

Voice of Power

Saffron – Summer

I watched my mother out of the corner of my eye, wondering if she wanted an extra pillow to soften her chair. I didn't ask, though, knowing she would only tell me to stop babying her. And no doubt she would follow that up by shooing me away with the instructions to go and be young. But after a year away at the Academy, she was the one I wanted to spend time with, not Finnian.

She looked across at me and gave a small sigh, followed by a gentle smile. "As you can see, I survived nearly a full year of your absence. You don't have to stick to my side now, you know."

"Of course you survived. How could you not with Aunt Helene taking such good care of you?"

My mother rolled her eyes at the mention of her sister. "I'm not that much of an invalid, you know! I can survive without anyone taking care of me."

I bit my lip, resisting the urge to argue as I pushed back the familiar nudgings of guilt. It was my fault she was an invalid, although not through any conscious act. Still, it had been her pregnancy with me that had sparked the illness she now suffered under. And I could only imagine what it was like to spend half your life living at the headquarters of the healing discipline while enduring the one chronic condition that mages were helpless to fix.

"Really, Saffron," she said, exasperation in her voice now. "I don't want you to spend your whole summer dancing attendance on me."

"But I like being with you."

Her face softened. "It's lovely to have you home again, darling. But I really should rest now if I'm to have enough energy for the evening meal."

I jumped up, hurrying over to kiss her cheek while I surreptitiously examined her face. Had I missed the signs of exhaustion? Or was she just using her fatigue as an excuse to convince me to leave?

It was hard to tell, although her eyes did look a little more weary than they had this morning. I rang the bell, and her loyal maid appeared quickly, as if she had been lingering outside the door. Maybe my mother really did need a nap. She waved away my apologies, however, merely bidding me to enjoy myself for the afternoon.

Outside her enormous suite, I leaned against the wall of the corridor and closed my eyes. Was she getting worse? Neither my uncle nor aunt had mentioned anything about her condition deteriorating.

With a shake, I reminded myself that she had been ill for my entire seventeen years. There was no reason to think she would be going downhill now. It was my life that had changed irrevocably by my departure to the Academy, not hers.

“Saffron!” My cousin’s affectionate greeting filled the hall, pulling me out of my introspection.

“Finnian,” I answered in dampening tones.

He grinned. “Why so suspicious, cousin dearest?”

I shook my head. “Because you look altogether too pleased with yourself. And I know you too well.”

He placed a hand on his chest as if injured. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He paused, a twinkle in his eyes before he continued. “But since I’ve found you, shall we go down to the accommodation cottages and tell the new healing recruits that my father is about to come around and conduct individual testing?”

I groaned. “We’re Academy trainees now, Finnian, not children. Isn’t it time you stopped playing pranks on the poor healing recruits?”

New recruits to the healing discipline—both mage healers and commonborn healing assistants—came to live at my Uncle Dashiell’s estate for a year for their initial training. Most of the mages who were accepted to the discipline at the annual Midsummer intake were fresh from their two years at the front lines, full of zeal for healing after the injuries and death they’d witnessed there. I admired them, but Finnian had always seen them as fodder for his amusement.

“I only do it for their own benefit,” he told me loftily, as he had many times before. “The healing discipline, more than any of the others, requires mages with humility, not pompous arrogance. They will all have to take their turn healing commonborns, after all. I’m just helping them start to view themselves with a little less self-importance.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, because you know so much about humility. And I’m sure they’ll all thank you for it. Like Reese. By the time he left here at the end of last year, he was positively singing your praises.”

Finnian gave a fond smile of remembrance. “Ah, Reese. I can only hope to find such a promising target among the new recruits. Given he was assigned to work with Beatrice straight from his year of training, I’m sure he needed every bit of extra attention I gave him. He already had far too high an opinion of his own ability.”

“Well, he is a strong mage. And your father wouldn’t have assigned him to Beatrice unless he showed equal promise as a healer.”

“Exactly my point,” said Finnian, entirely unrepressed.

I sighed and pushed off the wall to join him. “Never mind the new recruits. It’s far too hot to bother with them anyway. Let’s go down to the river and swim.”

Finnian sighed regretfully but agreed, attempting to lure me into a bet that he could be ready and in the entrance hall of his family’s mansion faster than me. But I refused to take the bait, and he wandered off muttering about my being a spoilsport.

His poor humors never lasted long, however, and he was all smiles and teasing as we spent the afternoon in the water, joined by a number of other locals and even a couple of the

new recruits who had apparently been given the afternoon off. Their presence buoyed Finnian even further since it allowed him to terrify them with all sorts of casually dropped comments about the tests and challenges they could expect to face in the coming year at his father's estate.

I refrained from spoiling his fun, even if I couldn't bring myself to join in. It was true that Uncle had issues every year with mage recruits who complained about training alongside the commonborn recruits. So it was possible my cousin actually was motivated by something beyond his own amusement.

We barely made it back in time to be ready for the evening meal, a quiet affair on this occasion, with just my aunt and uncle, Finnian, my mother, and me. I watched my mother carefully throughout the meal, but she was full of smiles and seemed at normal energy levels. Normal for her, at any rate.

Energy was the one element of human health that mages were unable to heal. Our power could not replenish energy, no matter how much we wished it could do so. And sadly that was as true for those afflicted with my mother's condition as for regular mages who exhausted themselves composing.

The mage healers hadn't even managed to work out why some people mysteriously developed excessive fatigue, a condition that could last two years, ten years, or a lifetime. It struck down rich or poor, mage or commonborn. We could only be grateful it wasn't communicable and didn't afflict a greater number of people. It didn't even seem to be passed down through generations, something which my mother constantly took as a great comfort.

As a young child I had often asked my uncle to heal my mother, and he had never lost patience as he explained to me her illness was the one thing he couldn't heal. It had made no sense to me then, raised almost as much on my uncle's estate as in my own home in town. Seeing limbs regrown and people brought back from the brink of death had seemed commonplace, and the powerful mages who wrought these marvels had appeared to me to be without limit.

I knew better now, and I no longer mentioned the topic to my uncle. It couldn't be easy to spend a lifetime working your way up to be head of the healing discipline, only to welcome a member into your household who stood as a constant reminder of what you could never achieve. But he had never once indicated by word or even look that he found his wife's sister—or me, her daughter—an unwelcome burden. My father had died when I was only an infant, and my uncle was the only father-figure I had ever known. His generosity and acceptance of me—someone barely related to him by blood—had ensured my eternal devotion to his family.

My father had been only a distant cousin of the great duke, a much weaker mage—and I suspected a less admirable character, although no one would come out and say such a thing to me directly. I had long guessed that my mother married him less out of great passion and more because she wished to stay close to her sister who had won the love of the fast-rising young healer already rumored for future leadership of the discipline. The two sisters, Ellingtons by birth, had moved to Torcos within months of each other, and when my father died, the duke and his wife welcomed my mother and me into their family without hesitation.

They might not be able to heal my mother, but they did everything else for us, ensuring a life for both of us that we couldn't have managed on our own, especially given my mother's condition.

An unexpected name on my uncle's lips drew my attention back to the meal. It was the first time I had heard him mention Elena of Kingslee, the unusual trainee in our year. Privately I had been fascinated by her arrival, unable to avoid the tug of speculation. If the limits of power were changing after all these centuries, might the key to healing my mother's illness be uncovered?

But the hope had long since faded away. Elena might be remarkable, but she showed no sign of creating such breakthroughs in healing capacity.

"Ah, yes," Finnian said, "our very own Spoken Mage. What of her?"

His father raised an eyebrow at the title but didn't question it.

"I hear you've befriended her, son."

I held my breath, my eyes flashing between them. Finnian and I had kept our distance at first, as had all the mages except the Cygnet girl, waiting to see what our families and society would decide about her. But Finnian had never been one for great patience—not where his curiosity was concerned, at least. And he had decided we had seen enough indications of Callinos favor toward Elena to permit him association with the commonborn.

I had been a great deal less sure, however. After everything my uncle and aunt had done for me, the last thing I wished to do was disappoint them or the Callinos family in any way. No recriminations had arrived, however, and I had started to wonder if Finnian's family meant to turn a blind eye to the whole situation.

"She's a great deal more entertaining than any of our other year mates," Finnian said with an easy grin. "Fiery and full of surprises."

His mother raised both eyebrows, casting a subtle glance in my direction. I gave her a tiny shake of my head, and she relaxed. I felt no qualms in reassuring my aunt—I had seen nothing to suggest Finnian had any romantic inclinations toward the commonborn girl.

"She doesn't strike you as dangerous?" the duke asked. "There are all sorts of wild stories circulating about her."

"For the first part of the year she seemed as harmless as a kitten," Finnian said. "I'll admit things got a little more lively when she blew out part of the library, but thankfully that seems a performance unlikely to be repeated now that we know not to let her write. And she's made it clear she now has as much control as a standard first year. She passed her exams at a higher level than the rest of us, from what I hear."

His mother frowned and exchanged a weighted look with her sister. "I know Lorcan and Jessamine find her fascinating, but I'll admit to feeling some concerns about you both residing in such close proximity to her. I hear she attacked some of the other trainees."

Finnian snorted. "You mean Calix and Weston attacked *her*, with Natalya and Lavinia pulling the strings, no doubt." He gave his mother a look. "You know what the twins are like. And, if anything, the Stantorns are worse."

“The prince himself vouched for her in that instance,” Uncle said, placing a reassuring hand over his wife’s where it rested beside her plate. “I would not have voted for her to remain a trainee if there had been any serious indication of danger to the others.”

Aunt Helene shook herself slightly. “No, of course you would not. I just...” She let her voice trail away, her eyes dwelling on her son.

“If I had been there, I would have given them a taste of their own medicine,” Finnian said, a derisive note to his voice.

“If you had been there, they wouldn’t have attacked her at all,” I said. “Bullies like their victims weak and isolated.” I might be of little consequence outside of my relation to my cousin, but Finnian occupied a position in our world that not even the twins could ignore.

My aunt looked at me thoughtfully. “So you agree the commonborn girl was the victim in the encounter, Saffron? You don’t think she’s a danger to mages?”

I hesitated, weighing my words. “I’ve never seen any indication that Elena intends violence toward mages in general—or toward any of us in particular. She seems to want to keep her head down and learn control.”

“As she should,” Uncle said approvingly.

Finnian gave me a reproving look for my guarded words. “If you ask me, Elena is a great deal better quality than someone like Natalya. I like her. And I, for one, will be watching with great interest to see just how far she goes in upending our world.”

His mother appeared a little alarmed at his words, but his father merely looked thoughtful. After a moment, he glanced toward me.

“And what do you think, niece? Do you like this Elena?”

I bit my lip, looking briefly at Finnian as I gathered my courage. “I do. She might be a little unguarded in her words sometimes, but I think she has a kind heart. And she isn’t proud, or self-seeking.”

There, I thought silently at Finnian. *Was that praise enough for you?*

My mother gave me an approving look. She pestered me almost as much as Finnian did to speak up more.

“Well,” my uncle said, “if you both think so, that is reference enough for me. I am content to let things be. Lorcan is determined to have his head on the matter at any rate, and I have much better uses for my time than in-fighting among the family.” He looked at his son. “Do keep me informed, though. If we are to live through such interesting times as you seem to think, then I would hate to be behind on any of the news.”

Finnian merely grinned at his father, taking his acquiescence as expected. My cousin—the golden child of the Callinos family, born to all the strength of his legendary father—took his position for granted. He knew nothing about the pressure to be dutiful and to avoid disappointing the family at all costs. He knew nothing of the pressure that came from being publicly treated as a daughter of the mighty Duke Dashiell without possessing the birthright of power that would have belonged to his true daughter.

Once again, both my uncle and aunt had shown me true consideration, consulting me as readily as they did their own son and giving my opinion serious weight. I don’t think it had ever occurred to them that by treating me with as much acceptance as if I were their own

daughter, they placed great pressure on my shoulders. But I couldn't bear to disgrace them in any way. And so, while Finnian might take it lightly, I felt great relief at my uncle's pronouncement. I liked Elena, and I liked Coralie—more than I had expected to do when I reluctantly trailed Finnian into their orbit—and it was a weight off my mind to know our friendship with the girls didn't incur my aunt and uncle's disapproval.

I might not be as open about it as my cousin, but privately I had to admit to almost as much curiosity as Finnian as to how Elena's existence was going to reshape our world. It would be an interesting next three years.