

Chapter One

Once there was a land far beyond any world we

know. It was big and beautiful, a country full of wide-eyed citizens who loved every aspect of their simple lives. Ruling above them, was their beloved king and queen. They were adored by their people and ruled in gracious and kind ways. Really, they had everything they wanted, but one thing. The queen had been told at a young age that she would never bear children.

This fact seeped into her heart and burned so undesirable that she was partly blinded by her longing. Years and years they tried, until one day, they had their miracle. They named her Vesa. She had dark black hair, and bright eyes that were so blue they seemed hallowed out, telling a tale of truth. And this miracle daughter had her own gift, so magical it was unreal.

Magic had been dead in their world for ages. Once it had been a land flush with wonders, color, and light. But that had died. No one really knew why, the same reason no one understood why, at the age of not even a year, the young princess began to show signs of processing a great gift for magic.

The king and queen were overjoyed by the blessing their daughter brought to them, but as she grew, so did her magic, and they became blinded by greed, corrupted by the power that their little girl gave them. It was to such an extent, that they both forgot their previous longing for a child and began to treat their girl as more of an asset rather than a daughter.

Every day, she spent more of her time doing their kingdom's busy work. She didn't even attend school, and such simple things, like friends, were something she never knew. She would work to heal all that were sick, sitting on a throne as they lined up for her, she would construct architecture, fix natural disasters, and run all of the power through every household, so there was never a need to light a fire to see, or keep warm.

By the age of twelve, she had completely forgotten even the idea of what childhood was like. If she complained, she was assured that anyone would be over the moon to have the magical gift she did. However, that never stopped how empty her heart felt from being forced to work all day. When the war started, the pressure on Vesa only got worse.

There was an uprising prompted by Darius, the ruler of the neighboring kingdom, which turned into a few small battles, and then a raging war.

For Vesa, there were too many spells to run, and as more and more of their kingdom was conquered by King Darius, more and more of the princesses' will to go on and keep working was drained. One day when her parents forced her to go to the front line with them, Vesa snapped. It was when they forced a child to fight an army something in her spirit snapped.

As legend has it, and as the townspeople whispered to themselves, Queen Vesa had murdered her parents out of resistance and defiance of being forced to join the war. All that anger built up flared outwards in her magic, killing the only parents she ever knew. It was said that when her mother lay dead, the young princess picked up the blood-soaked crown, and placed it upon her own head, starting her reign as not just queen, but a hated, and evil one. With power so strong and so dangerous, every person below Vesa feared her. After all, she was the only one with such great magic... so they thought.

Although unknown to the queen, there was another. A girl named Iris had been born about a year later than Vesa, in a village under the rule of King Darius. No one but the people in her village knew of her power, they had sheltered her and her ability to do magic from the outside, for fear of how the world might hurt her.

She had been raised close to nature and with a love of plants. Though she ran magic through her whole town, it was not to the same burden placed on Queen Vesa whose whole life became about doing magic to uphold her whole kingdom. Although, even for Iris the burden of her ability to do magic had put some damper on her life. Proving just a bit, that a gift could also be a curse.

On the day when our tale begins, Iris is busy out in the gardens, working her way towards the meadow. It was a festival day since the king's army was moving through the land, and there was much to be done for a girl like her.

Her hands cupped around the bed of a tomato plant, and she whispered to it very slowly. This little glow enveloped her sun-kissed hands and worked its way down into the plant's roots.

Iris was a pretty girl, her hair fell over her shoulders in two little braids, it was dark and very curly, and her big brown eyes hyper-focused on exactly what she stared at, they seemed to know just what she wanted. It was apparent, both in looks, and situations, that she couldn't have been more opposite to Vesa. They were nothing alike.

The garden was very quiet aside from herself there, and she seemed wishful, as her attention peaked, and her focus drew itself to what she did in the moment. Her hands pressed down a little bit harder, and her attention shifted, as the plant started to rise out from the ground.

The red tomatoes grew and broke from their once green appearance, to perfectly ripe and ready to pick, as she pulled her hands back. A woman, aged likely around sixty or so, stood behind her, and she smiled as she saw the plant stabilize.

"Thank you so much dear," She said, "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"It's not a problem Ms. Wispen," Iris said, as she wiped the remaining dirt from her hands onto her skirt.

"Oh, you are such a dear. Really, these tomatoes will help with everything. I must have exactly 102 for the king's army when they walk by, you know. Or I think he'll think of me as some sort of... peasant, and any more I would seem a snob," Ms. Wispen said this with the smallest smile, as she took the place Iris had crouched, and picked the red fruit, tucking it into the pocket of her apron. "Thank you again, love."

"Once more, it's what I'm here for," Iris promised, she did a little spin, as she moved around the planting bed, where the farmer's other crops circled around.

Ms. Wispen waved, "Where to next?"

Iris only smiled a little, "The orchard Mr. Dwell just planted south of the meadow. He wants the whole thing grown since the path divides between his peach and apple trees. It will be impressive to the king he told me, to grow peaches in our climate," She waved her hand around, as her fingers sparkled a bit.

Ms. Wispen only could grin back, her way of saying good luck and goodbye. She was a gossip, and like everyone in the town, she knew all the rumors of how desperate Mr. Dwell was to grow something unusual to fascinate the king. His goal was to be promoted to a king's farmer they all said. But unfortunately for him without Iris, he was lost.

That was why, on that day, she went to attend his crop. To help him in his ever not successful goal. The fields his orchard lay on were just a seven-minute walk from Ms. Wispen's farm, and it was easy for her as she stumbled between the crops, and took a shortcut down through the crown field.

If one didn't have such a gift that Iris possessed, then it would have been nearly impossible to find her way through such a place. But Iris could feel the draw of the trees with her magic alone, a feeling that was something too complex for her to even begin to put into words.

When she arrived at the orchard, or what was meant to be an orchard, she found Mr. Dwell sitting on the foot of his well, that he intended to grow all the trees around. His hands were pressed to his cheeks, and his eyes turned right down to his shoes, which he tapped together, like magic might spark all the trees up, just with the touch of the fronts.

"Good morning Mr. Dwell," Said Iris, as she approached him.

He noticed her right away, and his hands flew flat to the sides of the stone lining he sat on, as his back went rigid with attention. "Great!" He sputtered, "They are going to come through here any minute, what took you so long?"

Iris snaked up a breath between her teeth, giving him an awkward smile. "I had to make a quick stop at Ms. Wispen's house. She needed exactly 102 tomatoes for the festival market." Mr. Dwell's brows furrowed, he rather didn't like to be put last, and this was made incredibly apparent by the doubtful look that absorbed the whole of his attentive smile. "You didn't run out of magic did you? I need these trees..."

"I can't run out Mr. Dwell, the gift always gives," She lifted her hand, and a bit of light sparkled off her fingers. Just the sight of it made his eyes grow huge, and his pupils dilated into huge black holes of wonder that tried to consume every sparkle off her fingers.

The light off of her hand was white and wispy. The queen, Vesa's, was dark, and rigid. Very different from this girl, who now with a close of her hand, ended the brief entertainment that she had allowed Mr. Dwell to absorb.

"Splendid," He said, as he got up very quickly from his seat, practically flew over to her, and grabbed both of her hands, as if to shake them violently. "Just how splendid you are!" He said, again and again, as though the sound of his own voice pleased his ears. "I want all of these trees grown!"

"Yes, I know. It might take a minute though," She said, her smile tense as she pulled her hands back. They fluttered a bit with light, and she shook them out, as she breathed in a deep breath, which was then expelled as an even more vigorous sigh.

In one second, the glow from her rather lively eyes had faded, as she bent to the ground, and let her hands touch the earth. Her fingers cut into the grass, as her nails pushed down, to puncture the dark dirt.

As they did so a little glow flourished to the tips, and it sparkled about the outside. In the faint distance, almost as a melody to assist her with her task, the sound of a trumpet that escorted the army played, and the faint backlash of drums started to become hearable to them.

It grew to a point where it was louder still, but Iris did not allow this to distract her attention from the earth below her hands. She let them seep closer to the ground, as they pressed down harder to the dispelled earth.

The light came like a flood, as it so quickly was released faster than just a glow. It sped into the ground as quick as water, loose and fluid. Her lower jaw trembled a little, and to avoid Mr. Dwell's notice of this, she tipped her head down. Closer to the ground.

"Is it working?" Mr. Dwell asked, but Iris did not reply to him. Instead, she seemed to gesture with a small tip of her head for him to look. He had yet to take his attention off of her. All of the village people, when they saw her glow, were mesmerized.

He broke out of that trance however to see the trees, they grew so quickly it was like years passed in seconds. First, they were small, then they grew larger, and their branches began to spread out, as they turned into limbs, and spread above to the sky. Every twig, every leaf, opened to reveal itself, and in all three minutes, they were standing in a completed orchard. Ripe fruit hanging, ready to be picked.

Iris let her fingers sneak out from the dirt which they had become encapsulated in, and she addressed her gaze at Mr. Dwell. She wiped her hands off on her skirt and stood with a bit of a smile.

"Immaculate," He whispered, the impression dug out in the way his brows bent together. "You are by far the most impressive... oh, I just can't believe it. The king will think of me as the worker of miracles."

"Yes," Iris said, with a bit of a smile. "Perhaps because I worked for you," And she nodded a little bit. Before she looked at him a bit expectantly. See, such magic as that, it was exhausting. Iris did a lot, and that day she had already done more than was usual for her. She wanted some reward for the heaviness it made her feel.

But as she looked at Mr. Dwell, she realized, like with everyone she did a favor for, that there would be no pay. "What are you looking at?" He said, his brows bending a bit. "Run off, will you? I'm sure your magic is required elsewhere, the royal set will be here any minute now!" He waved his hand at her, and his tone got so aggressive that Iris was a bit startled.

"Yes... sorry," She stammered, and she turned very quickly on her heel. She let her lips roll together with a bit of air and tried to shake some of the dirt out from under her nails, as she retraced her steps down the pathway once more.

As much as it hurt a little when she weaved below the trees and found herself in the tall grass of the corn fields, she had an appreciation for life. She traced her hand along the crop as she went, and allowed a bit of magic to fringe itself to the touch below her fingers.

With a smile pelted on her lips, she found peace in a tranquil moment that absorbed her. However, such tranquility was rare for a girl like her. The corn ahead of her bunched a little, and a loud rustle disrupted her still and silence altogether.

The corn heads bobbed into one another, as a girl, maybe ten or so, pushed her way through them. "Miss Iris!" She screamed, only to stop, realizing the person with the very name she called was before her.

Surprised of course. Iris's expression had dropped, and the joy she had just then found, seemed eaten away. "Yes?" She said, her head falling to the side just a touch.

"Uh, umm, oh, Uh... The people, Mrs. Brandsey, those people, they need you. They said right away, as fast as you can. I was the best runner so they sent me!" The girl, stammering it all, ended with a huge smile, and she slapped herself on the chest.

Iris bit her top lip, as her eyebrows jumped all the way up her forehead, "Right," She said, laughing uncomfortably. "I will go... Where are they?"

The girl's eyes got really big as she thought, "The medic center. The whole army going through stopped there, some guy got really hurt or something, sick maybe? Anyways, you gotta come help!" The girl jumped forward with excitement and grabbed Iris's hand.

Iris yelped, exactly once, as she was pulled forward, quite aggressively, and forced to run alongside the girl, as they headed straight on through the corn. The girl pulled and pulled and pulled her as they went.

They traveled through the entirety of the field, past the farm, and down onto the street, closer to the houses across from it. As they ran, they kicked up the dust from the roads, causing it to cloud in the air behind them, swirling about in the sky.

When they had gone past Delilah's house, they started to pass buildings instead of homes. They weren't anything impressive, small, made mostly of bricks that had been laid somewhere around forty years or so ago.

These cluttered closer together, however, as they came into the more central part of the village, that tried to appear modernized like a king's city would have. Only, it failed at it miserably.

Here, tents and colorful display tables had popped up along the streets. It was a market in full bloom, and it got very crowded, so they had to push and shove their way past people. In their village, named Fern, from the way the forests looked that led to it, there was not a very large population.

But, seeing as the fact that the king's army was filtering through, and it being the largest of all the local villages in sector 3 of the king's land, it had crowded up with all the people who had flooded in from these places.

Iris looked every which way, at faces she had known since she was three, and faces she had never seen in her entire life, but she didn't have much more time to stare, as they pushed a final leg through, broke out from a chunk of the crowd, and crowded through a back door into a very dismal brick building, that looked as though it had been whitewashed seven or so times. Even though the paint was still flaking.

It was suffocating as soon as they stepped in. The girl dropped Iris's hand, and moved off to the side, not that it did much good. The place was packed with King Darius's guards, making it almost impossible to move.

Iris stood on her toes a bit, as she tried to see over the heads. "Excuse me," She said, but the guards seemed to be unable to hear her. She cleared her throat, "Uh, excuse me," She said again, but it did no good.

The little girl noticed this failed attempt, and she made a rather ghastly sound, as she put her hands up to her mouth. "The person to save the dying man is here!" She yelled, and promptly, everyone stopped talking, and turned around.

Iris gave a little wave, as a path was made between the men for her. They each gave her more of an odd look than the last, as though none believed she could heal anything. To this, she just waved more. It didn't do her any favors.

The sick guard was on a bed at the front of the first medical center room. His head was tilted back, and his eyelids pressed about as tightly together as seemed possible, his face the depiction of sheer agony. His hands clawed at the sheets, and he made something that sounded a bit like a muffled scream.

"What's wrong with him?" Iris whispered when she made it to the foot of the bed. There were two women beside him. Mrs. Brandsey was one of them, and an older woman, named Cassie, was the other. She went by nothing but her first name. They were considered the elders and leaders of the town. Both bore very serious looks.

"He has an infection from a battle wound that was left untreated," Mrs. Brandsey said, in that soft voice of hers that could have read anyone to sleep in seconds. Her fingers trailed down the blanket, and she bunched it and pulled a little up so Iris could see.

The man had a gash that had partly healed, right on his now-exposed stomach. His arms wrapped around his lower abdomen, and he groaned just a little. There was sweat on the top of his forehead, and still, his eyelids nailed into one another.

"Making it stop," He whispered, mumbling out another groan. "Please..."

Iris balled both of her hands, trying to feel the magic pitted inside of them. She kneaded, and everyone inside the room let out a little gasp, as a bit of light fluttered at her fingertips.

"She's got what the queen has!" One of them in the back said to another.

"Do you think it's as strong?"

"How long has this been a thing?" Yet another exclaimed, but before any more excited whispers could propel themselves out into the tight room, Mrs. Bradsey cleared her throat.

"Be quiet so she can focus please," said she, as she tried to scold the soldiers with just her eyes alone. It was enough, since all of them went silent, and watched.

Iris's hands trembled just a bit, it was from the pressure of the people around her. For such a girl like her had never once before desired, or performed for an audience, nonetheless one of such importance to the land. She was Fern's greatest honor, and here, they wanted to show that off.

Her fingertips touched the man's wound, the light centered down, as it began to creep, very carefully through the cracks of the unhealed gash. It was absorbed by his skin, and just for a second as it passed under, the layer turned a bit lighter, until the magic had faded inwards.

She did this, with her hands pressed there, for a little while. Everyone tried to get a look at what exactly she was doing, the guards in the back stood on their tiptoes, the little girl pushed through the crowd, and even the elders leaned over a little, transfixed.

Iris tried to ignore the pressure of the looks. She let the magic work for itself, it draped out from her hands and poured, flowed, and enveloped down. She knew it was almost done when the skin of the wound at the top began to heal.

There was also the fact that the man was now very silent, his eyes had closed, not because he was dead, but because he was relaxed and no longer in pain. As Iris removed her fingers, he let a long sigh flutter from his somewhat opened lips.

A pause followed that, from every single person who had seen it, seconds later, they erupted in applause. Again this was something Iris had never experienced, and she stood up and faced the crowd that cheered for her.

"Bravo! Excellent use!" one cheered more towards the front.

"You'll make the king proud," She thought she heard another say, more towards the back of the large group. Sweaty men, who made the air stale, and hard to breathe in.

"You... he's perfectly alright," Iris told them, her eyes fluttered over to the man, then back to the large group of soldiers. "You can leave right away if you'd like," Then she looked to the elders, and with a bit of a smile, started to find her way out past the men.

They tried to stop her, for handshakes, congrats, even a few tried to shove gold into her hand, but once when she had felt some deserved pay for her work, she no longer wanted it. The group had overwhelmed her, and easily discomfited her insides.

The village people, those same elders, Mrs. Bradsey, and Cassie alike, had never wanted to expose her to the king. Now, they had done just that. When Iris got out onto the streets, she found their packed nature, like the room, uncomfortable.

The sheer amount of faces too, from people that she did not know, and who did not know her, also made her stomach turn when she had grown up in a place rarely accustomed to strangers.

"Iris!" A voice called out behind her, and Iris came to a halt amid the crowds, just a bit down from the hospital, more in the spree of the market itself.

There were tents and stands in which people sold all sorts of things, some she had and some she most definitely had not heard of. Her attention however was sucked away from these things. Cassie had called her and came stroming along, as fast as a little old lady of her size could.

She was already winded and sweaty at the top of her head, but she wiped it away with a brisk arm and stopped right at Iris's front. "Dearest," She said, "I am so sorry," Her hands took both of Iris's and she clasped them to her heart. "I didn't want them to know, but he was so sick..."

"I know," Iris said, "Don't worry, the king will likely just ask me for favors now and again, it's not a challenge." The lie smothered her, but she produced it anyway, along with a shy smile.

This seemed to transfer over to Cassie, who smiled as well, as she held her hands just a little bit tighter. "I'm proud of you. You matured into such a lovely woman, you take on all this responsibility, and you do it without trouble. Do you know the legend of the Queen of Ree?" She asked, her voice tentative and more on the quiet side, as though she wished to keep such passing a secret.

"I've heard of it," Iris said, a little nervous in the voice, for really she didn't want to hear it again.

"She was like you, but she was spoiled and couldn't handle such tasks, so she killed everyone who made her do them. You are so wise in the way you reserve your magic, and do everything you're told. That's what makes a good person when they use their gifts for everyone," She patted both of Iris's hands, unknowingly making her uncomfortable.

For Iris knew a good deal of what it must have felt like for Vesa, and she could understand that, since the pressure at times, was unbearable. Yet to hide this, she kept a pretty smile and nodded to strengthen the lie that she was really a good person.

"I like helping you all, now I must get home to help my parents too."

"Oh what a good girl you are," Cassie said, she touched a hand to Iris's cheek and beamed at her. Iris promptly smiled back, but separated herself from the leader a bit hesitantly, as she began to push her way through the crowd.

It was a long walk back to her house, and she took the even longer way just so she could think. This went through the market, where she ignored the stands and everything offered, down past the houses, and right to one of the farms. It was smaller of course, but the crop load was never shy, and the house itself, apart from the growth on the land, was very neat and sweet.

With yellow walls, big windows, and white outlines, to the way a little path led from the dusty road down to it, the whole thing was incredibly inviting. It was the place Iris had always been able to refer to as her home.

She followed the path and cautiously found her way to the front door, which was always left unlocked. "Mother!" She called, as she stepped in, instantly suffocated, not by the sweat of men, or the crowds in the market, but by the smell of cookies, sweet and instant against her breath.

"Yes, dear?" A callback, coming from the kitchen just down through an archway out of the living room, where her mother must have been baking.

"I just thought I'd tell you I'm home, I'm going up to my room, if that's alright?"

"Do you not want a cookie?"

"Maybe later," Iris said, as she followed the stairs up, and disappeared to the second story, where her little bedroom, with not more than a bed, a dresser, and a desk was, with flowers she had picked throughout the years for her decoration.

She stayed in that room for the rest of the day, perhaps to avoid having to work any more spells that felt insignificant to what she knew she could do. Time passed as though it was a figment of her imagination, she fell asleep when the night drew over them, and she did not awake, until a loud, and rather prudish knock appeared at her door.

It couldn't have still been night, but neither was it day. Instead, it was a strange in-between when this happened, and Iris tried to avoid all of it. She rolled herself tight in her blanket, but that did not cease the sound.

"Iris!" Her father's low and aggressive voice called out from the other side. "You've got visitors!"

"Tell them I'm not in," Iris replied, half asleep, and wounding herself up tighter.

"Iris, they're rather important, please come out!" Was his shout, and since it was so credible and loud, she almost felt the need but still refused until the door itself actually opened.

"Iris dear," It was her mother speaking now. "You have to get up. It's two of the King's Knights, and they are here for you."

This made Iris bolt up instantly. "I'll be there in five minutes," She said, her hair sticking to her face a bit, her eyes widened, and flooded with just a bit of fear.

"Right," Her mother said, and she issued Iris's father to go with her, as they left the girl alone. It only took four minutes actually, for Iris to get downstairs, where she found her parents chatting away with two royal guards.

They were rather enthusiastic, as they pointed these figures out to their daughter, who, in turn, was not as excitable to the notion of knights in her very home. "Hello," She said.

"Ah!" One of them exclaimed, and this was a sign for everyone's attention to turn to her. "You're the famous one all of the guards keep talking about! I'm Sir Drake, and this," He pointed to the other knight.

"Is Sir Greg," The second knight told her.

"We're here to take you to see the king," He said.

"The king?" Iris responded, and she said the word most unfavorably, as she touched two fingers to her lips, as though to absorb the word afterward. "Oh... I can't see him..."

"Iris you have to," Her mother said, "You'll be brought back right after, they promise."

"Yes," Sir Drake said, as a smile poured out over his lips. Iris didn't trust it, not the way it looked, not the way he sounded, nothing. "He just wants to personally thank the girl who saved his best knight, now, please, come along, will you?"

"No!" Iris exclaimed she looked at her parents like they might have said something to help her, but their faces were stone cold.

"Iris," Her father said, "It's just for a day, please go."

Her eyes fixed on him for a minute, like she considered it, and didn't at all like it. Her teeth gripped around her lower lip, and she thought for a minute. "Come on," Greg told her, "You have no choice," He whispered this last part.

As her eyes looked to her parents, and to them, however, she realized so quickly that he was right. A frown consumed the entirety of her face, and she took one uncomfortable step forward.

"Good," Sir Drake said, "It will just be for a day," But she didn't trust this promise, as she started to walk with him.

"Do I need to pack my things?" She requested to know, but he informed her the king would give her everything she needed, as he escorted her the rest of the way out of the house, and she had no choice but to follow.

As she looked at her parents waving, and smiled, she started to wish she had taken that cookie earlier, for now, she had no idea if she would ever get one again.

