

# Mind of the Magic

written by Holly

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By Holly Lisle

## Chapter 1

THE old sign on the massive, carved wooden gate read:

Qualified. Certified-Safe Magics—  
Guarding. ~~Transporting~~, and Livestock Our Specialties  
~~Also Historical Research~~  
We Buy Books!  
Private and Group Lessons Watterdaes  
NO LOVE SPELLS!!!

Faia Rissedote finished nailing up the new sign beneath it.

Rede-Flute Lessons Fueredaes and Wuendaes  
Hiller-Crafted Weaving, Inquire Within  
Herbals and Healing Extracts  
Reasonable Rates

She might as well have put up a sign that said, “Give me something to keep me busy . . . please.” She made a face and stepped back from her handiwork to get a better look at it—and saw Matron Magdar Netweaver strolling up the walkway from the marketplace, her acquisitions floating in front of her. Magdar nodded politely. “Pleasant daymeet, Faia.”

“And to you, Magdar.”

Faia’s neighbor stopped to study the sign. Faia watched one

eyebrow slide upward. "Rede-flute lessons and weaving?"

Faia nodded.

"I suppose the new magic is cutting into your other business, eh?"

"You could say that."

Magdar gave her a purse-lipped little smile. "Thought I did." She smiled again, and said, "You really ought to see the new tower Gammitch Leech is for magicking up—over to the corner of Warren and Fancy, it is. Thin as a needle and tall as the heavens, eyah—sparkles in the daylight like a big block of southern ice. He plans to go hunting another missus soon as he finishes it. Reckon he'll be for stopping at your doorstep, same as the rest, eyah?"

Faia ignored the last remark. She looked southwest and discovered that she could see Gammitch's magic-built tower rising over Omwimmee Trade—a thin green line that stretched skyward like a thread stiffened and stood on end. "Doesn't look very stable," she offered at last.

"Don't reckon it needs to be, do you? Plenty of magic to go round nowadays—not just for you big-city magickers like it used to be."

Faia didn't argue with her neighbor, although she disagreed vehemently with what Magdar had said. She'd been the most vocal naysayer in the town meetings that followed the sudden, inexplicable rise in the accessibility of magic four months ago, and no one in town had forgotten that fact. Or forgiven, either. Her neighbors figured that she was jealous of their sudden good luck, or worse, that she was trying to take advantage of them by preventing them from using the mysterious magical power they suddenly all had.

That wasn't the case at all, of course. Faia knew what power

without knowledge could do—she had argued from the standpoint of a woman who had once accidentally melted a town; they argued from the standpoints of people who not only had not melted any towns, but who had never seen it done either, and who figured it could not have been as bad as it sounded. They were determined that they were going to do things magically, whether they knew what they were doing or not—and when that fact became apparent, Faia shut up. She had the chore of putting back together two of the three idiot-wizards who blew themselves up, and she had given the widow of the third a nice jar for his ashes. Meanwhile, she kept her opinions to herself.

“Speaking of men looking for a missus,” Magdar said, interrupting Faia’s gloomy ruminations, “I heard you turned away Geltie’s son Ludd when he came asking for you to wed him.”

Faia sighed. She’d known that story would get around. “You heard true.”

Magdar shook her head and put her hands on her hips. “So what’s that now? . . . Ludd, and Wicker’s boy Nait, and the other butcher’s youngest . . . I can’t rightly recall his name . . . .”

“Stord.” Faia supplied the name. Magdar would have remembered it sooner or later anyway.

Magdar snapped her fingers. “Stord. Exactly.” The older woman frowned. “A girl like you shouldn’t be so picky. They won’t keep coming forever, you know. Once you lose your looks, there’s not a one of them will give you good daymeet.”

“That’s hardly a recommendation to marry them now,” Faia murmured dryly.

Magdar seemed not to have heard her. “You having that child and all, you’re lucky there’s any who come courting anyway.

When I was young, the men of Omwimnee Trade would never have looked twice at a girl who'd been . . . " Magdar glanced up and down the street and her voice dropped to a loud whisper. " . . . with men." Her neighbor nodded at Faia's five-year-old daughter, Kirtha, who was at that moment sprawled on her stomach on the raised walkway, studying the bugs that crawled along the cracks. "The proof that you have done that is sitting over there for all to see. She's hardly something that you can flaunt—bit of an embarrassment to your character, truth be known. You really ought to get another man while one is still willing to look at you, eyah."

Faia looked at Kirtha, who was kicking her feet in the air, and giving every impression of being engrossed by the insect world below her—but Faia would have bet her house her daughter hadn't missed a word. "She's no embarrassment to me."

Magdar sniffed. "No. You wouldn't be ashamed of yourself. But then, you're outlander, and citified, too. Not a one of us in Omwimnee Trade doesn't know about city morals—you could find more morals in a tomcat than a city girl." She shook her head and gave Faia a pitying smile, as if what she'd said was not an insult, but simply a fact of life. Faia was used to both the assumptions and the expression. "By anysuch, you'd get invited to events if you were respectably married, you know. Everyone wants to be polite, but, Faia . . . the town has to have some standards."

They were stupid standards, Faia thought, but they were standards . . . and the town had them. By the bucketload.

She sighed and imagined marrying dull Ludd, who had never been beyond Omwimnee Trade and had no desire to see anyplace else, who had spent his whole life cleaning and gutting and drying fish, and who had no other interests. She couldn't imagine marrying him just so she could get invited to the exciting social events of Omwimnee Trade. The weaving-gathers, the house- raisings, the sitting-ins for births and deaths—and for

all of that, she would only have to put up for the rest of her life—or his—with the sullen company of a man who talked almost not at all, and who, when he did deign to speak, spoke of fish.

“When I find someone I want to take public bond with, I will,” Faia said. “But I have never been in love, and I won’t choose a bondmate until I am.”

Magdar shrugged. “I wouldn’t waste love on a husband, girl. I couldn’t stand either of mine—the one I have now is a loathsome toad. Husbands are to give you a place in society. If you want love, that’s what backlight lads are for. Get married, get some respectability, and you can have all the love you want then, can’t you?”

Faia bit her lip and nodded, not saying a word. The town had its standards, all right.

Magdar looked at the sign again. “Rede-flute, eh? Maybe my youngest three would be interested in lessons. Would get them off my hearth for a bit, any case.” She snorted. “Eyah. You think about what I said.” Then she sauntered away, her groceries once again floating in front of her. Magdar was nearly to her own front door when Faia realized the back of her neighbor’s long, full skirt was smoking. Faia stared down at her daughter, who was glaring after the departing busybody; she looked back up just in time to see the first flames lick along the hem of the fabric.

“Kirtha!” Faia sent a fire-smothering spell racing after Magdar. The neighbor’s skirt sizzled and the flames died. Magdar appeared not to have noticed at all. But if she hadn’t yet, she would soon, and would come back with another lecture—the one about children who didn’t feel the switch often enough. Faia picked up her daughter and dragged her into the house. “Kirtha, you can’t do things like that!”

“I don’t like her, Mama.” Kirtha looked unrepentant.

Faia understood exactly how her daughter felt. She wasn't fond of Magdar Netweaver either. That didn't change anything. "The Lady's Gift of magic is something you never misuse, Kirtha. You never make a spell in anger, or out of greed, or for frivolous or wasteful reasons."

"Hmp!" Kirtha was unimpressed.

Faia put her down in the walled courtyard to play. "We are going to discuss this again later—but I want you to think about what you did. If I hadn't seen Matron's skirt catch fire, she could have been hurt. That would have been very bad, Kirtha. Very, very bad."

Bad to a five-year-old was a meaningless term, and Faia knew it. And teaching a five-year-old with too much power and not enough self-control the ethics of magic was nearly impossible. But I'll manage, Faia promised herself. Somehow, I'll make her understand.

Just then, a castle sailed into view over the west roof of the house, chasing clouds eastward; gaudy pennants flew from its graceful whitestone turrets, and its roofs flashed silver in the sunlight. The sound of music and laughter drifted down to Faia and Kirtha. Faia stared upward while the castle floated overhead, and listened to the happy sounds that came from it.

The world was full of the insane, she thought. Those people in the castle were proof of it. True, magic in inconceivable amounts had recently become available to almost everyone in Arhel. And true, there now seemed to be almost no limits to what some people could do magically. But a sudden unexplained jump in the availability of strong ley fines seemed to her to be a reason for caution, not for building castles in the air, of all things.

A fair-haired woman leaned over the parapet and fluttered a gaudy silk flag in greeting. Faia gave her only polite acknowledgment, the sort of greeting that seemed appropriate

for an insane stranger one couldn't simply ignore. Kirtha, however, waved her arms wildly and shouted, "Bye, castle," until it drifted over the east roof and vanished from sight.

When it was gone, Kirtha quit waving, and her back stiffened. Now it comes, Faia thought.

Kirtha turned to face her, with brows furrowed and lower lip stuck out. "I want a flyin' castle," she demanded, her voice pitched shrill and loud.

Insanity was to be the order of the day, then, Faia reflected. She missed the world of four months ago, when life and its occurrences still made some sense. She told her daughter, "No," keeping her voice calm and reasonable.

Kirtha tossed her red hair and stamped her foot. "I want a flyin' castle!"

Faia rubbed her fingertips against her forehead. They'd had this argument several times a day since the first such castle had appeared, perhaps two months earlier—and Kirtha never, ever listened to reason. "Those castles are dangerous," she said at last. "And no matter how much you want one, you cannot have one!"

"You're mean! You could make me one, but you're jus' mean! I want to fly in the sky an' live on a cloud. An' you won't let me!" Kirtha closed her eyes and held her breath, and her pale, freckled face turned as red as her hair. She pulled in threads of magic from the earth and air and in an instant built thunderclouds that appeared suddenly, filling the tiny patch of sky just above the garden; the clouds crackled with energy and rumbled as they bumped against each other. Little bolts of lightning shot from cloud to cloud.

"That's enough!" Faia banished the clouds before the lightning could catch the thatching of the roof on fire. *Lady give me strength*, she thought.

A sudden incredible clamor came from the front of the house. "Stay right there," she told her daughter. Faia frowned and started toward the gate. Whoever stood out there was not politely knocking, but slamming the metal knocker down onto the plate over and over again. The booming reverberated in the breezeway and filled the garden—she was suddenly certain it was Magdar, back to complain about the damage to her skirt. She took a deep breath and got ready to make her apologies. She lifted the heavy bar and flung open the inner door in the gate. No one at all stood there, however, and quick glances in both directions proved the entire street to be empty.

Children, she thought—though Kirtha's little friends were usually polite and well behaved when they came over to play, and most of them couldn't even reach the knocker. They were so invariably good, Faia suspected, because their parents had warned them about her . . . Omwimmee Trade's own outlander magic lady, who would turn them into wingless hovies if they were naughty. Perhaps some new child had moved into the neighborhood.

Faia sighed. Whoever the prankster had been, he was gone. She began to pull the door shut, but as she did, a faint breeze stirred something on the ground, something someone had shoved up against the sheltered overhang of her gate. She stopped and looked over the mess. Why, she wondered, would anyone dump their old rags by my gate, then make such a racket to get me out here to find them? Puzzled, she propped the door open, and went out to investigate.

The rags weren't simply rags. They were the filthy, tattered clothes of the person who still wore them. It was a tiny person, too — she thought at first that someone had abandoned a small child, but when she knelt and brushed back some of the shredded clothing and matted hair to get a better look, she realized the huddled figure was a man — dwarfed, misshapen, and very near death. He was bruised and bloody, hardly breathing; his skin clung to his bones so tightly she could

make out the shapes of his teeth beneath his lips. His eye sockets and cheekbones stood out in ridges so sharp Faia could almost have believed he had no flesh at all. Looking at him, she could not imagine how he still lived.

"Oh," she whispered. "Oh, poor man."

She couldn't imagine who had left him there—the villagers, when they brought one of their sick to her, hovered over her and worried aloud about their loved ones while she worked. They always brought some pay for her, too—if not silver or copper, then a piglet or a fat duckling or a half-measure of dried, smoked fish.

Whoever had brought this man obviously didn't intend to pay her anything. She sighed and scooped both the little man and his pack into her arms. "Which isn't your fault, though, is it?"

He weighed almost nothing. "Poor man." She looked down the street again; it remained empty. In Omwimmee Trade's tropical climate, that was normal; midday was the time when business shut down and everyone went home to nap through the worst of the heat. Still, she wished she knew who had brought the little man to her. Knowing something—anything—about him would have helped her a great deal.

She was almost glad to find him there. Until only months ago, she had taught preliminary magic classes to students who hoped to one day be accepted into the great universities of Ariss or Bonton or distant, mysterious Dumforst. She performed warding spells and healing, hired out her services to break the spells of local hedgewizards who were forever renting themselves as cursemongers for the peevish masses, and in other ways made herself useful and needed in the little trading and fishing town. None of her students had seen fit to continue their studies when the magic changed, however, and her services in Omwimmee Trade became redundant. She had always had plenty of

free time before—now she and Kirtha had nothing but free time.

She didn't want to take pleasure in the misfortune of another . . . but caring for the sick man would make her feel needed again, for however long he might survive.

I'll put him in the guest room—he'll be there only a day or two, most likely, and then he'll die and I'll have to notify the Omwimnee Trade council and get a permit to bury him.

She sighed. Death remained the one thing magic could not postpone forever, or reverse when it came. She might not be able to save him. She would do whatever she could for him, though; if he died, at least he would not die friendless and alone, huddled in some street corner.

The stranger's eyes flickered open just before Faia carried him into her home. They stared directly into hers—bright, crafty, and incredibly alert. She paused, foot lifted above her threshold but not yet over, subject to a sudden wave of vague uneasiness. The man was completely helpless—but the look in his eyes sent tingles down her spine.

Almost immediately, though, he closed them again—and once again was as obviously helpless and near death as he had been a second before.

Faia shifted, disquieted.

Maybe I should leave him where I found him. Maybe I ought to just put him back and pretend I never saw him.

Then she shook her head. Oh, Lady, I should be ashamed of myself, considering a thing like that. He's dying, he has no one— and I get the chills because he manages to open his eyes for an instant to look at me.

She felt terrible. Mortified by her momentary callousness, she carried him through the gate and inside, down the long breezeway to her large guest room, really the main bedroom of

the house, which had once belonged to Medwind Song, barbarian mage and ex-headhunter, and her tenth husband, Nokar Feldosonne, one-time librarian of Faulea University and a powerful old saje.

Faia wiggled the door latch awkwardly with the tips of her fingers, trying to keep from hitting her guest's head on the wall, and shoved the door open with a hip. Musty, dust-laden air blew into the breezeway, and she stifled a sneeze. She hurriedly placed her guest on the bed, and threw open the windows; light streamed into the dark room and illuminated the dust motes that swirled and spiraled upward with every step she took. The bookshelves were cobwebbed and grey with dust, the corners of the round rug she'd made while she was pregnant with Kirtha appeared to have been gnawed by rodents, and spider silk hung in long trails from the beams overhead.

She winced. The room had been long vacant and long neglected.

She closed her eyes for an instant, picturing everything as it should have been—fresh sheets on the bed, fresh flowers at the bedside, the room clean, the air sweet-smelling. The task took her no time and little energy. She opened her eyes to a bright, welcoming room.

"Better," she said to herself as she began undressing the little man. "It's a start, at least." She needed cool water and wet towels to bring his fever down quickly, she needed to start a healing broth simmering over the fire and to pick some fresh herbs for restorative simples. She would have to put thought into remembering the training her mother had given her for focusing wellness into the sick.

Perhaps Kirtha can gather the vigonia for me, she thought. She needs some tasks that must be done by hand, and with care. A little responsibility will be good for her.

Suddenly finding herself with much to do, Faia covered her guest with a sheet and hurried out of the room and down the

breezeway. Not until much later did she realize she was singing as she worked.

## **Where to Get *Mind of the Magic***

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