

The background of the cover is a stylized illustration of a tree with thick, brown, gnarled branches. The tree is covered in green leaves and numerous bright yellow, round fruits. A single branch on the left side has a golden key hanging from it by a thin cord. The key has a decorative, circular head with intricate patterns and a simple bit. The background behind the tree is a soft, hazy landscape with more trees and a light sky, suggesting a magical or enchanted forest setting.

Journey into the Realm
The Spell Master

Markelle Grabo



Ramsey Wilder's start in ability school is just what she needs after realizing her elfen heritage and rescuing her sister. But her new life is threatened by Finn's dangerous promise to return and the secret she has yet to discover.

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The Spell Master

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Prologue

Moonlight shone through my bedroom window, illuminating the path to my sister's bed. The late summer air was cool and still, but I didn't shiver because I was cold.

Sitting on my now-familiar green comforter, I again contemplated my choice to invade Zora's privacy. I toyed with my silver cross pendent, surprised I hadn't already broken the chain, and realized that this act of treachery never once crossed my mind when I lived with Dina, the human sister I left behind when I set off for the Elf Realm to find and rescue Zora from the Element fairies. What did this say about the relationship I had with the elfen sister who actually shared my blood? Was I about to do this because of our brief history together, or simply because Dina had never withheld something from me that I would have given anything to learn?

The secrets Dina kept from me – social gossip or what presents I would receive on my birthday – were nothing compared to the one Zora was entrusted with by our parents before they disappeared years ago.

So maybe that was reason enough for what I was about to do.

I rose from my bed and traveled lightly across the wooden floor to where my elder sister slept. I thanked my innate gracefulness – one of the perks of being magical and otherworldly – as I reached her, the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest the only reason I was standing before her. I would never try this while Zora was awake.

My hands shook; I wasn't sure about this. Would I ever be? That was highly unlikely. But how else would I ever know? How else would I discover my secret, the reason I was sent to live with humans for fifteen years? I had to do this.

When I took someone's hands, I could see their memories. Every elf had a magical ability, and this was mine. Like a roll of film, I could experience the life of someone else.

Zora's hands lay clasped over her stomach. How she could sleep so perfectly, almost like Sleeping Beauty, was a mystery to me. But the way her hands rested was almost as good as a personal

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invitation. I took a deep breath. *I need to know*, I reminded myself. I deserved to know. After all, it was my secret.

And it was important that I know. Somehow, this affected the Elf Realm, the Element Fairy Realm, and the war that began between them over thirty years ago.

Besides my parents, who disappeared when Zora was four, only Zora and one other knew my secret. The Element Fairies who captured her wanted information. Zora hadn't revealed one thing, and she refused to disclose any information to me now. So...I had to do this. It was the only way.

Zora's face, pale under moonlight, was delicate and serene. I imagined that once she realized I had invaded her memories, her expression would be more devilish than angelic. This sudden insight was enough to make my heart beat faster, but not quite enough to make me back down. Hands still trembling, I reached for my sister. As I gently freed her fingers from where they lay interlocked, I watched her eyes to see if she would wake. I hesitated briefly, asking myself again if I really wanted to risk our newly formed bond over this. I answered myself by slipping my hands under hers until our palms connected.

My eyes closed and vivid images began to form. Standing before me was an elf with pale blonde hair and striking emerald eyes. It took mere moments for me to notice the silver slashes across each iris. In his hands, the elf I knew only as the Stranger held an open book.

The bolded word *FATE* stretched from one page to the other.

This was not a memory. This was unrelated to my sister and my secret. This was something else entirely.

I opened my eyes and tried to pull my hands away from my sister's, and that was the moment I realized Zora was no longer holding them. But someone was.

That someone was Finn.

His grip on my hands tightened. The fire fairy's eyes were blood red and malicious, trained on me alone as I struggled to break free. A tingling sensation made me pause. My hands felt warm and

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strange. I couldn't place the exact feeling...not until they started to burn.

The pain was excruciating. Finn's trademark grin only grew wider. Panic flared in my chest. I would have given anything to see the Stranger's silver-slashed eyes just one more time.

"*See you again soon,*" Finn mocked, quoting the note he left on my pillow.

My agonized scream was what finally woke me.

But I reentered reality in silence. The screaming was just another part of my nightmare. My bedroom was dark and still. Pulse still racing and breathing erratic, I got up and tiptoed to Zora's bed. Relief fell over me like a wave when the face I saw belonged to my sister and not Finn.

This wasn't a dream. If I took my sister's hands now, I wouldn't see the Stranger, the elf I couldn't stop thinking about. And Finn, the fire fairy general who nearly killed me last June, wouldn't be in Zora's place when the memories ended. I would actually learn my secret. I would *know*.

Just like in my dream, my hands reached for hers and I was prepared for the Realm around me to grow dizzy and dark until the pictures began. But as our palms connected, I *wasn't* prepared to feel Zora's hands pull away abruptly. Or for the flutter of her eyelashes, revealing emerald irises identical to mine.

"Zora," I gasped. I didn't know what else to say.

In her eyes I recognized disappointment, but her lips formed an angry scowl.

"Never again," she said darkly. "Never touch my hands again."

Her tone was frighteningly stern, her eyes now ablaze with an emotion I couldn't identify. Was she shocked by my actions? Or had she expected them and was now bitter over a verified prediction?

The exact emotion didn't matter though, not really. She told me never again...

...and I obeyed.

~1~

New Beginnings

The sparkling sapphires were mesmerizing. Like falling into a trance, I lost myself in their depths. My fingers traced each jewel that dotted the silver dragon egg. With each sapphire came a memory, a past event.

Mostly, the memories were of the last few months: my near-drowning at the bridge; meeting Addison and Stellan, the beautiful pair of strangers who found me lost and alone in the Human Realm; coming to the Elf Realm; searching for my lost sister; meeting an elf with silver-slashed emerald eyes; falling in love with Stellan; fighting a cruel magical being....Other, less recent memories, concerned my old life, when I thought I was human. When I thought I was a freak.

Although I cherished some of the older memories, most of them I wanted to forget. Those memories would forever be a part of my past, but I didn't want them to be a part of my future.

"Ramsey, you're going to be late! Stop checking on the eggs. It's time for school," Zora called to me from the kitchen.

Frustrated that my responsible sister had interrupted my thoughts, I yelled back, "One more minute!" I wasn't ready to leave just yet.

"Hurry up!" she said in response, although her voice was suffused with tenderness. As far as I was aware, Zora didn't have one speck of bad blood in her slender elfen body.

My sister's remark about school caused a wave of nostalgia to crash over me. After all, I had come a long way in the last few months. Until now, I had never actually pictured myself attending a school for elves. It sounded completely insane...and yet it was true.

Fantasy wasn't fantasy anymore; it wasn't just make-believe or a silly game. A former resident of Wisconsin and lover of all things

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magic, I was now part of a different, *real* magical world, away from humanity and big cities. I lived and breathed magic. Everything around me was magical, including myself.

As an elfen, the term for a female elf, I should have spent my whole life in the Elf Realm, a world separate from humans. However, my secret forced my birth parents to hide me away in the Human Realm until I was fifteen years old. With my pale skin, striking emerald eyes, pointy ears, and white blonde hair, I was *very* different compared to average humans. After years of ridicule and social isolation, I was finally rescued from my tortured life.

And now, despite my strange past, I was starting to feel like I actually belonged here.

“Ramsey!” Zora called again.

I took a deep breath. I couldn’t hide in the dragon room forever. School was going to happen whether I was ready or not. The eggs – presents from Princess Brielle of the Elf Realm – would hatch any day now. My morning ritual was to give each a little rub, but I was definitely overdoing it today. I reluctantly bid them farewell and hurried to meet Zora in the living room.

“Sorry,” I said. “Let’s go.”

Zora took my hand - she knew better than to take both my hands, especially after the stunt I pulled – and dragged me out the door. She was in a big rush, that was for sure. But she was right. I was going to be late if we didn’t hurry.

Today was my first day of elf ability school. Until next July, I would go to school every day except Saturdays from seven forty-five a.m. until noon. My schedule included four classes, each one an hour long with a five-minute break in between. Zora, whose seventeenth birthday was in early August, had graduated from ability school this past July, after she was rescued.

Zora now spent most of her time helping our “surrogate mother,” Aaliyah, in the orchard she owned. Aaliyah was Addison and Stellan’s mother and our neighbor. Half of the money, after the other employees were paid, went to Aaliyah, and the other half went directly to Zora. I was grateful that my sister was pleased with her current situation. She deserved happiness after everything she had

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endured with our parents leaving her, her subsequent isolation, and her kidnapping.

I hadn't lived very long with my birth parents, but I had lived with my adopted parents until I was fifteen, and I enjoyed a stable family despite my freakish features. They loved me as if I were their own daughter, just as I loved them. Zora knew for many years that her parents had deserted her.

Thinking about our parents and their strange disappearance always left me feeling confused more than anything else. I didn't miss them. I didn't remember them. And I would *never* know my father; he was killed by Element fairies long ago. I did wonder, however, why my parents left Birchwood City in the first place, and why they hid me in the Human Realm if my secret was meant to help the Magical Realms.

Eder, a high guard to Queen Taryn of the Elf Realm, was the only other elf who knew my secret. He once saved me from drowning in the Human Realm and has played a mysterious role in my life ever since, with his vague and ominous warnings. He even said he knew my secret, and would tell me if Zora refused. I tried writing to him numerous times since I left Tarlore, and I even tried meeting him the last time I visited the elfin capital, but to no avail. For some reason, he refused to see me and never answered my letters.

Eder told me once to wait until things played out, to just let things happen as they may, because it was the only way I would ever learn anything. No matter how skeptical I was, it seemed I had no other choice but to follow his advice, at least for now....

It was a beautiful Sunday morning. As Zora and I neared the edge of town, the warmth of the sun and splendor of the Realm distracted me from the subject of my parents and my secret. I yawned, still sleepy from waking up at three this morning in order to attend Birchwood's church service on time. I went with Aaliyah every Sunday. Elves didn't actually call the building a church; it was referred to as the Holy Sanctuary. Elves incorporated nature on a grand scale in their sermons and didn't worship Jesus like humans did. I didn't mind the changes. Going to the Sanctuary helped

expand my knowledge of elfin customs and traditions, and it kept me close to my faith. Yes, it was different, but so was I. I couldn't really complain.

Zora sometimes came to the Sanctuary, but I knew she wasn't very devout. I realized some elves, like some humans, preferred being faithful outside of organized religion, but the Sanctuary bore little resemblance to the churches in Wisconsin. It was basically a place to contemplate one's life and the beauty of the natural world. When I mentioned anything to do with faith at home, Zora refused to acknowledge that I was even speaking, leading me to believe that being kidnapped and tortured had ruined some of her perspective on life, faith, and all things predetermined.

"Are you excited?" Zora asked as we strolled.

I shrugged. "Kind of, but I don't really know what to expect. School wasn't my favorite pastime in the Human Realm. And school on a Sunday? Not cool."

My sister gave my arm a squeeze. "It's different here," she assured me, "I promise you. You're going to school in the Elf Realm, where everything is *full* of magic. There's got to be *some* fun in that, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I guess," I said, sighing, "but I do wish one thing."

"What's that?" she wondered distractedly, as she admired a passing group of cute little elfin children.

I looked down, watching the way my shoes left imprints in the dirt. "That Stellan could be here to see me off on my first day like you are."

Mentioning Stellan always brought a hushed response from my sister because of what happened between the three of us last June after her rescue. Through the use of my new ability, I accidentally discovered that Stellan and Zora had been seeing each other before she was kidnapped. Tears and fighting ensued, but eventually I realized I cared for Stellan too much to lose him despite his mistakes. He was the only guy who had ever loved me for just me.

Zora didn't hate Stellan, but she hadn't exactly forgiven him yet, and I didn't blame her. Being cheated on by someone you've known all your life couldn't be easy to deal with, especially after

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spending months being tortured and not knowing your boyfriend had already moved on to your long-lost sister.

I knew I shouldn't have said anything about Stellan, but sometimes my emotions got the better of me.

"Stellan would want you to be happy," she said, and I could tell she was choosing her words carefully.

"I know," I stressed, "but still, I'm going to school, and he's off fighting in the war. It's just wrong."

Zora's jaw clenched and I could tell I was pushing the subject, but I couldn't seem to help myself. "It's the law, Ramsey, and you know that. At age eighteen, if an elf's ability is important to the war, he or she must serve for at least two years," she reminded me.

I sighed deeply and trudged on, knowing Zora was right, and also knowing I had better shut up about Stellan or this day wouldn't be a happy one at all.

When we arrived at Birchwood's stables, Zora and I saddled majestic dark mares and began our ride to school. Over the summer, Zora had taught me how to improve my riding skills, so I wasn't feeling uneasy. I was a natural rider, but the skills Zora passed on to me helped me understand how to connect with my horse on a level deeper than a simple pony ride. I learned to approach each horse carefully and not saddle one until it was comfortable with my smell, and to look each horse in the eye so my intentions were never a secret.

We rode three miles west of the city to a small town called Aubrey, which meant "elf power" in German. Many of the names of elf towns and cities were of German, Celtic, Greek, or English origin because, before the Realms were created, every magical creature lived in the Human Realm. The name was perfect for the town, because it held one of the greatest elf ability schools in the Realm.

The Allura Elfin Ability School, named after its founder, was one of the most renowned schools in the Realm. Allura was an

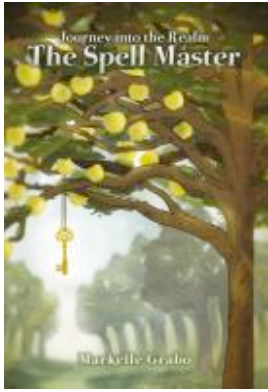
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amazing Spell Master (one of the most coveted of elfin abilities, the power to cast spells) and known far and wide for her talents. She was ancient, but no one could tell by looking at her. Elves didn't show their age past sixteen. Their minds progressed, but their bodies stayed the same: youthful, beautiful, immortal.

Thinking of Allura made me wonder how I would impact the Elf Realm in the future. Would my secret somehow bring about peace, or would learning the truth only put me in danger? I sighed, realizing thoughts like this were unfitting for what should be a happy day. I needed to forget past troubles, at least for a while.

However, there was one trouble I could never get out of my mind, one that worried me every second of every day without fail. *Finn*. He wanted to know my secret. He wanted me dead. He would come soon; I just didn't know when he would choose to appear and wreak havoc in my life again.

I did know one thing, though. When he did return, it wouldn't be to leave me a note



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