



## Gift of Magic (A Novel of the Nine Kingdoms)

By Lynn Kurland

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***Gift of Magic* is the latest installment in *New York Times* bestselling author Lynn Kurland's breathtaking *Nine Kingdoms* saga, which follows the daughter of a dreamweaver and the son of a mage as they struggle to save the realm from a magic as dark as it is powerful.**

Sarah of Doire knows the pattern of spells is no accident. With each page, each powerful rune, she and Ruith are being led somewhere, to someone-but by whom, she cannot tell. Sarah's gift of sight only allows her to see the spells themselves, not the person behind them.

A reluctant sorcerer still learning to trust his own magic, Ruithneadh of Ceangail knows he's woefully unprepared for the adversaries they'll face. But he and Sarah must collect and destroy his father Gair's spells soon. Many mages seek their power, and in the wrong hands, Gair's magic would plunge the Nine Kingdoms into an eternity of darkness.

But as they pursue the final spells-acquiring strange companions, welcome allies, and unexpected foes along the way-Sarah and Ruith realize that their true quest has only just begun. The real enemy is closer, darker, and more power hungry than they ever imagined; and until he is defeated, the fate of the Nine Kingdoms hangs in dire peril.

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## Editorial Review

### About the Author

Lynn Kurland is the New York Times bestselling author of numerous novels and novellas all for Berkley. Her website is [www.lynnkurland.com](http://www.lynnkurland.com).

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Praise for

### **the novels of the Nine Kingdoms**

#### *Spellweaver*

“Kurland’s flowing prose combined with a strong multibook story arc and complex, evolving characters come together to make *Spellweaver* one of the strongest fantasy novels welcoming in the new year.”

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“Kurland weaves together intricate layers of plot threads, giving this novel a rich and lyrical style. Not only does mystery and danger abound, but also the burgeoning of a love and trust that is wonderful to behold. Kurland is an elegant spinner of tales!”

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—*Night Owl Romance*

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—*Midwest Book Review*

#### *Princess of the Sword*

“Beautifully written, with an intricately detailed society born of Ms. Kurland’s remarkable imagination.”

—*Romance Reviews Today*

“An excellent finish to a great romantic quest fantasy...Readers will relish Ms. Kurland’s superb trilogy.”

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“An enchanting writer.”

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—*Romance Reader at Heart*

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“Kurland is a skilled enchantress... *With Every Breath* is breathtaking in its magnificent scope, a true invitation to the delights of romance.”

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—*The Oakland (MI) Press*

***From This Moment On***

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—*Publishers Weekly*

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*The Novels of the Nine Kingdoms*

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(with Julie Beard, Barbara Bretton, and Jo Beverley)

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## A TIME FOR LOVE

### **Especials**

"To Kiss in the Shadows" from TAPESTRY

Lynn Kurland

GIFT of  
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The spell slammed into him with the force of a score of fists.

Ruithneadh of Ceangail met the ground with equal force. He lay on his back, winded, and stared up into the darkness above him. He couldn't decide if the stars he saw were ones his poor wee brain had created for his pleasure or ones twinkling in the sky for their own purposes. It was still at least an hour before dawn, so he supposed it was possible it was merely the heavens still displaying their sparkling finery.

He realized after a bit that he hadn't noticed it had begun to sleet. Perhaps what was swirling in front of his eyes was less a vision of the heavens than it was the aftereffects of a spell he'd known was coming his way but had been unfortunately less prepared to counter than he would have liked. He would have blinked the stinging rain out of his eyes, but it was too much effort. Breathing was too much effort as well given that all that seemed to be left of him was a void in his chest where his breath was accustomed to reside.

That was his own fault, he supposed. He'd thought a little sparring with spells before breakfast might be a good way to begin his day. And why not? His opponent had been a worthy one, and he had himself been eager to take any opportunity to improve his rather meager magical strength.

But now that he had regained what good sense he'd lost somewhere on his way to the appointed field of battle, he was prepared to revisit the conclusion he'd come to years ago:

Magic and all its incarnations should be sent briskly along to hell.

'Twas a pity he hadn't clung to that very sensible belief as firmly as he should have.

In his defense, he had tried. He had spent the previous score of winters in a house on the side of a mountain, conducting his life by purely pedestrian means. His days had been amply filled by roaming through the woods near his home, occasionally sampling the local alemaster's delicate apple-flavored ale, and continually stretching himself to perfect his recipe for unburned bread. Any magic he might or might not



have possessed had been nothing but a distant and unpleasant memory, a memory that had occasionally plagued his dreams but never his waking hours—

He pursed his lips, the only part of him that seemed to be capable of movement at the moment. Very well, so memories of magic had plagued his dreams more than occasionally and intruded more than he wanted to admit upon his daylight ruminations. He had made it his life's quest to ignore those memories and dreams and other things that made him profoundly uncomfortable.

At least he had until his peaceful if not exactly useful existence had come to an abrupt end one evening at twilight when a knock had sounded on his door. Answering it—against his better judgement, as it happened—had resulted in finding himself cast headlong into a rushing river of a quest that had carried him places he'd never intended to go again—

“Perhaps you shouldn't have asked me to check mercy at the edge of the field.”

Ruith winced as his breath returned, followed rapidly by the feeling in most of his limbs. He imagined he wouldn't be overly happy to discover what was left of his back after its meeting with the rock-hard ground, but there was nothing to be done about that. It would take his mind off the road in front of him, a road he knew would include death, danger, and duels of spells with men who would no doubt continue to suddenly and without warning appear from his past. Such as the one leaning over him, frowning thoughtfully at him.

He found he had breath after all to at least wheeze out a vile suggestion as to what his opponent might do with his annoying observations.

Mochriadhemiach of Neroche only laughed, grasped Ruith by the hand, and hauled him up to his feet. He stood back and looked him over critically. “I think we should have another go.”

Ruith thought quite a few things himself, namely that he had gravely underestimated the truly evil nature of the youngest prince of Neroche. They had spent a fair amount of time together as lads, slipping away from responsible adults to whisper along passageways as chill breezes only to regroup in private to have lengthy looks at books of spells housed behind sturdy locks. He was, if he could be permitted a bit of self-congratulation, a damned fine picker of sturdy locks, much better than Neroche's newly crowned king.

A pity he hadn't maintained the same sort of abilities with his magic.

Which was, he supposed, why he found himself standing unsteadily in the middle of a muddy field with sleet stinging his skin where it struck him, gritting his teeth and fighting to ignore the particular draining sort of weariness the weaving of heavy spells caused, and finding it in him to be grateful for time spent with a mage he was fairly sure wouldn't kill him as he stretched his own powers of endurance.

At least there was no one there to watch him shake not only from weariness but from revulsion over the disgusting nature of the spells Miach was no doubt dredging up for his benefit alone. He had no desire to know from whence Miach had unearthed them. If the man hadn't looked so damned casual about spewing them out, Ruith might have felt sorry for him that the like were rattling around in his wee head.

“Perhaps you would rather return to seek out a soft seat and a hot fire?”

Ruith shot Miach a look. “I think I will manage another few moments without either, thank you just the same.”

“Truly, you don't look well.”

“I appreciate your solicitude.”

Miach only lifted one shoulder slightly. “I’m altruistic.”

Ruith could have brought to mind several other things he would have preferred to call him, but the truth was Miach was a fairly decent soul, his vile collection of spells aside. He had been willing, after all, to abandon not only sleep but an inedible breakfast to march out into the gloom and toss a few spells about. Admirable traits, those.

He was also lazy, illustrated by the fact that he seemed content to simply stand there and yawn for a bit. Ruith was happy to take advantage of that to put off the torture for a bit longer, not only to catch his breath but also to look about himself to make certain they were still about their unpleasant labors unobserved. He noted nothing, but that didn’t surprise him. The inn was at least half a league behind them and surely no one else would tramp through heavy spring snow to reach the clearing Miach had noticed as he’d come on wing from his home in the west.

And even if anyone had known the glade was there, they wouldn’t have been able to take a closer look given that it was now covered by a glamour provided by none other than that illustrious king of Neroche. That spell, Ruith suspected, had been poached from Ruith’s grandfather. Ruith didn’t remember having been there for that bit of thievery, though he’d certainly accompanied Miach on several other forays into Sìle of Tòrr Dòrainn’s library under cover of darkness. To say Sìle had disliked Miach for those intrusions was to put it mildly.

“Ruith?”

Ruith pulled himself back to the present, then smiled briefly. “Sorry. I was just wondering when it was you filched that spell for my grandfather’s glamour and what you did to ingratiate yourself so thoroughly with him that he didn’t do damage to you for it when last you met.”

“Oh, he wasn’t at all happy to see me,” Miach allowed with a rueful smile, “but I had brought your sister to Seanagarra which earned me a bit of forbearance. I suppose nothing but good manners prevented him from killing me once he’d recovered from his surprise at seeing her.”

“Did Grandmother Brèagha prevent him from forcing you to sleep in the stables?”

Miach laughed a bit. “Aye, she did, thankfully. And as for all that unwarranted animosity toward me he’d entertained over the years, I daresay he thought I was corrupting you, though I’m not sure how that’s possible.”

“Perhaps he was soured by all the times he caught you in either his library or his private solar?”

“With you leading the way?” Miach returned politely. “No doubt. And whilst we’re discussing who corrupted whom, I seem to remember your having taught me several spells I hadn’t considered myself, most of them having to do with shapechanging so we could venture into other, more exclusive places mere mortals would have considered utterly unassailable.”

Ruith smiled faintly. “Did I? I don’t remember that.”

“They weren’t your father’s spells, if that eases you any,” Miach said. “I imagine they were things Rùnach had stumbled across in his endless search for the obscure and elegant. As for King Sìle’s tolerance of me now—” He shrugged. “’Tis nothing I’ve done, I assure you. I enjoy his favor simply because your sister was

good enough to insist on it.”

Ruith only avoided wincing because he had enormous reserves of self-control. He had just recently learned that his sister lived still, which had been startling enough. Standing five paces from her betrothed was substantially more wrenching. That Miach had passed so much time with her when he had still been laboring under the belief that she was dead—

He took a deep breath, but that left him coughing miserably. It was several uncomfortable moments later before he regained control enough to wheeze out a few words. “Stubborn, is she?” he managed, because he had to say something. “My sister, I mean.”

Miach smiled. “It is a characteristic that has served her well in the past, though I haven’t managed to convince her she doesn’t need it any longer. She has very definite opinions on quite a few things.”

“Then I’m surprised she stayed at Tor Neroche, instead of coming here with you on your little jaunt to lands not your own.”

“Well,” Miach said slowly, clasping his hands behind his back, “let’s just say I wasn’t entirely accurate about my reasons for the journey.”

Ruith blinked. “You lied?”

“I hedged,” Miach corrected. “I told her I needed to make a brief visit to Léige to discuss a trade agreement Adhémar had initially negotiated with King Uachdaran. Of course I had actually considered doing just that, though I was much more interested in several things going on elsewhere, things I thought merited my attention.”

“And again, not within your borders.”

Miach smiled grimly. “I find myself suddenly feeling responsible for things I could have easily ignored in years past.”

“I doubt that,” Ruith said with a snort. “You were always poking your do-gooding nose into places it shouldn’t have gone. Obviously that gaudy crown of Neroche hasn’t changed you any, though I will say that in this instance, I’m grateful for it. I need every opportunity I can find to stretch what feeble powers I have left.”

“I won’t flatter your enormous ego by choosing another word besides *feeble*,” Miach said dryly, “though I’ll concede that lazing about for the past score of years in your luxurious accommodations in Shettlestone didn’t do much past coming close to turning you to fat. I’m not sure we can remedy that in the next pair of days, but we can try.” He started to turn, then paused and looked at Ruith closely. “What did you tell your lady you were planning on doing this morning?”

“I told her the truth, but I gave her strict instructions to remain at the inn.”

“Best of luck with that.”

Ruith shook his head. “She had her reasons for not wanting to watch us this morning.”

Miach nodded. “I imagine she did. And I imagine her sight makes mine pale by comparison.”

“I suppose you two could spend the day trying to decide if that’s the case or not,” Ruith said, “though I’m

not sure Sarah would oblige you. As for what she does see, aye, it is quite a bit. I locked her out of Uachdaran of Léige's lists for that reason alone." He suppressed a shiver. "I wish I'd locked *myself* out of his lists, for I'm heartily sorry I saw a fraction of what he threw at me."

"How were his spells?"

"Very old," Ruith said, "old and more tangled than anything my father had ever done, to be sure."

"More powerful, would you say?" Miach asked, looking more interested than was polite. "I wouldn't know, of course, having only scratched the surface of his collection myself."

Ruith pursed his lips. "You can continue to bleat out that tale as often as possible in hopes that someone will eventually believe you. But as for the truth of it, I'm not sure there's a way to qualify his spells. If you're a weary traveler, are you more intimidated by a sheer mountain face jutting up hundreds of feet into the sky or a mighty river tumbling over man-sized boulders and fells?"

Miach's ears perked up. "I wouldn't presume to offer an opinion, and I don't suppose you memorized any of those very tangled spells—"

"I suppose I did," Ruith said shortly, "but I haven't the stomach to teach them to you right now. The material point is that Uachdaran seemed determined to crush me under the vilest of the lot, no doubt as retribution for our having sneaked into his solar that one evening whilst our mothers and siblings were enjoying the delicate entertainments of his minstrels."

"I never stay long enough at Léige for any invitations to the king's lists, which I can see now has worked in my favor." He frowned. "I had no idea he even *had* lists, though now I wonder why it never occurred to me. I can't imagine they were very comfortable."

"They weren't," Ruith agreed. "I was very happy to leave Sarah in his solar, enjoying the fire. Much as I'm hoping she's doing at present."

"Whilst you stand here in the mud, shaking with weariness and fear?"

Ruith snorted. "I'm not afraid of you."

The look Miach gave him made him wonder if he might have spoken too soon.

"Then I'm obviously doing something wrong," Miach said mildly. He turned and walked away. "I'll rummage about in my memory and see if I can find things equal to keeping you awake."

Ruith took a deep breath, then quite suddenly found he couldn't even do that any longer. Miach's enthusiasm for the task at hand was matched only by his boundless imagination and what Ruith soon realized had been only the start of what he could do. Where Miach had dredged up those spells...well, it was likely best not to speculate. It was all he could do to keep himself from being crushed beneath things he couldn't see coming at him, though he could certainly feel them when they arrived.

A bit like his life, actually.

Not that his life should have been shrouded in that sort of mist. The quest that lay before him was rather simple, all things considered. He was going to find all the scattered pages of his father's private book of spells, put them back together, then destroy the whole bloody lot of them. There were several people he could bring to mind without effort who might want a different outcome once the spells were gathered, but

with any luck he would have his task completed before any of them caught up with him.

He studiously ignored the fact that he wasn't entirely confident that would be the case.

He wrenched his thoughts away from unproductive paths and concentrated on fighting off what Miach was throwing at him. He recognized the occasional spell, but he was the first to admit Miach seemed determined to keep him off balance with things Ruith imagined had come from places his future brother-in-law likely wished he hadn't gone. Unfortunately, he could readily envision when and for what purpose he himself might need those very things.

He began to wonder, after a bit, why it was that he recognized not so much what Miach was sending his way, but how he was arranging the battle. Of course Miach had trained with his father, no mean swordsman himself, but somehow Miach's skills in using spells as a sword had improved to the point that Ruith wasn't sure he could credit that to happenstance.

"You haven't been studying swordplay with Soilléir, I'm sure," Ruith managed when the barrage paused long enough for him to gasp out a comment, "given that he wouldn't know which end of the sword to point away from himself if his life depended on it. Who has improved your paltry skills to such a degree?"

"You talk too much."

Ruith would have argued the point but found speech was simply behind him for quite a while. He would have considered it mean-spirited of Miach to leave him in such a state if it hadn't been so useful. As he'd noted before, anyone else he faced would have absolutely no reason to show him any mercy.

Time wore on in a particularly unpleasant way. Ruith suddenly noticed a streak of blue out of the corner of his eye, but supposed he was just imagining things. Considering how many spells Miach was flinging his way, seeing unusual things was perhaps nothing more than he should have expected.

He froze, then frowned. There was something about that flash that seemed...off. It was perhaps unreasonable to assume he could tell as much given the alarming nature of what was assaulting him, but he couldn't dismiss the impression. He countered a trio of very vile spells of Olc, then quickly held up his hand.

"Did you see that?"

"See what?" Miach asked, sounding not at all out of breath, damn him anyway.

"That blue flash."

"You're stalling."

Ruith would have protested, but he didn't have the chance. He continued to fight off an alarming number of increasingly powerful spells until he realized that at some point during the past few moments, he had crossed the line from scarcely managing things to being completely overwhelmed. As unpleasant a conclusion as it was to come to, he realized that if he didn't do something drastic very soon, he was actually going to perish.

That was a dodgy place to be given that Miach wasn't paying attention to him any longer.

He opened his mouth to point that out only to watch Miach's spells disappear as if they'd never been there. He looked up from where he'd fallen to his knees in the muck to find the king of Neroche trotting off the field.

“Where are you going?” Ruith gasped.

Miach paused, then swore just before he disappeared.

Ruith supposed that was answer enough, then he froze. Miach hadn’t run off the field to search for a drink, he’d gone because there was something more in the surrounding woods than wildlife. Something Ruith had feared would find them.

He cursed and crawled unsteadily back to his feet. The next time he left Sarah behind at an inn, he was going to either put a better spell on the door or spend more time pointing out the dangers of walking in woods that might potentially contain more than just the usual complement of man-eating creatures.

Because the sinking feeling he had in his belly told him that Sarah had just encountered just that sort of thing.

Two

Sarah of Doire stood in the middle of a fairly well-used road that cut through a heavy forest of pines, facing what looked to be certain doom, and wondered where it was that morning that she’d taken a wrong turn. The possibilities were numerous, actually, and surely merited further investigation lest she make the same mistake again in the future.

Assuming, that was, that she had a future in which to make those same sorts of mistakes.

She turned her mind back to an hour ago when she’d woken from sleep with the feeling that there was something very foul going on in the world. Looking back on it now, she supposed that had simply been the smell of a breakfast that someone—or two someones, apparently—should have pitched onto the compost heap instead of leaving on the table. Instead of ignoring the smell and simply turning over to go back to sleep as she likely should have done, she had given up on any more rest and gotten up to face the day.

She had tended a fire that had been still burning thanks to a spell left there by some enterprising mage or other, then spent a few minutes pacing quietly so as not to wake the other occupant of the large gathering chamber. She had stopped more than once to look at him, on the off chance that the king of the elves had felt something amiss and woken from sleep because of it, but apparently he’d felt safe enough in his surroundings to continue on with his very sensible rest.

She wondered now if it had been a mistake to breakfast on bread that was almost free of bits of sand and butter that was still a few days away from rancid, or the extremely vile ale that tasted more like water that had merely been favored with a passing view of a few hops instead of enjoying a more substantial relationship with them. Not only had it not eased her hunger, it had left her looking desperately for any sort of distraction.

Perhaps she had chosen poorly when she had ventured into her pack, for instead of putting her hand on a pair of knitting needles and a ball of perilously soft blue wool, she’d come up with a book. And once she’d taken the book in her hands, it had fallen open to a page she hadn’t asked for. At that point, there hadn’t been any reason not to read, had there?

*My dearest Sarah, I have given you the history of my people, but it is also the history of your people. Your mother was Sorch, your father Athair, who was my cousin. I grieve for you that you didn’t know her for she was a very lovely gel, full of laughter and joy and dreams that were easily read in her eyes.*

She had shaken her head yet again because that's what she'd been doing since she'd read those words a pair of days earlier. She was obviously going to need more time to accept that her mother was not the witchwoman Seleg as she'd been led to believe for a score and five years, but instead a dreamweaver who had also apparently taken a wrong turn at some point during her life and wound up in the sights of Queen Morag of An-uallach, whose lust for magic and power was the stuff of legends. Sarah was certain she would have been familiar with those legends if she hadn't grown to womanhood in Doire where the only tales told down at the pub were about how many attempts had been made so far that year to poach Farmer Crodh's painstakingly bred milch cows and how much rain a farmer might reasonably expect during April. The last wasn't even very interesting. The only things that grew successfully in Shettlestone were scrub oak, sagebrush, and rumors about mages living in mountain cabins.

*If Morag had known you were alive, she would have carried you back to An-uallach without hesitation, out of spite, if for no other reason. She has never realized that Seeing is not a blood magic, but a magic of the soul that cannot be given to another—nor taken from the one who sees.*

Of course, Sarah wouldn't have had any idea about that particular sort of magic or what it might mean to her if she hadn't, several weeks earlier, marched off into the gloom after her alleged brother Daniel of Doire to keep him from destroying the world. It had seemed so straightforward at the time, that marching, because all it promised to lead to was finding the fool, clunking him over the head to subdue him, then tying him up until she could deliver him to the place where ill-behaved mages were taken to be scolded into displaying good manners.

She supposed it was more Fate than simply bad luck that she'd been plunged into all manner of adventures she hadn't bargained for. She had traveled to Buidseachd to meet a particular master of wizardry named Soilléir, hobnobbed with the king of Léige, and most recently escaped from Morag of An-uallach's castle on the back of a horse who had shapechanged himself into a dragon and carried her and Ruith off to safety.

*I am sorry, my dear Sarah, that the reading of this will grieve you. Know that you were—and are still—loved by those who have been watching you unseen over the years.*

Unseen, seen, seeing—all of that had left her thinking on things that made her truly uncomfortable. It had been one thing to discover early on during the journey that Ruith hadn't been the ancient curmudgeonish wizard living like a hermit several leagues from her home, but instead Ruithneadh of Ceangail, youngest son of the most notorious black mage in the history of the Nine Kingdoms; it was another thing entirely to find out hidden details about herself. If those things discovered would have been limited simply to a new set of relations, she might have emerged from the experience unsettled but relatively unscathed. But unfortunately those revelations had included learning that not only could she see, she could *see*.

The pages of Gair of Ceangail's highly coveted book of spells, among other things.

It didn't matter where she was or what she was doing, she could see those pages. She could do something as simple as draw a map with her finger in the dust on a table and suddenly there in front of her would spring up the locations of those pages, as if they'd been little fires that burned without consuming anything but her imagination. She had verified that for herself that morning in the dust on the table where the remains of breakfast had resided.

And it was what she'd seen when those little fires had sprung up that had convinced her to leave King Sile

sleeping happily in front of the fire and take her chances with what lay outside the door. A pair of spells had been laid there, one to protect and one to trigger an alarm. The first had been created by Ruith and was the sort of thing she was accustomed to from him: beautiful on the side she was to see and terrible on the side meant to repel intruders.

The other spell had been nothing more than a thin blue line laid across the threshold. She had readily seen that it had been fashioned by Miach of Neroche. Its purpose was to warn him if any mage crossed over it into the chamber, which she approved of. But since she hadn't been a mage but instead a woman with a pressing need to deliver very unsettling tidings to her comrade-in-arms, she had carefully lifted Ruith's spell, stepped over Miach's, then thought nothing more of either.

She had slipped out of the inn, then paused and considered her direction. She supposed if she were lucky, she would eventually run into Ruith and Miach. In preparation for that—and because she knew they were using spells she wouldn't want to see—she had whispered a particular spell under her breath.

She had no magic of her own, so spells were always nothing but words for her. The only reason she had any confidence at all in the spell she'd used that morning was because it had been one of Soilléir of Cothromaiche's spells and his spells seemed, at least in her case, to come with power of their own. She had no idea how he managed that, but he managed several things she had no desire to investigate further.

And once she'd whispered that spell and had it come with a power she hadn't provided, her sight...well, there was no accurate way to describe what had happened to her. It wasn't as if she stood in a chamber where a torch had been suddenly extinguished or a candle snuffed out, leaving her in the dark. She could still see her surroundings; she could simply see less.

Less of things she shouldn't have been able to see in the first place.

She had enjoyed that diminishing of her sight for approximately twenty paces before she'd run bodily into something immobile and leapt back, an apology on her lips, assuming she had run into Ruith or perhaps the king of Neroche.

But she hadn't.

That had been an indeterminate amount of time ago. Now, she supposed if she survived what lay before her, she might look back at the moment she had bolted from the inn and wonder if she were prone to finding herself in the wrong place at the wrong time or if she, the very unmagical daughter of Sorcha and Athair of Cothromaiche, had been destined to spend her life trying to avoid being found and murdered by Queen Morag of An-uallach.

Who it seemed might manage the feat yet.

That very determined queen now stood five paces from her, not even looking at her, as if she had been a regal sort of kitchen cat too majestic to acknowledge the poor brown creature cowering next to her, its small heart beating with terror.

Sarah had never been fond of mice. They nested in her wool and chewed through her finished garments. She hadn't felt sorry for them when she'd seen them between the paws of her quite useful barn cats, though now she supposed she might have to revisit her opinion on that.

The queen glanced at her then, her eyes glittering in spite of the shadows.



“Well,” she said softly, “out for a stroll, are we?”

Sarah considered bolting but discarded the idea immediately. She might manage a few paces, but no more. She wasn’t sure screaming would serve her given that she had no idea how far away Ruith was, but perhaps it was worth a try.

She didn’t manage so much as a squeak. It was odd how a spell of what she could only assume was silencing managed to completely obliterate even the veriest hint of sound before it was made. She could still breathe, but she supposed that was only because Morag wanted her in full possession of her wits as she was about her long-delayed and unhappily denied work of killing her. She would have attempted to explain exactly how it was that she had nothing Morag could possibly want, but she couldn’t speak. Even if she’d been able to, she doubted Morag would have believed her.

She glanced without hope at the clutch of guardsmen standing behind the queen. They were, to a man, hard-eyed and stone-faced. Nay, no aid from that quarter.

She wished desperately that she had asked Ruith’s grandfather to accompany her. She wished she had stayed at the inn. If she were going to be completely honest, at the moment she wished she had never left Shettlestone. Now she would die before she could tell Ruith in great detail how she felt about him, perhaps find kin she belonged to but had never met, and use that third spell of Soilléir’s she’d found in the book he’d given her but hadn’t dared try yet—

She blinked, then realized abruptly that Morag hadn’t begun circling her for the sheer sport of it, she’d been winding spells around Sarah herself, so tightly that Sarah couldn’t move.

Which made it everlastingly too late to do anything at all.

Morag came to a stop in front of her and watched her with cold, glittering eyes.

“I should draw this out,” she said, “but I’ve waited long enough. And don’t think I give credence to that utter rubbish about your having no power of your own. *Everyone* from Cothromaiche has some sort of magic.” She smiled condescendingly. “Perhaps even you, the least of Seannair’s line.”

*But I don’t*, Sarah would have gasped out if she’d been able. Soilléir had said the ability to see was something that was woven into the soul, and Sarah had no reason not to believe him. Morag would slay her, then attempt to pick her as clean magically as another might a feast-day goose, but she would still have nothing to show for the effort.

Sarah looked up, unable to even wince at the spell that suddenly appeared over her head, a spell of death that formed itself into spikes that dripped with poison that burned her where it fell.

“You won’t die quickly,” Morag said with absolutely no emotion in her voice, “for that would defeat my purpose. You must die slowly, that I have time to catch your soul at the moment it has one foot in this poor world and the other in the world to come. It is only then—”

Sarah couldn’t hear her any longer. She couldn’t struggle, couldn’t cry out, couldn’t scream for help. All she could do was stare up at what was hovering over her, gathering itself together to fall upon her and crush her.

A wind, terrible and bitter, rushed past her so suddenly, she almost fell over. It sent the queen stumbling backward into the arms of her startled guardsmen. Sarah stared at what the wind had left behind, gold and silver runes that sparkled with painful brightness in the air in front of her. They were suddenly dispersed by a

blue flash that streaked through the predawn gloom a single moment before the entire glade exploded in light, as if a thousand flaming arrows had been shot into the air only to stop and linger a hundred feet above her head.

Suddenly, out of nothing stepped a woman of about her own height with long, dark hair that was tangled from the breeze that still swirled around her. The woman raised a sword that glowed with that unearthly blue light and, with unnerving efficiency, sliced through the spell above Sarah's head as if it had been spider webs. It fell to pieces on the ground and writhed there like snakes.

Three more gusts of wind unspun themselves into men, rumpled from their journey but looking terribly lethal nonetheless. Sarah supposed that since they had resumed their proper shapes closer to her and her rescuer than the queen, they could be considered rescuers, not foes.

One held a bow loosely in one hand and an arrow tipped with werelight in the other. The second man, who held a sword in his hand, looked enough like the archer that they had to have been brothers, save the first one was dark-haired and the other fair. The third simply stood there with his hands empty, no doubt intending to intimidate with his terrible elvish beauty alone.

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