."

Muller answered in a low voice. "Before we knew anything about him, I had been so certain it would be best if I stepped aside. Then we discovered he was completely unfit to rule. Even that was all right for Aronsdale—you would do well in his place. But then he began to recover and suddenly we had a king who would rule, but imperfectly."

"Surely a flawed king is better than none at all."

His voice cracked. "Even then I didn't know the worst. He is an abomination. A mage who kills."

Iris couldn't sort his tangled emotions; she had no shapes to focus her power. She tried to draw on the sun, but it was too distant, too abstract. She felt as if she were using untrained muscles. She strained to concentrate—and then she had a sense of going over a barrier. Her spell blossomed and she felt Muller's deep-seated dread at the prospect of Jarid ruling Aronsdale. Even knowing how much perfection meant to Muller, Iris didn't understand the depth of his reaction, nor could she delve deeply enough to discover what caused his fear.

She spoke softly, "We are all flawed, Muller. Just look at me."

He lifted his hands, then dropped them, moving with the unconscious grace he never seemed to want rather than the warrior's power he longed to command. "Iris, it may not seem so now, but you *will* come

into your own as a mage, at least a sapphire, maybe an indigo, greater than Delia, greater than Chime, perhaps even greater than Jarid's mother."

She wondered why he hadn't answered her question. "In the past, Delia said emerald was my limit."

"She was wrong. I told her so."

Iris felt as if he had just punched her in the gut. "You believed I had such power and you never told me?"

"Delia didn't want me interfering. Besides, she thinks I have no mage power." He shrugged, trying for a nonchalance he obviously didn't feel. "She wouldn't listen."

"You should have told me." Suddenly Iris understood. "Except then you and I would have had to wed. And you want Chime."

He said, simply, "Yes."

"If I really am that strong a mage, surely you knew it would come out."

"Once Chime and I were married, it wouldn't have mattered. We couldn't undo the union." He looked toward the castle, high on its bluff. "And then you found Jarid."

Iris exhaled. "That is why you sent me to get him."

"In part." He swept his arm out as if to include the entire country. "But what I said before is true. Aronsdale needs you. I would only bring sorrow to our people."

"How could you give up so easily?"

Muller gave a bitter laugh. "You think I gave up?" Bending down, he dug up a chunk of rock. Then he showed her. "What shape is this?"

"An oval, sort of." A broken oval; the end had cracked off, leaving a jagged edge.

"An imperfect shape."

"Very."

"Can you use it for spells?"

Iris tried to concentrate on the rock, but instead of focusing her power, it dispersed her spell like a jagged seashore breaking up waves.

"Nay, Muller." She gave him back the rock. "It ruins the spell."

"As it would for any normal shape-mage." He concentrated on the rock, his forehead creasing.

"Muller?" Iris wondered at his intense focus. It was exactly the way Delia looked before she did a spell.

Suddenly a spark jumped up from the rock, which turned red like a hot coal. With a grunt, Muller dropped the stone. It hit the ground and the grass sizzled.

Iris gaped at him. "What did you do?" The glow in the rock was only now fading.

"That," he said harshly, "is *my* mage power."

"But... but you have no—"

"No power? Aye, so Delia believes. Why? Because she can't feel a 'gift' as imperfect as mine. I can only use flawed shapes." He kicked the scorched rock at their feet. "You want me to create light? That was the best I could do. My spells always come out twisted. *Wrong*. But I have the Dawnfield mage strength, green at least, maybe blue. It would devastate Aronsdale to have me at its helm."

"Hai, Muller." No wonder he had dreaded becoming king. In a realm that kept its freedom only because of its shape-mages, such a distortion of power from the highest authority in the land could debilitate the country.

Muller indicated the distant figure of a woman in a meadow. She was walking toward their hill, her white dress drifting on the wind. Like him, she was ethereally beautiful, almost unbearably so.

"My betrothed," he said.

"Does Chime know?"

"Yes. She helps me. Soothes me." Softly he added, "But we cannot deny the truth. She and I are flawed."

"Muller, nay."

His face was pensive. "You think she doesn't realize she has too much trouble understanding spells? She and I will never win acclaim for our gifts of the mind, but we complement each other."

Iris was beginning to see why he and Chime spent so much time making themselves beautiful. It helped them endure what they perceived as their flaws on the inside. She spoke gently. "Acclaim means little. A love that makes each of you feel whole is priceless." If only she and Jarid could find their way to such a gift.

"A pretty thought." Pain showed on his face, though he tried to hide it. "But idealistic."

"Sometimes idealism is all we have." Iris watched Chime climbing the hill. "Jarid and I know so little about our duties. All of us are flawed, Muller, but together, perhaps we can do what would be impossible for one of us alone." She turned to him. "Help us. Let me tell Jarid you will stay. He and I, we need you and Chime."

For a long moment Muller watched his betrothed. Just as Iris thought he wouldn't answer, he turned back to her. "I will talk to Chime." He gave her a wan smile. "But I don't know how much we can do."

"Thank you," she murmured.

In truth, Iris didn't know what she could do, either. Jarid had withdrawn from them all. She didn't know how to breach the barriers to his heart—and without him, Aronsdale would remain incomplete.

Jarid sat against the wall of the tower room, a curving surface tiled in gold mosaics. He felt like a figure in a round box. He could focus his power through the tiles, the room, the orb-lamp on its stand, even the stairs beyond the door. Power coursed within him, awakened by his wife and her damnably soothing touch, the healing she drew from within herself and gave to him.

Iris.

Pulling his knees to his chest, Jarid crossed his arms and laid his forehead on them. His mind kept replaying that moment from this morning when—for the first time in his life—he had seen his foster father. Stone. The man had a weathered face. A worn face. An aging face.

A beloved face.

Jarid had ordered the guards to free Stone and give him a guest suite in the castle, and he had made sure they did as he said. Then he had retreated here. Nothing would let him escape the truth. Now everyone knew: their king was an atrocity. All this day he had been reliving Murk's death; no longer could he deny the memory. That night, all those years ago, he had thought he would die himself. He was tainted. He would return with Stone to the mountains and live his life in isolation. He hated to leave Iris, but he couldn't let her stay with him. He would destroy her. He would destroy Aronsdale.

A knock came on the door.

Jarid ignored it, but silence no longer protected him. Nor could he shut out the compassion that flowed to him from beyond that portal. He shouldn't have been able to sense Iris so well with the door between them, but he did. They had reached each other across valleys and mountains and rivers, beyond the forest and beneath the bowl of the sky. It should have been impossible, but they had done it. Now she was a part of him, one so integral to his heart that he feared he would shatter when he left her.

The door opened. Jarid rose to his feet, his back against the wall, his posture defensive. Iris stood framed in the gracefully arched doorway. Guards loomed behind her, their hands on the hilts of their swords, ready to defend their queen against their king.

Iris stepped inside and turned to the guards. "You may close the door."

"Your Majesty," one began. "You shouldn't risk—"

"I shall see my husband in private," Iris said firmly.

When the guard still hesitated, Jarid spoke in his roughened voice. "You heard her."

With poorly disguised reluctance, the guard closed the door. Jarid told himself he should insist that Iris also leave, but the words deserted him. He wanted her too much.

*Stop.* He put up his hand, palm out, to push her away.

"You donna fool me," she murmured.

"You must go."

She came over to him. "Nay, my love."

"You cannot love me."

"You can say I will never be yours, but you canna tell me what I will feel." She spoke with compassion. "Give us time to learn each other, Jarid. With you, I feel a closeness I've never known before. It is as if we have a place in the world. A home. Perhaps neither of us knows how to love the other, but the seed is there. Let us give it a chance to grow."

Jarid wished he could give that to her: a home, a place, a husband to cherish her. She deserved all that and more. But his scarred heart had nothing to offer.

Iris besieged his defenses. He barely stopped himself from gathering her into his arms. His conflicted

emotions bewildered him: his longing to believe her; his conviction he didn't deserve what she offered; his pleasure at seeing her, hearing her, feeling her. He felt her self-doubts and couldn't fathom why she considered herself undesirable. Her hair, so full and curly, gleamed gold, chestnut, red, yellow. Seeing her lush body, he remembered their wedding night and his pulse quickened. Her face glowed with health, her cheeks pink as if she had been running.

He spoke in a rasp. "I cannot promise you a life of the laughter and love you deserve."

Her voice softened. "I couldn't bear it if you left."

It was too much. Even knowing he should push her away, he drew her forward, into his arms, and laid his cheek on the crown of her head. "Iris—"

"Is it truly so horrible, to be with the likes of me?"

"It is a miracle. But you destroy my defenses."

She rested her head against his shoulder. "It is a good thing, to heal."

"It's killing me."

"Nay, Jarid. Living hurts, but that is'n death."

"I must never forget what I am."

"You are Jarid Dawnfield, King of Aronsdale."

"I am a monstrosity."

"Nay!" She drew back to look at him. "You are a marvel."

His hands tightened on her back. "Muller is right. He is more worthy to be king."

"He didn't say that."

"He doesn't want me to wear the crown."

"He wants it even less himself."

"He doesn't mean that."

"He means it." She set her palms against his chest. "Muller is also a mage, but his spells go awry. You fear you will kill because you have so much power within you. He fears he will kill because his spells twist out of shape."

He stared at her. "Muller is a *mage*?"

"Aye. He says I may tell only you."

Jarid leaned his forehead against hers. "He can learn to control his spells."

"He thinks not."

"I *cannot* accept the crown."

"You already have it."

"I will abdicate."

"Nay." Her melodious voice flowed over him. "What meaning would light have without darkness to define it? Goodness isn't the absence of evil, it is our ability to rise above the shadows within. If you had no such goodness, you would have never punished yourself all these years. That you have both light and shadows donna make you evil, it makes you human."

"I must go." He feared to accept the hope she offered him. "You must stay."

Her voice caught. "I would miss you forever if you left me."

Jarid pulled her close so he wouldn't have to look into her face. He couldn't speak his heart: *I fear to love you*. It would hurt too much, for to love meant to risk the anguish of loss.

Tenderness came into her voice. "We all leave this life someday. We canna let that stop us from giving our hearts. If we do, our lives have no meaning."

He told himself that his leaving would protect Iris, but when he tried to imagine a life without her, isolated in his mountain refuge, it was unbearable. Great ice floes were breaking within him, as his defenses cracked and split.

"Let them crack," Iris murmured.

His voice broke. "I don't know how to love you."

She cupped his cheek with her hand. "Let us learn together."

It was a long moment before he spoke. Then finally he said the words that both terrified and elated him. "I will try." He took a deep breath. "I will stay, my wife."

## Epilogue

Like sunshine sparkling on water, Chime ran up the hill to Muller, her husband. Sitting farther up the slope, Iris watched them. Off to her right, on the edge of a bluff, Jarid stood alone, staring out at the vista of green hills, meadows and woods. Although he wore rich garments now instead of rags, he still dressed simply in dark trousers and a white shirt. Iris had no idea what he was thinking now; even when she could feel his moods, she had trouble understanding them. But whatever thoughts occupied him today were calm.

Over the past months, during the spring and summer, his tormented moods had eased. Although she doubted he would ever let himself free of the guilt that haunted him, his days at Suncroft seemed to soften the jagged edges of his grief. He had asked Stone to stay, providing him with farmland to the south of Crofts Vale.

Iris was coming to know her husband. In many ways, he was still the boy who had lost his parents. Although he learned at an incredible rate, he rarely spoke. His powers were unparalleled. Fourteen years

of honing them through meditation had turned him into a mage greater than any known in the recorded history of Aronsdale. In the past, the queen had served as the mage for the realm and the king as its sovereign. Iris and Jarid were reversing those roles. He had little desire to govern, but he could easily spend all day developing spells. Together, they could give Aronsdale the strength to stand against Harsdown.

It wasn't an easy road, learning to govern, but to Iris's surprise, it suited her. She was also learning self-discipline. Incredibly, she had talents to offer Aronsdale, and she had a place here at Suncroft. She and Jarid spent most of their time learning their duties, with help from Muller and Chime, but today they had borrowed a few moments just to enjoy the sunshine.

As if he had heard her thoughts, Jarid turned to her, his dark hair blowing in the wind, and beckoned, inviting her over. Her mood warming, she rose to her feet and went to him, savoring the sight of this man who had come to mean so much to her. They sat together on the edge of the bluff, gazing at the countryside. In a distant valley, Crofts Vale slumbered in the sunlight. Closer, but still far down the slope, Muller and Chime strolled into view, holding hands.

Jarid spoke in a low voice. "They are happy."

"Aye." Iris wanted to ask, *And you?* But she held back. On the night he had agreed to stay at Suncroft, she had sworn to herself she would never push him. In the months since, she had done her best to keep the vow.

Jarid took her hand. "Iris—"

"Aye?"

He rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. "A lovely day."

"That it is." She wondered at his mood; he so rarely engaged in casual conversation.

He spoke softly. "It will never come easy for me."

"It?"

"Speaking."

She flushed. "Can you tell my moods that easily?"

"Not so easy. But some." He touched her cheek. "My silences leave a woman lonely, I think."

"Nay. You fill my life." She had never felt lonely since he had come here. Vulnerable, yes; if you loved someone, you risked hurting that much more if you ever lost them. But it was far, far better than loneliness. The emptiness she had known all her life was filling now.

"Silence donna mean absence," she said.

"It is hard for me to say what is inside."

Iris curled her hand around his. "It is you I want. Not words." She almost added, *Words can't love you*, but she held back. It was too much to ask him to return her love. They had wed as strangers. It was enough that he seemed content with their union.

Jarid turned her palm upward to the sky. He cupped his hand under hers, as if they were holding an invisible orb. "Look."

A sphere of light appeared in her hand, glowing violet. His mage color. Her pulse quickened. The power of that simple orb could vanquish any mage in the land.

"It's beautiful," she whispered. "Terrifying and beautiful."

"Now yours."

"Mine?" No one knew yet her mage color.

His voice rumbled. "Watch."

The orb of light in her hand changed—into a rainbow. Every color swirled within the enchanted sphere, swirling in beauty.

Wonder spread through Iris at the exquisite sight. But she said, "It cannot be. A mage is one color, not all."

"You are like none other. You have part of all of us in you." He lifted their hands together, offering the orb to the sun, sky and land. Its light swirled and spun.

As she watched, marveling, the sphere rose from their hands, growing in size, translucent in the streaming sunlight. She could see the countryside through its glimmering surfaces. The orb bobbed on the gentle breezes like a giant bubble, rising higher, blown toward the village. It drifted across the land, pulling out into an arc against the sky. Farther and farther it floated, stretching out...

Then it was done—and a rainbow arched in the sky. It was impossible in the clear, sunny weather, without a raindrop in sight. Yet there it was, brilliant and pure, a great bow of color over the village of Crofts Vale.

"A gift to our people," Jarid murmured. "Light and the healing that comes after a storm."

Tears gathered in Iris's eyes. "It is truly lovely."

"It truly is." His voice had an odd sound. "A sight that I love."

Iris turned—to find him looking at her. Her breath caught. "That you love?"

"Aye." His voice gentled, falling into the cadences of the Tallwalk Mountains. He curved his hand around her cheek, his palm tingling with the power of the sphere they had held. "You."

For a moment her voice failed. When she found it again, she said, "And I you, my love."

So they sat together in the sunlight, watching the enchanted view, each a haven for the other, their hearts reborn in the gentle radiance of their shared gifts.