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Storm Glass

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Storm Glass

MARIA V. SNYDER



1

THE HOT AIR pressed against my face as I entered the glass factory. The heat and the smell of burning coal surrounded me in a comforting embrace. I paused to breathe in the thick air. The roar of the kilns sounded as sweet as my mother's voice.

"Opal!" Aydan yelled above the noise. "Are you going to stand there all day? We have work to do." He gestured with a thin gnarled hand.

I hurried to join him. Working in the heat had turned his gray hair into a frizzy mop. Dirt streaked his hands. He grimaced in pain when he sat at his workbench, rubbing his lower back with a fist.

"You've been shoveling coal again," I admonished. He tried to look innocent, but before he could lie, I asked, "What happened to your apprentice?"

"Ran off once he figured out how hard it is to turn fire into ice." Aydan grunted.

"Well, I'm here now."

"You're late."

"Sorry, I had a…test." I sighed. Another frustrating, fruitless endeavor. Not only had I failed to light the fire, but I knocked over the candles, spilling hot wax all over my classmate Pazia's clothes and burning her skin. Her expensive silk tunic was ruined. She sneered in disdain when I offered to replace her shirt. Nothing new. Pazia's hostility spanned my entire four years at the Keep. Why would I expect my last year to be any different?

After starting my fifth year of lessons at the Magician's Keep, I had hoped to be able to do more with my magic. Pazia's abilities had grown so much since we sat next to each other during our very first session that the Master Magicians considered allowing her to take the Master-level test.

I'd learned about Sitia's history, politics, how to fight and about the uses for magic, but my ability to tap into the power source remained elusive. Doubts flared and the nagging feeling of being limited to one magical skill churned in my chest. And it didn't help my confidence when I overheard my fellow students calling me the One-Trick Wonder.

"Jealousy," Aydan had said when I told him about my nickname. "You saved Sitia."

I thought of the day—over four years ago—when I helped Liaison Yelena capture those evil souls. She had done all the work, I was merely a conduit. I tried to downplay my involvement, but Aydan remained stubborn.

"You're a hero and those children can't stand it."

Remembering his words made me smile. Calling fifteen to twenty-year-olds children was typical for Aydan, a proud curmudgeon.

He tapped my arm with a blowpipe. "Stop daydreaming and gather me a slug."

I grabbed the hollow rod and opened the oven. Intense light burst from the furnace as if a piece of the sun was trapped inside. I spun the end of the rod in the molten glass and twisted it up and out, removing taffylike ball before my eyebrows and eyelashes could be singed off again.

The cherry-red slug on the end of the iron pulsed as if alive. Aydan blew through the pipe then covered the hole. A small bubble appeared in the molten glass. Resting the pipe on the metal arms of his gaffer's bench, Aydan rolled the pipe back and forth, shaping the glass.

I helped him as he created an intricate vase with a twist at the bottom so the piece actually rested on its side yet could still hold water. In his hands, turning glass into art appeared to be an easy task. I loved the unique properties of molten glass which could be molded into such wonderful objects. We worked for hours, but the time flew.

When he finished his artwork, Aydan stood on creaky legs and said the words that were the reason I came to help him after my Keep classes. "Your turn."

He exchanged places with me and grabbed a hollow pipe. While he gathered a slug, I made sure all the metal

tools lying on the bench were in their proper places. All I needed was my annoying younger brother telling me to hurry, and my patient older sister helping me to complete the feeling of being in my family's glass factory.

Sitting at the bench was home—familiar and comfortable. Here and here alone, I was in control. The possibilities endless and no one could tell me otherwise.

All thoughts fled when Aydan placed the pipe in front of me. Glass cooled quickly and I had no time to dwell on anything but shaping the molten ball. Using metal tweezers, I pulled and plucked. When the slug transformed into a recognizable image, I blew through the end of the pipe. The piece's core glowed as if lit by an inner fire.

My one magical trick—the ability to insert a thread of magic inside the glass statue. Only magicians could see the captured light.

Aydan whistled in appreciation of the finished piece. Technically his ability to light fires with magic made him a magician, but since he didn't possess any other talent he hadn't been invited to study at the Keep. I shouldn't have been invited, either. I could make my special glass animals at my home in Booruby.

"Damn, girl." Aydan slapped me on the back. "That's a dead-on copy of Master Jewelrose's red-tailed hawk! Did you make that for her?"

"Yes. She needed another piece." I never knew what I would create when I sat down at the gaffer's bench, but my time spent helping Master Jewelrose care for her hawk must have influenced me. The core glowed bright

red and called to me with a song of longing. Each of my creations had a distinctive voice that sounded inside me. No one else could hear its call.

"See? That's another talent you have." He bustled about and placed the hawk into the annealing oven so it could cool slowly. "Magicians can now communicate over vast distances with these animals of yours."

"Only those who have the power of mental communication." Another skill I lacked, mind reading. For those who possessed the ability, they only needed to hold one of my animals and they could "talk" to each other through the magic trapped inside. I'd admit to feeling a measure of pride over their usefulness, but I would never brag about it. Not like Pazia, who flaunted everything she did.

"Pah! It's still one of the most important discoveries of recent years. Stop being so modest. Here—" he handed me a shovel "—put more coal in the kiln, I don't want the temperature to drop overnight."

End of pep talk. I scooped up the special white coal and added it to the fire under the kiln. Since Aydan sold his glass pieces as art, he only needed one—a small shop compared to my family's eight kilns.

When I finished, my garments clung to my sweaty skin and strands of my brown hair stuck to my face. Coal dust scratched my throat.

"Can you help me mix?" Aydan asked before I could leave.

"Only if you promise to hire a new apprentice tomorrow."

He grumbled and grouched, but agreed. We mixed sands from different parts of Sitia. A secret recipe developed generations ago. It would be combined with soda ash and lime before it could be melted into glass.

As I tried to trick Aydan into telling me where the pink-colored sand came from, a messenger from the Keep arrived. A first-year student, he wrinkled his nose at the heat.

"Opal Cowan?" he asked.

I nodded and he huffed. "Finally! I've been searching the Citadel for you. You're wanted back at the Keep."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Who wants me?"

He glowed with glee as if he were my younger brother delivering news of my impending punishment from our parents.

"The Master Magicians."

I had to be in big trouble. No other reason for the Masters to send for me. As I rushed after the messenger—an ambitious fellow to be running errands for the Masters in his first year, and who'd already decided I wasn't worth talking to—I thought of the mishap this morning with Pazia. She had wanted to get me expelled from my first day. Perhaps she finally succeeded.

We hurried through the Citadel's streets. Even after four years, the city's construction still amazed me. All the

buildings had been built with white marble slabs streaked with green veins. If I was alone, I would have trailed my hands over the walls as I walked, daydreaming of creating a city made of glass.

Instead, I ran past the buildings as the brilliant color dulled with the darkening sky. The Keep's guards waved us through—another bad sign. We vaulted up the stairs two at a time to reach the administration building. Nestled in the northeast corner of the Citadel, the Keep's campus with its four imposing towers marked the boundaries. Inside, the buildings had been constructed from a variety of colored marble and hardwoods.

The administration's peach-and-yellow blocks used to soothe me, but not today. The messenger abandoned me at the entrance to the Masters' meeting room. Hot from my sprint, I wanted to remove my cloak, but it hid my sweat-stained shirt and work pants. I rubbed my face, trying to get the dirt off and pulled my long hair into a neat bun.

Before I knocked, another possible reason for my summons dawned. I had lingered too long at the glass factory and missed my evening riding lesson. In the last year of instruction at the Keep, the apprentice class learned about horse care and riding to prepare us for when we graduated to magician status. As magicians we would be required to travel around the lands of the eleven clans of Sitia to render aid where needed.

Perhaps the Stable Master had reported my absence

to the Masters. The image of facing the three magicians and the Stable Master together caused a chill to shake my bones. I turned away from the door, seeking escape. It opened.

"Do not hover about, child. You're not in trouble," First Magician Bain Bloodgood said. He gestured for me to follow him into the room.

With curly gray hair sticking out at odd intervals and a long blue robe, the old man's appearance didn't match his status as the most powerful magician in Sitia. In fact, Third Magician Irys Jewelrose's stern demeanor hinted at more power than Master Bloodgood's wrinkled face. And if someone passed Second Magician Zitora Cowan in the street, that person would not even think the young woman possessed enough talent to endure the Master-level test.

Sitting around an oval table, the three Masters stared at me. I quashed the desire to hide. After all, Master Bloodgood had said I wasn't in trouble.

"Sit down, child," First Magician said.

I perched on the edge of my seat. Zitora smiled at me and I relaxed a bit. We were both members of the Cowan clan, and she always made time from her busy schedule to talk to me. And, at twenty-five years old, she was only six years older than me.

I glanced around the room. Maps of Sitia and Ixia decorated the walls, and an oversize geographical map with its edges dropping off the sides covered the mahogany table.

"We have a mission for you," Zitora said. She had twisted her honey-brown hair into a complex braid. The end of the braid reached her hips, but she fidgeted with it, twirling it around and through her fingers.

A mission for the Masters! I leaned forward.

"The Stormdancers' glass orbs have been shattering," Master Jewelrose said.

"Oh." I relaxed in my chair. Not a magical mission.

"Do you know how important those orbs are, child?" Master Bloodgood asked.

I remembered my lessons about the Stormdance Clan. Their magicians—called Stormdancers—had the unique ability to siphon a storm's energy into an orb. The benefits were twofold: tame the storm's killing winds and rain, and provide an energy source for the clan's other industries. "Very important."

"And this is a critical time of the year. The cooling season is when the storms from the Jade Sea are most frequent and strong," Zitora said.

"But doesn't the clan have master glassmakers? Surely they can fix the problem?"

"The old glassmaker died, child. Those left behind were trained to make the orbs, but the glass is flawed. You need to help them find and correct the problem."

Why me? I was still learning. "You need to send a master glassmaker. My father—"

"Is in Booruby with all the other experts, but..." Master Jewelrose paused. "The problem might not be with the glass. Perhaps the old glassmaker used magic

when he crafted the orbs. Perhaps magic similar to yours."

My heart melted as if thrown into a kiln. Events had become too hot too quick and the results could have cracks. I had worked with glass since I could remember, yet there was still so much to learn. "When…when do we leave?"

"Today," Zitora said.

My alarm must have been obvious.

"Time is of the essence, child." Master Bloodgood's tone saddened. "When an orb shatters, it kills a Stormdancer."

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