



Scent of Magic (Healer)

By Maria V. Snyder

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Though she should be in hiding, Avry will do whatever she can to support Tohon's opponents. Including infiltrating a holy army, evading magic sniffers, teaching forest skills to soldiers and figuring out how to stop Tohon's most horrible creations yet: an army of the walking dead—human and animal alike and nearly impossible to defeat.

War is coming and Avry is alone. Unless she figures out how to do the impossible...again.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Filled with Snyder's trademark sarcastic humor, fast-paced action and creepy villainy, Touch of Power is a spellbinding romantic adventure that will leave readers salivating for the next book in the series."-USA TODAY

"The descriptions are vivid and draw you into the rugged journey across the mountains. You'll want to follow their voyage into the next book."-RT Book Reviews on Touch of Power

"This is one of those rare books that will keep readers dreaming long after they've read it."-Publishers Weekly, starred review, on Poison Study

"Snyder delivers another excellent adventure."-Publishers Weekly on Fire Study

"A compelling new fantasy series."-SFX magazine on Sea Glass

About the Author

Maria V. Snyder is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Study series, the Glass series, the Healer series, *Inside Out*, and *Outside In*. Born and raised in Philadelphia, she earned a Bachelors of Science degree in Meteorology from Penn State and a Master of Arts degree in fiction writing from Seton Hill University. Unable to part ways with Seton Hill, Maria is currently a teacher and mentor for the MFA program. Find her on the Web at MariaVSnyder.com.

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"I'm dead," I said to Kerrick.

He kept his flat expression, and I knew I'd get more cooperation from the cave's stone walls. Too bad for him that I didn't need his approval. But it would be nice if we worked out an agreement at least.

"No one knows I survived. It's the perfect opportunity for me to go undercover, and—"

"No. It's not safe," he said.

"Why not? No one will be looking for me. I could slip in—"

"What about Danny and Zila? They're going to need you to teach them how to be healers." Kerrick added another branch to our small fire.

We had stopped to rest in a narrow cave. Kerrick and I'd been traveling at night and sleeping during the day to keep a low profile since we still remained in Tohon Sogra's realm. We were close to what had been the Realm of Vyg's western border. After the plague had killed two-thirds of our population nearly six years ago, many of the Fifteen Realms resembled broken toys, with tiny pieces of their populations scattered far and

wide.

Unfortunately Tohon had decided to sweep up those pieces to form one realm, or rather one kingdom. A good idea until you realized Tohon, the powerful life magician, was also a deluded megalomaniac whose army included a battalion of dead soldiers. Yes, dead. Tohon had discovered how to reanimate the dead.

"Danny and Zila don't need me yet. They're too young," I said. "Danny probably won't develop healing powers until he's closer to fifteen, which won't be for another year or two. Zila has six or seven more years."

"Still, it makes the most sense to rendezvous with Ryne in Ivdel as planned. We'll need to gather his men and then join forces with Estrid so we can stop Tohon's army from advancing into Pomyt."

"For you," I agreed. "Not me." Before he could argue, I added, "Besides, I gave my word to Estrid—"

"Which was voided when you *died*, Avry." He sat next to me and pulled me in close, wrapping an arm around my shoulder.

I leaned against him, breathing in his scent of spring sunshine and clean earth. Every time we talked about my death, he'd sought my touch as if he still couldn't believe I'd survived. Considering the plague had a hundred-percent fatality rate and it had indeed killed me a week ago, his actions were understandable.

However, a giant Peace Lily had brought me back to life. The ramifications of that action were...huge. Which was why I needed to figure out exactly what happened and what it meant for the rest of the Fifteen Realms. Or what was left of them.

I dropped the topic. For now. Kerrick and I had just admitted our feelings for each other. We had seven more days until we reached Peti, and I didn't want to spend that time arguing with him. So much better to do...other, more intimate activities while we rested.

We approached the outer edge of Peti near dawn. Stopping in a thick copse of trees, Kerrick reached out with his forest magic to search for ambushers, marauders or mercs. His magic was a gift from the forest, and through that connection, he sensed other people. Or rather, he felt the irritations and annoyances that the forest considered intruders to its home.

When I held Kerrick's hand, I also connected and experienced the unique bond he shared with the forest. I wondered if my eye color changed from sea-green to a darker green when his magic zipped through my body. Kerrick's eye color changed to match the forest. Since it was the middle of spring, the surrounding greenery was thick and lush, an emerald carpet.

When I had first met him, his eyes were russet with flecks of gold, orange and maroon. The warm colors belied his personality at the time. He had been as cold and distant as the snow-capped peaks of the Nine Mountains.

But not anymore.

He caught me staring and smiled. It transformed his face from unreadable to...happy. Which still surprised me. I had been used to him gazing at me with annoyance, anger or exasperation, and these pleasant looks threw me.

He waited.

I shook my head and returned to studying the town. It was near the foothills of the Nine Mountains. Even from this distance, it appeared that most of the buildings had burned down. No signs of life.

"Do you think the marauders got to Peti?" I asked. Since it was the closest town to the main pass through the mountains, it had been a popular place to stop before making the treacherous crossing.

Even after the plague, Peti had managed to survive. But without law enforcement, large groups of marauders had formed in the foothills. They would attack populated areas when they ran out of food and supplies. They'd killed, looted and burned without mercy.

"Probably before Tohon got to them," he said.

Tohon had swept through the foothills and killed all the marauders, leaving their bodies for us to trip over. He had *claimed* he was cleaning out the undesirables that had infected his kingdom. I considered Tohon's abominations—his dead soldiers. Why wouldn't he turn those marauders into more mindless, obedient troops? I asked Kerrick.

"He wanted us to find them. So we would rush to the pass and right into his ambush."

I shuddered. The memory of the dead carrying me away still haunted my sleep along with Tohon's voice beckoning me. The forest didn't consider those things intruders because they weren't alive. According to Kerrick, the living green ignored the damage they inflicted since it couldn't sense any life nearby. Which meant the dead could sneak up on Kerrick. An unpleasant thought.

"Let's check out Peti before we find a place to rest," Ker-rick said.

As expected, no one lived among the burned ruins. A light breeze swirled the ash. Our boots crunched on broken glass. Peti was bigger than I had thought. As we drew closer to the center, we encountered a few brick factories and businesses that had survived the fire. The flames had missed the heart of the town. With the marauders gone, people could return and build anew.

Except Peti was in the Realm of Vyg. Even though it was near the eastern border, this area was technically occupied by Tohon's army. Kerrick and I had dodged a number of his patrols on our way here.

Kerrick found another small cave for us to hide in until nightfall. I understood the need to be hidden from sight and protected from an attack. However, I would have liked to camp under the sky for our last day together.

We set up our bedrolls and lit a small fire to drive off the chill and cook a simple meal. Sitting on opposite sides, I broached the subject of my future plans.

"No," Kerrick said without considering anything I'd just said.

"I'm not asking. I need to talk to my sister. To explain—"

"No. It's too dangerous."

"I'm not asking," I repeated because he tended to think he was in charge. "Besides, I was on the run for three years. I know how to get around without encountering trouble. And I can defend myself." I pulled one of my throwing knives and pointed it at Kerrick. "And I know how to walk through the woods without making noise, so I'll stick to the forest. Plus my healing powers can be used—"

"I know," he growled.

I suppressed a smile, remembering blasting him with pain. He'd deserved it. I'd been trying to escape from him and his companions, but he wouldn't let go. And he called *me* stubborn. He was the most obstinate person I knew. Worry flared. Would he drag me to Ivdel with him?

"No one knows I'm alive," I said again. "No one is looking for me. No more bounty hunters, no mercenaries or Tohon's dead." And best of all, no Tohon. The man who'd threatened to claim me, and I knew, if push came to shove, he could with one touch. I hugged my arms close to my body.

"But what about the patrols? And Estrid's holy army? Or Jael? She killed Flea and tried to kill us. If she sees you..." Fear cracked his stony expression for a moment. "She won't. I'll wear a disguise."

"But your sister is Jael's page. If you get close to Noelle, she'll know."

"Then I'll make sure Noelle's alone."

"But what if she still hates you? She'll tell Jael you're alive."

He had me there.

I thought fast. "Then I won't approach Noelle until after you and Ryne arrive with his army." Hopefully in time to help Estrid defeat Tohon. Without Ryne, there was more than a good chance Tohon would overrun her defenses and add all of us to his ranks of dead. "I'll do reconnaissance and fact-gathering. I promise." I sensed a softening. "Tohon told me he has spies in Estrid's camp. I might be able to find them."

"No. You lie low, blend in and don't call attention to yourself. Learn what you can from watching and listening. Don't ask questions." Even though he was clearly unhappy, he continued. "You'll need a good disguise. Go to Mom's in Men-gels, she'll—"

"But she's days out of the way, and I don't want anyone to know I'm alive."

"If you don't follow my *suggestions*, then I'll just follow you." And he would.

I kept my expression neutral. "Why Mom's?"

"Before the plague she helped women who had run away from their abusive husbands. Her inn was known as a safe house for these women, and she would give them a new look, a new name and find them a safe place to live." He held a hand up. "She'll keep all your secrets. You can trust her. That's why everyone calls her Mom."

"All right. Any other *suggestions*?"

"Don't work in the infirmary. I know it'll be tempting, but find a job that lets you be invisible. Like a maid or

a kitchen servant."

"Okay. Anything else?"

"Stay away from anyone you recognize or know. Belen's still there." Kerrick's face paled. "You should tell Belen. He can help."

"No, he can't. Come on, Kerrick, you know he's a rotten liar."

"Easy for *you* to say. He's not going to rip *your* arms off." He hugged his arms to his chest.

"He's not going to hurt you," I said. Or would he? Belen was the Poppa Bear of our group, and we had become close friends. The thought of him mourning my death almost changed my mind.

"Have Prince Ryne tell him. I sacrificed my life for his, so he owes me one." Ryne had had the plague and I'd healed him by assuming the sickness.

Unfortunately for the six million people who had died, the plague killed healers as well, so we'd stopped healing plague victims until we could determine another way. But once the population panicked and rumors spread that we refused to help people...it had turned ugly fast. Long story short, I was the last healer alive until Danny and Zila's powers woke. If they did.

"How long are you going to play dead?" Kerrick asked.

"As long as I can. It's a good strategy."

"For you. I'm the one that's going to have to deal with Belen, Quain and Loren."

"I'm sure Ryne's keeping them busy with his genius military tactics that will stop Tohon." Which was the reason I'd given up my life for him.

Kerrick relaxed his arms and moved to sit next to me. He pulled me close. "At least I won't have to act like I'm sad and missing you."

"You mean you'll go from moody, sullen and distant, to moody, sullen, distant and sad? The guys won't suspect a *thing*," I teased.

"Don't start." He tangled his fingers in my hair. "You were the reason for all those..."

"Temper tantrums? Grumpiness? Irritability?"

He tilted my head until I gazed up at him. A dangerous glint shone in his eyes. "You didn't make it easy."

"True, but neither did you."

"True." A hint of a smile. "I guess we're meant to be together."

"Surprisingly," I agreed.

"Not to Belen. Once he forgives me for lying to him, he's going to gloat."

Belen had been his loyal friend, bodyguard and all but his older brother ever since Kerrick was born. It made sense that he could read Kerrick better than anyone.

"When did he figure it out?" I asked.

"Well before I did." Kerrick gazed at the fire. "I think he made a comment after you escaped and I saved you from the mercs."

An odd time. Kerrick had been furious at me. "And when did you...agree with him?"

"My feelings started changing after you healed Belen and we were at Mom's." He returned his focus to me. Cupping my face with his other hand, he said, "You had me tied in knots. You saved Belen's life, and I wanted to kill you and thank you at the same time. And during those nights when we didn't know if you'd live or die, I went from being angry to worried to frustrated to scared all within a single heartbeat. If you had died, I would have killed you."

"You know that doesn't make sense, right?"

"Nothing about that time made sense."

"You kept me from dying. Did you know that?"

He tilted his head in surprise. "No. How?"

"You gave me the energy to heal myself. If you hadn't stayed with me and held my hand, I would have gone into the afterlife."

"And here I thought it was Mom's tonics."

"Good thing the Lamp Post Inn is on the edge of the forest."

"That's why I like it. I can still access my power there. That and her desserts are the best in the Fifteen Realms."

"I'll make sure I try some when I'm there."

All humor fled his face. "But I won't be there to watch your back."

"Then I'll have to be extra careful."

"Promise?"

"Yes." I leaned forward and kissed him. He was right. What I planned to do was dangerous, but these were dangerous times. And I needed to become Noelle's older sister again before I resumed being Avry the healer. Plus my decision allowed me the freedom to just be a regular person. Someone unnoticeable, who blended in and didn't attract Tohon's attention.

When we reached the border road between Vyg and Pomyt that night, Kerrick had a few last-minute instructions. "Stay in the forest on the east side of the border. Better to go through Pomyt Realm than to get caught in the middle of any skirmishes in Vyg. You'll be safer traveling in the daylight."

I nodded, even though I knew to stay out of Vyg and to avoid Zabin until I was disguised. He needed to tell me. Plus if he didn't lecture me, I'd worry he was following me as he had when I'd surrendered to Tohon. His forest magic had camouflaged him, and I'd never seen him until he appeared without warning in the garden.

Kerrick had been livid since he'd seen me kissing Tohon.

Under the influence of Tohon's life magic, I hadn't had a choice. His powers had filled me with an unnatural desire and smashed my willpower to dust. After Tohon had left, and still reeling from Tohon's display of dominance, I'd been grabbed by Kerrick who had then confessed he'd be upset if Tohon lured me away.

"Avry, are you listening to me?"

"Yes. Vyg bad. Pomyt good."

"Avry." His aggravation was clear.

I smiled. He was rather handsome when he was annoyed. Before he could launch into another lecture, I handed him Flea's juggling stones for Belen, the letter and necklace for Noelle and the pouch full of Quain and Loren's favorite herbs for them.

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