

Chapter One

“Sorry,” the boy muttered as he jostled her once again.

Preela smiled slightly and turned back to the window, watching the rolling hills of central Zelannor pass by. It was her own fault. In her eagerness to get to the tower, she had climbed into the carriage without a thought for the other occupants.

Next in had been a blonde girl with curls and sparkling blue eyes who sat opposite her. Of course, the dark boy with brown eyes and ready smile had chosen to join her, leaving the seat next to Preela for the clumsy oaf who looked as if he dined on a dozen eggs each morning.

She shifted slightly, but there was nowhere left to move to; he took up every inch of the hard seat. The girl, who had introduced herself as Rosa, giggled and batted her eyes at her companion. Even her name was pretty, Preela thought dolefully, comparing her own red hair and freckles, and finding them severely lacking.

Gidron continued his far-fetched tale of bandits, earning more giggles and a sigh from Rosa. Preela rolled her eyes. If he really had fended off a horde with merely a staff and witty comebacks, she would wear pink for the rest of her life. Not that she would challenge him. She flushed at the mere thought of drawing attention to herself.

The cart hit another rut in the road. “Sorry,” the boy mumbled. He hadn’t shared his name. The other two passengers were uninterested, and Preela was too shy to ask. The only words he uttered were his abject apologies each time he fell against her.

As the carriage began another descent, Preela’s heart lurched, and she gasped. There it was. Above a dense mass of trees and bushes, the tower rose majestically, reaching to the sky as if to grasp the secrets of the heavens themselves. She had seen nothing like it in all her thirteen cycles.

“It looks exactly like the one in Maston,” a low voice said by her ear, “only a lot bigger, of course.”

Preela twisted and found herself staring at the boy’s face, which had moved next to her to share the view. She swallowed. “Oh?” she squeaked.

Grey eyes looked at her. She could see the moment that he realised how close he was. His pupils dilated before he reared back. “Sorry,” he said. He turned away and stared doggedly out of the far window.

Preela blinked and turned her gaze back, but the carriage had moved further down the hill and her view was obscured by a bank of vegetation. She caught a glimpse of the fabled observatory before it, to, disappeared.

She leant her head against the carriage wall, her eyes glued to the trees ahead, feeling slightly giddy. She was really here. It was a dream come true. She wanted to laugh suddenly as she thought about her uncle's face when the acolyte had followed her home to collect her meagre possessions. He had not been happy to lose his house servant and future income. She had seen the way his filthy friends had eyed her up during the late-night card games, their bleary eyes mentally undressing her. Perhaps that was the reason she had braved the crowds and put herself forward to be tested. A mixture of fear, helplessness, and a tiny sliver of hope urging her to take the trials and escape her fate.

No one was more surprised than she when they called her into the mage's house in the city. Once an inn, and later the home of the first Archmage, The Falcon was one of several residences scattered throughout Bestra belonging to the assembly of magic-wielders, and one she had passed many times on errands to the market.

She had been terrified on being led to one of the testing rooms. Sat at an imposing desk was a thin mage in ornate robes. He had glared as she stuttered a greeting, pointing to the uncomfortable chair in front of him. She had tried to stay still, but the man's gaze had made her skin crawl, and she twitched and scratched, her face turning red as the silence grew.

At one point, his eyebrows shot up as she jerked in her chair at the sudden clenching of her muscles and she almost groaned in embarrassment. He rang a bell, and to her intense chagrin, she was ushered out. Hot tears burned her eyes, but she had refused to cry after being seated in another room, devoid of everything but a few hard chairs, and ignored for what seemed an age. No-one else joined her. As the light faded, she wondered if they had forgotten her. Her uncle was going to be furious if his meal wasn't ready when he woke. She would rightly deserve the thrashing he would probably administer.

The acolyte came then. Bewildered, she was told that she had passed the trials and had one rotation to gather her belongings so that they could leave promptly. She tried to tell him she had not been tested, but he merely grinned and opened the door wide.

Now, after days of travel, she was here.

The Tower of the Mages.

The carriage halted, and the door opened. The passengers were ordered out and their luggage unloaded. With a cheery wave, the driver turned the carriage around and drove away. Preela watched him go with a frown.

The trees and bushes grew thickly like a hedge, and although there were clear signs of a track leading towards them, it stopped at the edge of the dense growth.

"Well, this is great," Rosa said, crossing her arms. "What are we supposed to do now?"

The boy walked up to the hedge and examined it. "Cherry laurel and holly. I see privet further in. No way through," he said.

"Perhaps the entrance is further round," Gidron said with a shrug. "The driver must have dropped us off in the wrong place."

"That's typical," Rosa said with a toss of her blonde curls. She eyed her bags. "How am I expected to carry all these?" she grumbled.

"Perhaps you should have considered that before packing so much," the boy said, hefting his two large backpacks over his shoulder.

Preela hurriedly picked up her bag, her face flaming as Rosa wrinkled her nose. Apart from two dresses, a comb, and undergarments, she had nothing to call her own. She touched the necklace hidden under her blouse. Almost nothing. Her uncle had sold anything of value, but she had successfully kept her mother's last gift to her away from his greedy eyes.

She dropped her hand when she noticed the boy watching her.

"Gidron..." Rosa said with a smile, tilting her head to one side.

He held up his hands. "Sorry, Rosa. I'll have enough to carry as it is." He managed to tuck one bag under his arm and pick up the other two.

"You can help me," Rosa said sharply.

Preela looked at the finger pointing at her. She took one step towards the bags stacked on the ground, but stopped when the boy moved quickly in front of her.

"She's not your servant to order about," he said. "If you want all that stuff, you can carry it yourself." He looked over his shoulder and caught Preela's eye before winking at her. She couldn't help the small smile appearing. She dropped her gaze, but was pleased to notice an answering grin on the boy's face before he turned back.

"It's not like she has much to carry," Rosa said, her hands on her hips. "It wouldn't hurt her to help me."

"Then ask politely," the boy said, moving to one side.

Rosa glared at him. She closed her eyes for a moment and lifted her chin. "Please, will you help me with my bags?" she asked.

"Of course," Preela said. She bent and picked up the ones Rosa pointed to, pretty certain that they would be the heaviest.

A groaning and popping sound from the hedge made them all turn. The bushes and trees were swaying back and forth, as if some gigantic animal were forcing its way through. Preela took a step back, almost falling over Rosa's remaining luggage. The boy dropped his backpacks and stood in front of her, his legs astride and his fists clenched.

Gidron hurried back to them and stood by Rosa, who clutched his arm.

Preela peered around the boy's muscular torso and swallowed. Surely nothing dangerous lived so close to the tower?

With a last scraping of wood against wood, a gap appeared in the dense hedge and an elderly, plump woman emerged with three younger people following close behind.

"Ah, good. Welcome to the Tower of the Mages," she said with a wide smile. She consulted a piece of paper. "Which one of you is Gidron Hammerson?"

"That's me," he said, putting up his hand.

"Excellent. You will go with Anca, who will settle you into experimentation."

A tall, dark girl walked up to him. "Greetings," Gidron said with a smile. Rosa huffed loudly.

"Rosa Ferrier? You will join Mavus in fundamentals, and Penn Arborman, you will follow Hadner to Investigation." The woman folded the paper with a flourish. "Right, shall we go?"

"My Lady, aren't you forgetting something?" Hadner asked, proffering a bowl and a knife.

"Goodness me. Thank you. Come here, all of you," she said, beckoning with the knife. "This doesn't hurt." She walked to each of them, pricking their finger with a knife and dripping several drops of blood into the bowl, which already contained herbs and a dark liquid.

"There. Now you can come and go as you please. Within reason, of course. Your guides will inform you of the rules." She waved a hand. "Off you go!"

Rosa took her bags from Preela and handed them over to Mavus, who didn't appear too impressed at being expected to tote luggage. Preela watched as her three companions left without a backward glance. She swallowed. "Excuse me?" she called to the woman, who was almost at the hedge.

"Yes, dear? What is it?"

"You didn't call my name," Preela said. What if this was all a terrible mistake? Where would she go?

"Oh," the woman said with a smile tapping her temple. "I'd likely lose this if it wasn't attached. You are Preela, aren't you?"

Preela nodded.

"You'll come with me. You're to begin your training as a mage."

Chapter Two

“Hurry dear. The path is closing,” the plump woman said. Preela looked around and saw branches and boughs twisting back into place behind her. She hurried through, clutching her bag tightly, unwilling to become entangled in the vegetation.

“Be a darling and deliver this to Master Winfrey,” the woman said, passing the bowl and knife to one of the half a dozen young people sat on benches enjoying the sun. “Now, come along Preela. We don’t want to keep the Archmage waiting.”

Preela hurried after her while trying to take in the sights. The tower took up most of the clearing, its doors open wide to admit the warm spring air. Several tables and seats were scattered around the closely cropped grass where people lounged with friends or studied, making the most of the balmy day. She could hear a stream bubbling nearby.

“We were so excited to hear of your coming,” the woman was saying. “Master Jinson was almost beside himself. I’ve never seen him so animated. He says your sensitivity is incredible. I would love to have been at your testing!”

“My testing? But I don’t think...”

“Of course,” the woman continued, ignoring Preela as she lead the way into the tower, “he takes all the credit for discovering you. If only you had put yourself forward earlier, I might have been the person crowing with pleasure.” She waved a hand airily. “No matter. It is what it is. I, for one, will watch your progress with great interest.”

Preela only had time to glance around the small atrium before being led down a winding staircase. She saw several tapestries on the wall and a large ornate timekeeper measuring the rotations.

“Now, I’m taking you through the library as a short-cut, but Master Liona would have your head if you tried it yourself. He is very particular about his books, you see. It’s a wonder he can bear to let the students touch them, let alone take them away.”

She pushed open a door and led Preela through to a vast circular room. The walls were completely covered with shelves of books, and Preela gaped as she took in the wealth of knowledge. Her guide had already started down a set of wide metal stairs and as she followed, she realised there were more galleries below. She counted seven in all.

“You’ll receive your full orientation later, but suffice to say, you will begin your training on the first level with the other initiates.” She waved her hand again, encompassing the entire library.

“Eventually, you will have access to all this.” They reached the bottom, and she led Preela across to another door at the far side. They skirted free-standing cupboards, more shelves and unoccupied tables and chairs.

“It’s a beautiful day, Liona. You should go out and enjoy the sunshine.”

“I’ve far too much work to do,” a voice shouted. “Don’t badger me, Morli.” Preela craned her neck but couldn’t see who was speaking.

The woman, Morli, Preela assumed, had already opened the door and was leading her down a dark corridor. “These are offices and smaller classrooms,” Morli said. “Personally, I can’t abide being down here in the dark. I much prefer being outside. So refreshing.” She pulled open another door. “However, I do love this space.”

The first thing Preela noticed was the heat. It felt incredibly humid after the cool of the library. She looked up and saw a vast glass roof covering the entire place. Vented windows had been added to control the temperature and several had already been opened. Around her were hundreds of plants, many unknown to her, surrounding a stark white tree devoid of all life.

“The first Archmage designed this,” Morli said, walking along the path. “He missed his glass house so much he created this space. They say he could often be found with his hands in the dirt or sitting beneath the One Tree. He also had this commissioned.”

Preela gasped as a large statue came into view. “Is that...?”

“Ygris, yes,” Morli said with a grin. “Only a facsimile, you understand. She was much bigger in reality. I would have loved to have seen her,” she said with a sigh, “but she followed the Archmage when he left on his voyage. She has never come back home.”

Preela had heard the stories many times. She remembered her mother used to delight in telling her tales of how the Archmage saved Zelannor, how he set up the school to train people in magic use, how he and his wife, Destry had taught here, and how he left Zelannor in order to search for the mages of old. Those wonderful stories had fuelled her own imagination and kept her warm when shivering in her tiny attic room or enduring the regular beatings from her uncle.

“Here we are,” Morli said, as she knocked firmly on a small wooden door. “Don’t be shy now,” she chided as she opened it and pushed firmly on Preela’s shoulder, ushering her inside.

Like the conservatory, the room was well-lit by the glass roof, but instead of plants, there was a large table with several chairs surrounding it on her left, pictures and tapestries on the walls and a bookcase against the wall on the right.

The door shut quietly behind her, and she was left alone facing an imposing desk, behind which sat an elderly man, his dark hair streaked with grey. He looked up from the mound of papers and narrowed his eyes.

"Come closer, girl. I don't bite."

She took a few paces.

"Sit down," he ordered, pointing to the chair in front of her. She lowered herself down and put her bag on the floor. She clasped her hands tightly together on her lap as her mouth dried up.

"Well, well. So, you are Preela." He pulled out a sheet of paper from his vast pile. "Hmm," he said as he studied it. "Interesting." He looked back at her. "Do you have a last name?"

She shook her head and licked her lips. "No, sir."

"Who is your father?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Your mother then?"

"Her name was Tildy, sir."

"Was?"

"Yes, sir. She died when I was young."

He tapped his lip with his finger. "I see. Who is your guardian?"

"My uncle, sir."

The tone of her voice must have alerted him. "You don't care much for him, then."

She lowered her eyes. She would not lie, but she had learnt from bitter experience not to voice her true feelings aloud.

The Archmage chuckled. "Don't worry, Preela. You can speak freely here. In fact, I insist on it."

She merely nodded.

"Master Jinson speaks very highly of your potential," he said after a brief pause. "He is very much looking forward to having you in his class. We haven't trained a mage here for many cycles. Your arrival has caused quite a stir."

"I don't understand, sir."

His brow furrowed, and he tilted his head to one side. "I'm not sure I follow. What exactly don't you understand?"

She bit her lip. Would this be the moment when all her dreams crashed down? Surely, he would send her back to her uncle. She took a deep breath. "I wasn't tested, sir. No-one asked me questions, or gave me a puzzle to solve. I think... I think there's been a terrible mistake."

She swallowed as her eyes pricked with tears. To make matters worse, she jerked in her seat as her leg muscles cramped.

"Oh no. There is no mistake," the Archmage said with a broad grin. "I can see why Jinson was so excited. Tell me, do you know how magic works?"

She shook her head.

"The let me enlighten you." He sat back in his chair. "People have different sensitivities to magic. I, for instance, can see it, like a coloured haze surrounding the wielder. The differing shades tell me not only how adept the wielder is but also the focus of their magic, a useful skill. Our first Archmage, Master Reez, could feel magic, just like you can."

"Feel it?"

"Just now, you jumped. Why?"

She frowned. "My legs spasmed. It happens sometimes."

"What you felt was my magic, a tiny amount directed towards you. Think back to your meeting with Master Jinson. What happened?"

"Nothing!" she said. "I just sat there."

"But how did you feel?"

"Nervous, itchy..." she remembered the uncomfortable feelings as they sat in silence. "He was using magic. That was the test," she said, her head shooting up, her eyes wide with understanding.

The Archmage grinned. "Exactly."

Preela laughed. "I didn't know!" Her shoulders dropped, and she found herself relaxing as relief flooded through her. She could stay. "I'm really going to be trained as a mage?"

The Archmage stood and paced the room, his hands clasped behind his back. "When the school first started, Master Reez took anyone with the potential, but it soon became clear that his range of skills was actually exceptional. Most of those early candidates could do lower level magic—what we call

fundamentals — but found the more exacting disciplines beyond them. That is when we created the magical categories we know today.

“Depending on their interests, we channel our students towards the disciplines most suited to their skill level. Some become minor healers, weather-workers, and such, going back to their homes and helping those in their town or city. Others prefer to experiment and investigate, so they stay here longer, following a thread of interest in a vast tapestry of possibilities.

“To be a mage is to become proficient in every discipline. You will learn from us all during your training. Each Master has the full range of skills required but has chosen to specialise in a particular field of study. Eventually, you, too, will need to choose your path. But that is many cycles away yet.”

He stopped his pacing and looked over at her. “Ah, I see you are already eager to start.” He raised a finger. “First, orientation. You must learn your way around. The Masters abhor a tardy student. Master Morli should return any moment to show you to your room. Do you have any further questions for me?”

Preela stood and shook her head. “I’m a bit overwhelmed, to be honest. This feels like a dream.”

“A good one, I hope.”

“Oh, yes!”

There was a tap on the door. “Like I said, no-one wants to be kept waiting.”

Preela bent down and grabbed her bag. “I am so grateful for this opportunity, sir. I won’t let you down.”

She frowned. The Archmage was staring at her neck. “Where did you get that jewel?” he asked abruptly.

She covered the necklace with her hand. When she grabbed her things, it must have slid out. “It’s mine, sir. It was a gift.”

“From whom?” he asked sharply.

She swallowed. “My mother, sir. It has been passed down to the women in our family for generations.”

He looked closely at her face. “Yes, yes. The eyes.” He lifted up his hand. “This is my ring. It used to belong to the first Archmage. The stone is very rare.”

She looked down at it. The green jewel in the centre seemed to swirl and flow as if made of liquid.

“That’s the same as my necklace,” she said slowly.

“There was only one other person who is known to have access to the source of this stone,” he said.

“The Archmage’s sister. I think you are a descendant of Amily Hinn.”