

Ensorcelled

By

Debbie Mumford

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*For my kidlets.
You make my world a magical place.*

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Kaitlyn cowered on the threshold of Aelfric's chamber. One look at his face told her reality wasn't going to match her glorious dreams. A crackling green nimbus flamed around his close-shorn scalp and his dark eyes blazed.

"You fool!" He grabbed her arm and jerked her into his workroom. "Get inside. Don't you realize the war has reached us? Even this castle's not safe; the enemy's black magic is too near."

The familiar disarray of Aelfric's jumbled belongings vied for Kaitlyn's attention, tried to soothe her agitation, but she refused to succumb, chose to remain focused on her master's livid face.

"What were you thinking?" he asked once he'd secured the door with a powerful spell. "Or is your adolescent mind incapable of coherent thought?"

Irritation and bewilderment warred. She'd expected astounded excitement, a congratulatory hug, not this angry condescension. "I'm sorry, sir, but I had to come."

"I can't think of a single reason sufficient to excuse your blatant disobedience." The magical nimbus calmed, but Aelfric continued to scowl. "Our enemy is skilled in black magic. If his spells had found you outside enchanted walls," he paused, shuddered, and the last vestiges of anger drained from his face. "Well, child, I wouldn't like to think of the uses to which he'd put your nascent power."

Kaitlyn lowered her eyes and hung her head. Aelfric hadn't called her "child" since she began her training more than three years before. Her fingers closed around the lumpy object in her pocket, and her resolve strengthened.

"Master, you need this." She looked him squarely in the eye, pulled a large, gold-encrusted bauble from her pocket and dropped it into his gnarled hand.

As soon as the ring touched his flesh, Aelfric screamed, an agonizing, soul-rending shriek. The formidable wizard fell to his knees. Kaitlyn watched in horror as he flung her prize across the room and pulled his body into a tight fetal position.

She dropped to the floor beside him, tried to capture and soothe the frenzied strands of magic enveloping his body. Shock made her stiff-fingered, awkward, but she sketched a healing sigil in the air above his sweat-sheened head. His shoulders relaxed visibly and the sick, panicked knot in the pit of her stomach eased. He rolled onto his back, eyes still closed, and allowed her to pull his right hand away from his chest and examine the wound. The ring's outline seared his palm, an angry red weal surrounded by charred flesh. The pungent odor gagged her.

"Master! I'm so sorry. I didn't know..." She choked back bile, wiped her tears with the back of her hand and tried again. "What can I do? How can I help?"

Aelfric gasped and snatched his hand back. "Help me into the sitting room, then fetch the willow bark salve."

They stumbled into the tiny anteroom that lay between his workroom and bedchamber. Kaitlyn helped him to his favorite chair and then ran back to the workroom for salve and bandages. The wound dressed, she pulled up a low stool and sat at her master's knee.

"Now, let me think," Aelfric said. "I don't believe you came here to murder me, so tell me, what *did* you come for?"

A hint of a twinkle lit his eyes and she breathed a sigh of relief. "I was meditating on the ancient runes you assigned me last week, trying to understand how they could bind the ley lines, when a, well, a *compulsion* came over me." She paused to check Aelfric's reaction to her well-rehearsed speech. His face was grave, but he nodded slightly.

"I saw a sigil in my mind," she continued. "It hovered just above the page of runes, and I knew I had to capture it before it faded."

"And did you succeed?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered. "I traced it in the air."

She remembered how the sigil had hung, shimmering in perfection—one second, two—before a gaping hole had sundered the fabric of space and time. She had watched in horrified fascination as a ring peeled itself from the bone-white finger of a long dead hand. The hole had resealed itself with an audible crack and she'd been left with an opal set in gold filigree on her outstretched palm.

Her gaze snapped back to Aelfric's face. She stared into his midnight eyes and announced with all the drama her fifteen-year-old soul possessed, "Master, it's the Firestone!"

Aelfric's uninjured hand, which had been stroking his chin, stilled. "What do you know of the Firestone?"

"I... uh... I read about it in your Gramarye." She flushed and glanced away.

"When did I give you permission to touch, much less read, my Gramarye?" His voice exuded quiet control, but Kaitlyn heard the edge of steel.

"You didn't, sir." She met his gaze and faced his displeasure. "Forgive me. I was curious; I overstepped."

"Indeed." He looked away and sat motionless; his face unreadable.

"Very well," he sighed. "I'll deal with your disobedience later. Tell me what you learned of that fabled ring."

Kaitlyn swallowed and, keeping her eyes on the floor, said, "Well, the Firestone gives its wearer the ability to withstand evil. No black magic can touch him; he is invincible." She dared to glance at Aelfric's somber face. "That's right, isn't it, sir?"

He nodded. "Yes, but there is more. Tell me, apprentice, what is the cost of this wondrous gift?"

"Cost?" Kaitlyn's voice quavered and she berated herself for her hurried examination of the ancient text.

Aelfric made an impatient gesture with his injured hand, winced and returned it gingerly to his lap. "Yes, cost. Come now, have your years of training taught you nothing? Power always carries a price—something you must consider before you take it up. What is the Firestone's price?"

She took a deep breath, steeled herself and met his gaze. "I'm sorry, sir. I was snooping. I didn't take the time to read carefully or fully. I don't know the cost."

"And yet you summoned the ring?"

"Yes, sir."

"You disappoint me, Kaitlyn. I didn't think you a fool." He closed his eyes, leaning his head against the back of the chair. "Bring me the Gramarye. Perhaps we can mitigate your folly."

She climbed to her feet, feeling the weight of his disappointment, and stumbled to his bedchamber. The massive book lay open on its own sturdy wooden table protected by a sigil-spell. She remembered her pride in unknotting that spell and flushed with shame. The sigil dissolved under her fingers and she gathered the heavy tome to her breast without

invoking the magic that would have borne it effortlessly to Aelfric. She accepted aching arms as a small part of her penance.

Even left-handed, Aelfric's sigil worked flawlessly as he accepted the book's weight and balanced it in mid-air before his eyes. The pages flipped to the Firestone reference and he swiveled the book to face Kaitlyn.

"Read. Absorb. Tell me the cost."

Heat suffused her face, but she stood her ground and read the entry, pushing her shame and humiliation to the back of her mind and focusing on the words' meaning. Understanding bloomed and pride at her summoning withered. She closed her eyes and sank onto the stool at Aelfric's knee.

"Report."

His voice shattered her black thoughts and brought her back to the current situation.

"The Firestone gives its wearer invulnerability, no black magic, no magic of any kind can touch that individual. In return, the stone demands unbreakable loyalty. The Firestone touches the wearer, but allows no other contact. The wearer is forever isolated from human touch."

She opened her eyes and saw him nodding, his expression unexpectedly compassionate.

"Why did you summon the ring, child?"

She sighed. "I thought it would give you the power to defeat Darius. I wanted you to end this war. I wanted my brother, Gavin, to live." Tears filled her eyes and escaped down her cheeks. "Master, I'm so sorry. I just meant to bring the ring to you so you could make everything right."

"You didn't stop to consider that I could have summoned the ring myself? Didn't wonder why I chose not to?"

The need to sob threatened to choke her, but she whispered, "No, sir. I didn't think. I found that sigil and acted. I thought you'd be so pleased that you wouldn't question my story of miraculous revelation."

After what seemed an age, Aelfric muttered, "and yet, she can touch it, and I cannot." He waved the Gramarye closed, sent it back to its table, and issued a command. "Go... find the ring. I need to examine it."

Kaitlyn struggled to her feet and plodded to Aelfric's workroom. She stopped where her master had stood when she dropped the ring into his hand and cleared the morning's shock

and disappointment from her mind. With a focused effort she visualized the moment he'd flung the Firestone across the room.

There. He'd chucked it over there. Moving slowly and deliberately, she searched the floor. When she reached the shelves—a jumble of crocks, jars of herbs, models of castles, desiccated rodents, and the odd skull or bone—she scrutinized the ley lines for the ring's peculiar signature as well as seeking the cold metal with her fingers. Satisfied that the ring wasn't among the shelves' detritus, she knelt to look beneath the burdened furniture. At the far back, beyond her reach, she detected a glint of fire in a distinctive knot of magical energy.

She sat up and looked for a broom, a stick, anything to extend her reach. Nothing presented itself. Aelfric's staff stood in a corner near the ensorcelled door, but Kaitlyn knew better than to touch that instrument of power.

Power... of course. She chided herself for a brainless chit. The last thing she needed was to confirm Aelfric's low opinion of herself. He'd think her a fool indeed, if he saw her searching for a stick when she could call the ring with magic.

Settling herself more comfortably on the stone floor, Kaitlyn closed her eyes, stretched her left hand toward the ring's hiding place and traced a summoning sigil with her right. Before the sigil's flare died, she felt the ring's cool weight settle on her palm. She grimaced and returned to the wizard's side.

Aelfric sighed as she knelt before him holding the ring. "I'd half hoped it might have returned to its former master's tomb," he said. "Too bad. Well, let's get to work. Examine the ring closely. Tell me everything you see."

He closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair, his expression peaceful. But Kaitlyn knew from experience that in magic, meditation often masked intense effort.

She rolled the ring around in her fingers, scrutinized it, and recited her observations.

"The stone is an opal, about the size of a mouse skull, smooth, but not perfectly round. It's been polished, but not cut. The setting is gold, but carries no jeweler's mark. I don't know the purity." She closed her eyes and let her mind follow the ley lines emanating from the gem. "The stone is of the highest quality, but the setting isn't simple filigree. It's sigil-worked gold, just as the Gramarye said."

Her voice died away with the embers of her hope that she'd called the wrong ring.

"Hold it up," he whispered, his voice soft and rasping. "Let me see the working."

She held the ring level while he studied the sigil-worked filigree. At last, he nodded. "You may put it away."

Aelfric scrubbed his face with his uninjured hand while Kaitlyn nestled the ring into her skirt pocket. When he spoke, she looked up.

"The setting is a focusing spell," he said. "It takes the stone's raw power and channels it, allowing the wearer control over tremendous energy." Aelfric's dark eyes flashed as they met Kaitlyn's. "And because you meddled without guidance or understanding, this weapon is bonded to you."

"Bonded to me?" Kaitlyn's voice squeaked. "You think it wants *me*? But I'm untrained, I'm not ready! You're supposed to use it. You're supposed to be the hero!" Her face flamed, then cooled as blood drained from her extremities to her core. Her vision blurred and narrowed until she feared she might faint.

Aelfric seized her by the neck and forced her head between her knees. "Breathe, child. Deep breaths. The dizziness will pass."

She obeyed, and gradually, the ocean-roar of her own blood quieted. Several more deep breaths allowed her to push Aelfric's hand away and sit up. She blinked repeatedly to clear her vision, and then stared at her master.

"What have I done? I don't have enough control to use this kind of power! I don't know anything about war or politics or saving the world. I'm too young to seal myself away from other people!"

Aelfric's fiery gaze singed her soul. "And yet you expected *me* to accept that burden." He stood and stalked into his workroom, his final comment trailing in his wake. "You should have counted the cost before you meddled in affairs beyond your training."

Kaitlyn lingered by his chair, stung by the truth. She had interfered, and now Aelfric couldn't touch the Firestone. Her people needed relief from Darius' evil magic; the Firestone could end the war. But to give up her humanity! It was true, she hadn't considered the cost, mainly because it hadn't occurred to her that she would be the one to pay it. She'd expected Aelfric to use the stone and absorb whatever consequences might ensue. So easy to discount sacrifice when she wasn't the one making it. She shivered, remembering her brother's battle-weary face. Her beloved Gavin deserved aid, but he'd ridden to battle knowing what might be required. She'd acted without deliberate thought.

Eyes brimming with unshed tears, she pulled the ring from her pocket and clutched it close to her heart. For good or ill, this weapon belonged to her; she must find a way to use it. Maybe she could escape payment.

"Master," she called, following him to his workroom, "what if we call a peace council? Could we show Darius the Firestone? Threaten him without actually using it?"

Aelfric turned in a swirl of robes and fastened his dark-eyed gaze on her face. "We can try, Kaitlyn, but it will only work if he reads resolve in your face. He will have to know that you are ready and willing to accept your fate."

She rubbed clammy hands on her skirt. "You're more experienced. Couldn't you pretend you summoned it?"

Something behind his eyes softened for an instant before hardening again. "No. This is your summoning. You must own it, or we have no hope."

Her shoulders sagged. She felt boneless, incapable of independent movement. Despair rolled through her mind. Even with the ring's power, she couldn't imagine herself standing up to a black warlock.

She surprised herself by nodding and saying, "You're right. This is my destiny, not yours. Please, arrange the meeting."



Kaitlyn stood beneath an ancient oak on a hilltop beyond the castle gates. Aelfric and King Lorien sat in cushioned chairs at a large, ornately carved table a few paces away. Aelfric had arranged the truce and magicked the furniture to this neutral spot. He hoped the oak's earth magic would lend support against the blackness that followed Darius.

A company of Lorien's best knights ringed the hilltop, and Gavin stood guard behind his liege's chair. Kaitlyn drew strength from her brother's presence though they hadn't spoken.

She had taken time to bathe and anoint her body with fragrant oils. Her normally unruly hair was braided into a neat dark plait and she wore her best gown of midnight blue. The Firestone weighed on her heart more heavily than it did the pocket of her gown.

Give me strength, she prayed. Show me what to do, and when to do it.

With a skirl of pipes, Darius appeared on the hilltop. He sat upon a white stallion, his foam-green robes flowing into the deep turquoise of his mount's trappings. Younger than Kaitlyn had expected from the evil tales she'd heard, his dark hair and beard showed no trace of gray, but his eyes were as cold as a winter sky. He dismounted with fluid grace and vanished his horse with a negligent gesture.

Aelfric stood and all eyes turned to him. "Thank you for coming, Lord Darius."

Darius nodded without breaking eye contact. "I'm always ready for a civilized chat, Aelfric." His gaze swept Lorien as he continued, "Shall we end this bloodshed? Will you yield to me, my lord?"

King Lorien stiffened, but remained silent.

Aelfric gestured toward an empty chair. "Be seated, sir. There has been a change, a shift in power. We wish to give you every opportunity to leave peacefully before we resort to its use."

Darius snorted as Aelfric motioned to Kaitlyn. For the first time the black warlock's gaze fell on her and she felt a questioning push at the edge of her mind. She strengthened her shields and approached the remaining chair.

"Don't tell me you're resorting to woman's magic to counter me." Darius laughed and returned his attention to Aelfric. "What is this supposed shift in power you mentioned?"

Kaitlyn slipped her hand into her pocket, grasped the cool metal and pulled the Firestone into the light of day. The opal gleamed, myriad colors dancing in its depths. She laid it on the table's polished surface.

A hungry expression flitted across Darius' face and he reached toward the stone.

"I wouldn't do that," said Aelfric. He gave a wry grin and held up his bandaged hand. "The Firestone is finicky about being touched."

"But, the girl..."

"Yes, I know. Disturbing, isn't it?" A genuine smile lit Aelfric's face. "But then, we've always known magic is capricious."

Darius licked his lips. "What do you want?"

"Remove your troops from my land," said King Lorien. "Go, and never return."

Kaitlyn watched Darius' eyes. She saw calculation ripple across his features and knew that he would call their bluff.

"Lord Darius," she said, noticing his frown at being addressed by a lowly woman, "I would rather not accept this ring, but I will." She heard Gavin gasp; saw him leave his post and move toward her. Ignoring him, she pleaded with Darius. "Please, leave us in peace. For your own sake."

"You're nothing but a girl-child," Darius said, his voice filled with contempt. "Even if you put it on, you won't be able to control it."

He rose, his chair falling over at the sudden movement, and began to gather energy between his hands. Gavin lunged the last few feet to place himself between his sister and her would-be attacker.

Kaitlyn barely managed to thrust her finger into the ring's circling embrace and fling her arm in front of Gavin before Darius' flaming arrow seared the air. It shot unerringly

toward her brother with a force that should have skewered him and sliced her as well. Instead, the arrow hit the Firestone's field and clattered to the ground, harmless.

"Katie, what have you done?" Gavin cried. He stared in wide-eyed horror as fine threads of liquid gold streamed from the ring's setting and laced themselves around her wrist and forearm.

Kaitlyn pulled her arm back and glanced from the golden threads surrounding her right arm like a long, fingerless glove to Gavin's stricken face. The lacing didn't hurt, but she felt it penetrate her skin, merge to her bone. She and the ring were one, would be one long after her flesh dissolved.

She felt as much as heard Aelfric's moan of despair and Lorien's sharp intake of breath. Darius remained silent, cold as ice, though mental calculations raced across his grim face.

"I'm all right, Gavin," she said quietly. She took a shuddering breath and tried to hug her brother. Her hands met gentle, but firm resistance.

She stumbled back, made her way to Aelfric's side and tried to squeeze his shoulder. Her hand stopped an inch from his flesh. She met his gaze with a rueful smile. "Don't blame yourself, Aelfric. This is my own doing." She closed her eyes, calmed her mind, and turned to face Darius.

"Your time has passed, Lord Darius," she said. "Mine is just beginning. I suggest you leave now, before the Firestone sings your beard."

He studied her. "Brave words for a little girl who should still be at school."

"Be warned," she said. "I am new to these powers, but the Firestone knows them well."

With the speed and grace of a striking snake, Darius hurled a killing spell at Kaitlyn's chest. It bounced from her protective barrier. He jumped aside as the spell rebounded and expended itself in the grass at his feet.

A stifled curse escaped Lorien as Aelfric surrounded the king in a protective envelope of magical energy.

Darius glanced at the withered grass before bringing his hands together. When he drew them apart, witchlight crackled between his palms.

Kaitlyn stood her ground as the warlock approached, pulsing his hands back and forth, building the witchlight's intensity. When he reached her side, he turned his palms toward her, pushing the frenzied light at her torso.

Kaitlyn disappeared behind a wall of flame, and Gavin screamed and shot toward her.

Through the white hot aura of fire, Kaitlyn shouted, "No! Gavin, go back!"

Simultaneously, Kaitlyn doused the witchlight and Darius seized Gavin.

"Advantage to me," he cried, cutting off Gavin's breath with the flick of a careless finger. "Remove the Firestone, or this one dies."

Kaitlyn tore her gaze from her brother's blue-tinged face, licked her dry lips and said, "I can't. It's fused to my bone." She flicked a sad smile at Gavin. "This is my destiny."

Darius flicked a finger in Gavin's direction and the young knight fell to the ground, gasping. "We seem to have reached an impasse. You can't give me what I want, and I won't give you what you want."

"Ah, but I think you will." She walked toward him with unconscious grace, an awkward teenager no more. "You will release your warriors from their enslavement." She stepped closer to him; he held his ground.

"You will stop using black magic." His resolve broke; he stepped back.

"And," she said, "you will leave this kingdom and never return."

He forced a laugh. "And if I refuse?"

"The Firestone will suck you dry."

"Right."

He pointed at Gavin, crooked his finger and raised her brother into the air.

Without hesitation, Kaitlyn threw her arms around Darius' neck and hugged him tightly. Witchlight blazed around them.

Aelfric ran forward. Lorien strained against his protective envelope, and Gavin crashed to the ground yet again.

The light died, and Kaitlyn released the warlock. Darius staggered for a moment before crumpling to the ground, unconscious.

Aelfric moved to support Kaitlyn, but couldn't touch her. He scrutinized his erstwhile apprentice, shook his head and turned to release his king.

Lorien and Gavin approached and Kaitlyn gave them a weary smile.

"Did you know that would happen?" Lorien asked.

She started to shake her head, but the motion made her temples throb. "No. I expected to repel him, as I did Gavin and Aelfric. But the Firestone wanted Darius."

"What happened?" asked Aelfric.

"The gem drained him," she said, looking deep into Aelfric's dark eyes. "It emptied him of power, sucked out his capacity to work magic. He won't trouble anyone again, at least not with magic."

"What about his army?" asked the king.

Aelfric answered for her. "They were ensorcelled, forced to fight his wars. Give them a chance; they'll find new lives."

"And you, my lady?" King Lorien asked.

"Me?" Kaitlyn's smile trembled. She longed to dissolve into someone's arms and cry. "I must learn to live with the Firestone's price."



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DEBBIE MUMFORD lives in Vancouver, Washington with her husband of more than 30 years, ghost-white cat and toasted-marshmallow colored bullmastiff. Her short fiction has appeared online in Flash Me Magazine, KidVisions, and Dragons, Knights & Angels. She has several novels available from Freya's Bower in addition to anthologies with Wild Child Publishing and Adams Media. Debbie is represented by the Levine Greenberg Literary Agency.

To learn more about DEBBIE MUMFORD, visit her online at <http://www.debbiemumford.com>

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