

1.

Lisiel felt a tingle at the edge of her senses that meant a magic-user was nearby. She looked up and met the gaze of Astinus, who was already on his feet and approaching the door.

“I shall return,” Astinus announced. His metallic blue eyes warned Lisiel to be wary. The conversation in the rest of the room stopped, and Lisiel felt everyone’s attention turn her way.

“Lisiel?”

Merdock, the king of Mortilus, was staring at her for answers. Lisiel came forward from the food tray and poured more wine in his glass.

“Magi,” she said calmly, careful not to panic them. “Astinus will investigate.”

Merdock looked over at the door Astinus had just exited, then back at his family. His wife, Queen Claretta, made a move to stand, but Merdock took her hand and gently reassured her. Lisiel quickly rounded the table and poured the timid queen some wine, even though Claretta rarely drank it.

“Relax, dear,” Merdock said. He patted her arm soothingly. “Lisiel will warn us if we need to be concerned.

Claretta looked at the wine in front of her and reached out with a shaking hand to grab it. Lisiel watched as the queen looked at the wine oddly, then swallowed it quickly. Lisiel refilled the queen’s glass, then moved on to the princess.

The only child of Merdock and Claretta seemed unconcerned. Princess Arabella continued eating her dinner and only nodded when Lisiel moved to refill her wine.

“You don’t recognize the magi?” Arabella asked.

Lisiel shook her head, her thoughts also with Astinus. She listened with her senses, in case he should call out a warning. If that happened, Lisiel would immediately rush the royal family into the secret passageways within the walls of the castle.

“Is anyone ready for dessert?” she ventured. The king and queen both shook their heads no. Claretta was still staring at the door, with her wine cup clutched in her hands.

Not for the first time, Lisiel marveled at how different the queen was from her king. Claretta was pale and small, with hair that was once the color of sunshine before it began to silver. In contrast, Merdock was far from timid. His charm and strength were legendary, even in other countries. Those who didn’t know better were intimidated by his

sheer size and daunting height; Merdock towered over everyone else in his court. But he had learned long ago how to use his booming voice to tease and laugh engagingly. He had a way of putting everyone else at ease. Merdock was trying to charm his wife into smiling, which was how things had been since the two first met if the stories were true.

“I’ll have the dessert,” Arabella said. She was oblivious to her parents’ fussing. “Just a taste, though. Cook’s pies are too rich and I get sick if I have too much.”

Lisiel bowed and went to the food tray to begin preparing dessert.

Arabella was more beautiful than anyone in her family. Her hair was the lustrous gold Claretta’s hair must have been but Arabella had inherited her father’s silver eyes and high-boned cheeks.

Lisiel had lived with this family for most of her life. Merdock had once told her that she had come to them when she was about three years old. The royal family had brought her into their nursery and raised her with Arabella, who was a few months younger. She wasn’t sure when she started showing signs of being a magi but Astinus seemed to know what to do. When she was almost seven, Merdock and his personal guard began teaching her how to fight with a sword, bow and arrow, longstaff and knife. At about the same time, Claretta’s personal servant taught her how to care for a princess. Shortly after, Astinus began teaching her how to use her magi gifts. At one point or another, everyone in the household had taken part in her training, helping to mold her into the greatest protection Arabella would ever need. Lisiel officially began serving Arabella the day after she turned 12, and had sworn to do so all the rest of her days, just like Astinus had with Merdock.

Lisiel was carrying dessert to Arabella when her fingers suddenly went lax and the plate tumbled to the floor, shattering into pieces with a loud crash. Startled, the family was at her side immediately. They recognized the glazed stare on Lisiel’s face from years of seeing magi communicate with each other. They waited in tense silence.

When Lisiel finally came back to herself, she looked down at the shattered plate by her feet and embarrassed herself by swearing loudly. She saw another servant hovering by the door who had heard the plate break and come to investigate. Motioning him over to pick up the shards for her, she gently pushed the royal family away from her mess.

“Was it Astinus?” Merdock demanded. “What did he say?”

“Astinus said all is well, not to worry,” she said. “A magi has come to speak with the royal family but one of his companions needs a healer. He has an arrow wound, and Astinus asked me to go to him.”

“We will both go,” Merdock said. He added to his wife and daughter, “I will return.”

Arabella looked as if she would argue, but the king cut her off with a quelling glance.

“Stay here,” he told her. “If Lisiel is healing someone, she can’t very well be protecting you at the same time.”

Arabella couldn’t argue with that, no matter how much she hated to be left out. Lisiel bowed to her, then followed the king out of the room.

Astinus had told her he was having the injured man moved to guest quarters immediately. Lisiel led Merdock swiftly down one flight of stairs and along a long hallway until she came to the rooms where Astinus waited.

A darkly tanned warrior answered the door to her knocking. The warrior’s dark eyes assessed the king and Lisiel quickly, before moving aside to admit them into the room.

“Lisiel, over here,” Astinus called from the inner room. She followed his voice and saw him standing at the foot of the bed there. The magi who stood next to Astinus was obviously a Master. He was dressed in red silk robes that did nothing to hide his oversized belly.

Lisiel bowed to him, with respect to his status, and then moved to the person on the bed. There were others in the room. She glanced at them quickly and saw they were tan like the warrior who had opened the door for her. She heard Astinus introduce King Merdock to the magi, whose name was Demetrius.

The man who needed her healing magic was unmoving. She could sense a powerful sleep spell wound tight around him. Lisiel had to shield herself from the pull of the spell or it would take her down too. The injured man was pale, and Lisiel could smell something claying in his swat. Feeling his forehead, Lisiel felt the fever raging there. Then she used her other hand to pull aside the dressing over his injured shoulder. A pungent smell assaulted her nose, wafting up from the wound.

“Poisoned arrow,” she murmured, probing at the shoulder with magic.

“Poison,” someone spat from behind her. He was quickly shushed.

Ignoring him, Lisiel pressed her hand on the wounded shoulder, probing deeper with her senses, seeing the damage in her mind. Her body was already reacting, reaching out of its own accord to heal the wound, but she pulled back, removing her hands from the patient’s body.

“What is his name?” she asked, turning to find three warriors standing directly behind her.

The warrior who had opened the door for them said, “his name is Tinder, lady, can you heal him?”

“Yes, I can, but it will take time,” she said. She met his gaze directly. “I cannot do it with you all in the room. You are distracting me with your various injuries and pulling my focus.”

She saw how he stepped back immediately.

“Then we will leave, and wait in the outer rooms,” the warrior said decisively, motioning the others out.

“Thank you,” Lisiel told them, already turning back to their brother on the bed.

“Call out if you need anything,” King Merdock said, following Astinus from the room. He closed the doors silently behind him.

Lisiel blew out a breath and closed her eyes. She focused her healing energy and eliminated all distractions.

Healing the warrior proved to be tougher than Lisiel expected. She had mended Tinder’s shoulder easily enough, gently healing the damage and pulling his skin and sinew back together with her magic. Finding all the poison in Tinder’s blood was harder, and it was taking a lot of time and energy.

Lisiel moved her hand from the newly healed shoulder and set it over Tinder’s heart, where the poisoned blood was doing the most damage. Under her other hand, she was still grasping his forehead, slowly easing the fever there.

The night passed as she worked, and she felt the fatigue start to creep up on her near dawn. Until then she had steadily ignored it, but her body was screaming in protest.

Lisiel thankfully extracted the last of the poison from Tinder’s body, sighing in satisfaction. His fever was gone, and he slept deeply now without need of Demetrius’ spell. Lisiel wearily climbed over him onto the bed and passed out beside him, letting sleep heal her exhaustion.