

*The*  
**Nine Bishops**



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## THE STORYTELLER

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**I**T WAS A HARSH WINTER. IT WAS THE HARSHEST DAY ANYONE COULD remember. The best phrase to describe the weather was bone chilling. It was too treacherous for anyone in Seemos to go outside. In one particular lodge, in nowhere of importance, the wooden boards that held the building together were creaking. There was a terrible wind outside that made the whole building shake. Only a fool would be out in the cold if they could avoid it. Most people would argue it was a terrible day, but one storyteller thought otherwise. It was a perfect day for the storyteller. On a day like this, when people avoided any place other than the fire, the storyteller had a perfect opportunity to tell a story.

While the impending blizzard raged outside, a toasty fire crackled inside the lodge. Two people sat next to each, warming themselves by the fire. One a storyteller and the other a little girl. Both sat by the fire, enjoying the warmth of the flames. The storyteller was covered from head to toe for protection against the cold. With every part of the storyteller's body covered, it was impossible to know the storyteller's identity.

However, the eight-year-old girl near the storyteller was not so bundled up. The girl had just finished playing outside in the snow, despite the storyteller's protests, which had worked up her blood flow. With so much

young energy, the girl did not need to cover up quite as much. In fact, she was wearing a long summer dress which was not appropriate at all for the weather. If it were up to the storyteller, she would not have let the girl dress up so radically.

The eight-year-old girl's name was Inessa. She had rich brown hair and sparkling green eyes. Her face was red from the cold air outside, but she still had wide smile. Inessa was always smiling, even when she was getting an earful. Inessa was very intelligent for her age, well beyond her peers. However, her intelligence caused her to be quite a little devil. Inessa liked to question the way of things and there was not anything that didn't pique her interest at least a little.

She hated to sit indoors and always liked to cause a ruckus. She had built a reputation of being a troublemaker. Some would blame her parents for raising such a troublesome child, but others argued it was natural for a girl her age. Despite her reputation, Inessa sat quietly and calmly by the fire. Inessa was beginning to have a look of boredom on her face. She hated the fact that it was so cold outside. Even Inessa knew when it was too cold. She was wishing the impending winter storm would subside so she could go back to playing in the snow.

The storyteller looked at Inessa with endearment. The storyteller could tell that Inessa was about to go crazy for sitting still in silence. The storyteller asked Inessa simple question, "Would you like to hear a forbidden story, my dear?"

Inessa looked at the storyteller with a smile. It was exactly what she was waiting to hear. Inessa knew the storyteller told good stories. The only thing Inessa liked more than playing outside was listening to the storyteller. Since she was forced to stay inside, there was nothing else Inessa wanted to do in this weather.

"How can a story be forbidden?" asked a curious Inessa.

"Well to begin with, it's a story that you aren't supposed to hear. In fact, no one in Seemos has heard this story," the storyteller replied mysteriously.

Inessa looked at the storyteller with immense curiosity and asked, “Is it a good story?”

The storyteller answered with, “This one does not contain fantasy characters like dwarves, dragons, elves, fairies, and witches, since none of those are real so I don’t know if you will like it.”

“But I thought witches were real!” interjected Inessa objectively.

The storyteller looked into the eight-year old’s eyes of mutiny. “Hmmm...that is up to dispute, but you may very well be right. Still, this story is not about witches or the lot of them. So, it is best to forget them entirely. Unlike the preposterous fantasies I just mentioned...well maybe excluding witches,” a smile gleamed over the storyteller’s lips “...the story that I am about to tell you is about something real. Magic.”

“Well everyone knows magic is real!” exclaimed Inessa like the storyteller was insulting her intelligence.

“In this story, the magic was different and used differently than the magic you might know today,” stated the storyteller.

“What could be so different?” Inessa wondered.

“In this story, there were people that could use magic and people that couldn’t.

“Well that is obvious,” Inessa said rolling her eyes. The storyteller ignored her and kept explaining.

“Everyone that could use magic was called a mage. Most people were skilled enough to use a basic form of magic, but the mages that sought to better their magic or make a living off it, joined mages’ guilds. The best mages from even the largest mages’ guilds trained a lifetime to better their magic.

The most powerful of the mages were called the Bishops, and they were on an elite level of their own. There were always nine Bishops in all. They were considered the most powerful mages in the kingdom and they were coveted by everyone.

There was the Flame who was like fire. Steel, the one that could not be broken. The quiet Tempest. Soot lurking in the shadows. Static who was faster than light. The genius that was Wild. The beautiful Mistress. Joker the unpredictable. And lastly Frost. The storyteller paused, momentarily thinking.

“Why didn’t you say anything about Frost?” asked Inessa.

“What do you mean?” the storyteller asked, trying to recollect where they were in the setup of the story.

“Well, you said Steel was strong and Static was fast, but you didn’t say anything about Frost. Was there anything special about Frost?” wondered Inessa.

“Sorry, I lost myself thinking about the next part of the story. I can’t remember Frost,” the storyteller lied. “Perhaps I will remember more about Bishop Frost when I tell you the rest of the story,” the storyteller promised. Inessa seemed kind of disappointed about the storyteller’s answer, but quickly asked another question.

“Before you mentioned the nine Bishops, you said that everyone that could use magic was called a mage.” Inessa stated, emphasizing the word could. “But were they all not able to use magic?” she finished asking.

The storyteller knew that for Inessa to understand the story, she would have to understand the hard truth. The storyteller had waited until Inessa was an age that she could understand the truth and learn from it. It was exactly why Inessa was hearing the story now. The storyteller decided to explain the next part in pieces.

“Well a majority of the population could use magic to varying degrees,” the storyteller reminded Inessa.

“Yea, but did that mean that there were people that were not mages?” Inessa wondered.

“About one out of every five children were born without magic. Parents that could use magic, had children that could use magic. The people that

could not use magic, never married mages,” the storyteller explained, wondering how Inessa would react.

“Why didn’t mages ever marry people that could not use magic?” Inessa asked ignorantly.

There was so much Inessa didn’t know, but the storyteller knew that she was going to be able to piece things together quickly.

“It was considered a taboo for people that couldn’t use magic to marry mages,” answered the storyteller.

“Wouldn’t some of the kids that didn’t have magic get bullied by the kids did have magic?” Inessa demanded.

The storyteller was amazed that Inessa, even at her age, understood the time, at least in a child’s sense, without any more context than she had been given.

“Yes,” answered the storyteller ready to field a few more of Inessa’s questions.

The storyteller only told her the truth. The truth was a delicate thing, so it had to be explained properly. The storyteller’s tone changed into a more somber one. The storyteller spoke in a tone that could pierce even the strongest of hearts.

“The people that couldn’t use magic had a name. Everyone in the kingdom knew the name because it marked them. It was not the same as their spoken name, but everyone knew it because all mages could see their name like they could see the color of their skin. The names made it easy distinguish the mages from anyone that couldn’t use magic. Mages described the name as foul, something worse than dirt. When a mage looked at someone that could not use magic, they saw only subordinate human beings. The mages treated the people that couldn’t use magic worse than dirt and thus called them the Filth.

The Filth only had names amongst each other. To the mages they all had the same name and were simply called Filth. The Filth only had each other. They had their own schools, living areas, and worked the most menial jobs.

They held no lands and had no positions of power. There were no laws against harming the Filth, but any backlash from the Filth against a mage was punishable by death under the law. Mages were not legally allowed to have children with the Filth. The law was written so that mages would not taint themselves by having children with someone that could not use magic,” the storyteller decided to say all at once.

The words were hard on Inessa’s heart. From the look on Inessa’s face, she was deeply saddened by the cruelty.

The storyteller wanted to say something that would make the truth more bearable, but a teary eyes Inessa said something first in the form of a question.

“Did mages ever love any of the Filth?” Inessa asked, hoping for a happier thought. The question caught the storyteller off guard, but some truths were better than others.

“Of course,” said the storyteller passionately in a comforting tone. “However, the ruler of Seemos issued harsh punishment onto those that broke the law, which made it dangerous to do such a thing,” the storyteller explained.

The storyteller decided to explain that point further. “The ruler at this time was King Ven Fallon, and he ruled with an iron fist. He was one of the few reasons why mages were allowed to treat the Filth so poorly. You see, the Bishops may have been the most powerful mages, but they were directly controlled by king. Any act of defiance against the king’s laws would quickly be enforced by either mage authorities or the Bishops themselves. They enforced the king’s biddings and upheld the law in Seemos. The nine Bishops swore an oath to the king. The oath was that they would protect and serve the king at the cost of their lives.

“But why would the Bishops want to serve such a cruel king?” asked Inessa, wiping away the last of her tears.

“Money, power, and fame are some of the reasons. There were still many laws that applied to the mages, even though the harshest ones were on the

Filth. However, the laws of the land did not apply to the Bishops. They could do whatever they wanted, so long as they served the king when they were called upon,” stated the storyteller.

“Ok then, why would the Bishops serve anyone if they were so powerful?” asked Inessa, sniffing her nose, no longer as distraught as before.

“Because the king was the most powerful mage of them all,” the storyteller explained.

“What magic strain did he have?” Inessa seemed back to her former self.

“You are starting to ask a lot more questions. I am supposed to tell you the story where you will find out all about these things. We will get to that part so be patient. I promise you will find out,” the storyteller said smiling.

“Wait so this isn’t the story?” Inessa complained.

The storyteller let out a sigh. Inessa was never going to stop asking questions at this rate. There was a lot more the storyteller was intending on explaining before Inessa heard the story, but the storyteller determined those facts could be added into the story as it went on.

Ready to finally tell the story, the storyteller said, “Ok well I guess that is enough of a setup since you do not care much about the context of the story. I think all of your questions that you are waiting to ask me will be answered in the story. Now promise me you will not interrupt me when the story begins.”

“Ok I promise, but I just have one more question!” Inessa practically demanded. The storyteller let out more sigh and gave the nod of approval to a very eager Inessa.

“Is this a story about a powerful mage that frees the kingdom from the evil King Ven?” asked Inessa, thinking she knew everything already.

A smile flashed across the storyteller’s face. “Of course not. It is about a Filth girl that couldn’t use magic.”

# PART ONE

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## CHAPTER 1: THE CIRCUS

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**I**N HER DREAMS, HIS FACE WAS UNMISTAKABLE. SHE HAD NO REAL memory of him, but she knew it was her father. They shared the same dark hair, the same slightly lopsided smile. In the dream, he was always smiling. She never dreamed of her mother and couldn't begin to remember what she had looked like. Yet her father's face was familiar from her dreams.

What differed from one night to the next was his eyes: sometimes they were green, other times blue. Once, she saw them yellow and purple. Her favorite dream was when they appeared brown. That was when he most looked like her. She didn't know him, but in those dreams, she felt with utmost certainty that he was her father.

He always said the same three words, words she cherished. Today, with his eyes an icy blue, he said the three words as usual, but this time he seemed about to say more. In her dream, she leaned forward eagerly.

Then she felt a jolt. She was pulled away from the next words that parted his lips and the dream vanished. Mika woke up with an icy splash of water to the face. She bolted upright to find Esteban, the circus ringmaster, standing over her with a bucket in his hands, wearing his usual ridiculous outfit: a red jacket with a white button-up shirt and a yellow vest, bow tie (blue today)

and black top hat. She saw with relief that he didn't have his whip with him, only the rusty bucket.

Esteban, who was half a meter shorter than Mika, with black hair and tanned skin, was an unimpressive mage whose sole magic strain was temperature control. Unlike the great mage Bishop Tempest, whose ability to control temperatures meant the entire Kingdom of Seemos enjoyed a moderate climate with neither harsh winters nor droughts, Esteban could employ his magic only in small ways—like making sure the water in his bucket was as cold as possible before he dumped it onto Mika. *At least this time it wasn't steaming hot*, she thought, feeling the water soaking deeply into her clothes. *Cold stings less*.

“Wake up, Filth!” Esteban demanded, sneering in that high-pitched voice that made many of his circus workers snicker behind his back, though they would never dare laugh in his presence—an act with potentially dire consequences for Filth, who possessed no magic at all.

“That's not my name,” Mika said under her breath.

“Get up and go back to work!” he growled at Mika. *I have a name, and it is not Filth*, she thought.

Mika frequented that thought, even though she knew her place in the world. She was a Filth, no magic and no name. It was a truth she knew that would never escape her. All mages had the innate ability to discern a Filth from a mage, an ability that the Filth did not enjoy. However, Mika knew who all the mages were regardless. Not one was kind to her.

“What are you doing, you lazy—. Remember who calls the shots here, Filth!”

Since most mages did not respect a man like Esteban, he demanded respect from the Filth who served him.

Mika had fallen asleep while on a break from her work in the circus tent. She was normally allowed a break at this point in her shift. But Esteban had said he'd punish any Filth caught slacking off today. She'd assumed he was

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