

# Crown of Power Epilogue

## Verene – Graduation

I smoothed my white trainee robe for the last time as I gazed out at the extensive audience. So many people had wanted to witness our graduation that the ceremony was being held in the arena instead of the dining hall as was the usual custom. I had heard all the details from Elsie, who had helped Zora with the preparations in her role as my personal servant.

“You have to continue as a trainee, despite all that’s happened,” she had pointed out in the face of both my and Stellan’s protests. “I want to honor my commitment and finish the year as well.”

Of course I had to accede to her wishes, despite my fear she was actually thinking of me and not her own preference—a suspicion that was reinforced when I discovered she and Stellan were waiting to make a formal announcement about their relationship until Midsummer. The delay seemed like yet another kind effort not to undermine my moment.

But I wouldn’t have minded having someone steal some of the attention. I hardly needed more given the suffocating weight I had been carrying since our return from the Empire. Although, on second thought, perhaps she truly did prefer to wait and change her status on her return to Ardann. She had a close enough view of the pressure I was under.

My eyes latched on to Duke Francis, in position slightly to the side of the assembled graduates. While he stood alone now, he had entered the arena with Zora on his arm, the head servant looking magnificent in a gown of soft, pale green decorated with intricate patterns of darker green embroidery. It was a subtle yet effective nod to the dark green uniforms of the Academy servants, and eyes and whispers followed her every movement. I only hoped the public shock over their relationship would soften the ground for Stellan and Elsie in a few weeks.

Zora sat in the front row of the arena seating with the highest ranked guests. My eyes slid along the other occupants, fastening on my family. My parents sat together, their broad smiles reflecting in their eyes as they looked proudly back at me. They were flanked by my

brothers, although neither Stellan nor Lucien were currently looking in my direction. I had half-expected Aunt Lucienne to come herself given the import of our graduation and the ceremonies immediately following it, but she had sent Lucien as her representative.

As soon as he arrived, he had pulled me into a hug that included a whispered apology, and I realized she had done it for my sake. When she traveled, the crown prince remained behind in Kallmon to govern in her absence. By staying herself, she had allowed my brother to be here. It was a fitting decision. Today was about a new generation.

The Sekalis had sent not only Princess Kalani but an enormous retinue of officials—a mark of honor and respect for our service to the Empire. And, of course, the entire Kallorwegian Mage Council was in attendance.

I had half-expected to see Mildred as well, but Zora said she was still sulking after having her unsolicited advice so roundly rejected. Of course, her letter to Jareth had expressed a different sentiment. Something about how the last thing she wanted to do was travel anywhere near the capital when every fool in the kingdom was flocking there en masse.

Duke Francis stepped forward to begin the ceremony, clearing his throat for attention. The arena fell unnaturally silent as all eyes focused on us. Several of the trainees shifted uncomfortably, but I had a lifetime of experience when it came to such functions. I easily maintained my attentive expression, even as my mind wandered.

Captains Layna and Vincent were equally well-disciplined, their faces impassive as they scanned the crowd from their position only a few steps away from the line of white-robed graduates. At the completion of this ceremony, we would no longer be trainees, and the old rules would no longer apply. Even here in the Academy, they would be our personal guards, shadowing our every move.

I suppressed my instinct to take Darius's hand, forcing my eyes not to slide sideways to where he stood beside me. We had fought so hard and endured so much to make it to this day. And for all the moments of both joy and terror, there had been even more of sheer boredom. We could make it through a little bit more.

My heart fluttered at the thought of the other ceremonies still in front of us in the next two days—ceremonies that would be anything but boring. In just a few minutes we would be fully qualified mages. Meaning it was finally time for Darius to be crowned king.

The Mage Council had intended an immediate coronation in the capital, but Darius had declared he would be crowned with his queen by his side. Which meant our coronation would happen directly after our wedding.

A small, impatient movement from my other side made me smile. I wasn't the only one getting married in two days. Just as Bryony had stood by my side through four years at the Academy, she was ready to join me in my commitment to Kallorway as well. Jareth couldn't have chosen a better bride—for his sake or mine. Knowing I would have both of my best friends with me took away all the fear of a new home. Because in two days I was not just getting married, I was also beginning a new life as both a queen and a Kallorwegian.

My eyes shifted back to my family. They had already assured me that our love for each other would be unaffected by the enormous changes in my life. And with them as inducement, I would dedicate myself to ensuring Kallorway maintained a good relationship with my home kingdom.

Duke Francis's tone changed, and I recognized his speech was coming to an end. It had been full of the usual congratulations and exhortations for the future with only the most veiled references to either the status of some of this year's graduates or the dramatic happenings of the past four years. Tradition must be upheld.

At his signal, five of the ten members of the Mage Council stood and walked across the arena floor to join us. Each of them carried folded squares of material, and all of them nodded respectfully toward Darius before taking their places a few paces to one side of the Academy Head.

He called Duchess Ashten, Head of the Wind Workers, forward and then spoke the formal words of graduation, directing them to the trainee standing closest to him.

"Isabelle, I hereby declare your mage training successfully completed. As you receive the privileges of your status as mage, remember your duties and responsibilities to your discipline and your kingdom."

Isabelle stepped forward, her eyes on the duke as she replied with quiet grace. "I thank you for your training, and I will remember."

She turned to Duchess Ashten who spoke the next of the rote words. "Isabelle, we welcome you into the wind worker discipline." She shook out the material in her hand to reveal a blue robe.

Isabelle bowed to her new head of discipline before accepting the robe and slipping it over her head. "I pledge myself to the wind workers."

Duchess Ashten nodded her acceptance of the new mage's words and, since Isabelle was the only wind worker trainee in our year, turned back toward the stands. Isabelle trailed behind to take up a reserved seat immediately behind the duchess.

Next, Duke Francis called for Duke Rennon, Head of the Creators, to step forward. As he took his place, he gave a small nod to his two nephews. Armand looked far too nervous to acknowledge his greeting, but Wardell grinned back at him.

Duke Francis called both of them forward one by one to recite the words of graduation and accept their orange robes. When Duke Rennon had led them both back to the stands, Duchess Callista took his place to receive Ashlyn and Frida, the two grower trainees. Both girls looked excited, casting giddy looks between those of us who remained and the crowd of observers. I smiled at them both, remembering the way four years had transformed their initial wary distance into friendship. While we would never be close in the way I was with Bree, I knew I would welcome the sight of their faces at court.

I couldn't say the same of the next trainee to graduate, however. As Royce—the sole Armed Forces trainee—recited the necessary words, I strove to keep any sign of emotion from my face. Royce's loyalty would always be conditional, and we would be wise to keep a close eye on him.

As the only member of the Mage Council remaining, General Haddon didn't wait to be called before striding forward to Duke Francis's side. I suppressed a head shake at the subtle message conveyed by the proud old man. He might have pledged himself to Darius's rule, but that didn't mean he would forget decades of command and maneuvering. He had been a daunting opponent, and I hoped he would prove an equally effective ally.

Jareth had trained in the Royal Guard discipline, but only Dellion was called forward by the general. She looked regal with her enviable height, her hair braided and wrapped around her head like a crown. As she walked toward her new discipline head, I remembered my initial impression of her nearly four years ago. I had observed then that she moved with an elegant, predatory grace, and that hadn't changed.

In fact, all the traits I had sensed in her then had proven true—practical, determined, elegant, connected, skilled, ambitious. And yet, in the intervening years, my thoughts about her had changed. Somewhere along the way, we had become allies. And what a difference it made to my impression of those traits to anticipate them being used on my own and my family's behalf.

When the gold robe slipped over her head, she gave a single, triumphant look back at the four of us remaining. I met it with a broad smile. She had declared that court was her chosen place, and she already looked like she belonged there.

When only Jareth, Bryony, Darius, and I remained with Duke Francis, he looked toward the stands. Zora rose solemnly to her feet, a pile of material in her hands. A brief wave of

murmurs, quickly suppressed, swept the stands. Neither Zora nor the duke gave any sign of noticing the crowd's reaction as she crossed the dusty floor to stand beside him.

He called Bryony forward first, and this time his words varied slightly.

“Bryony, I hereby declare your mage training successfully completed. As you receive the privileges of your status as energy mage, remember your duties and responsibilities to your kingdom.”

Bryony repeated the same thanks and promise the rest of the trainees had made and turned to Zora.

“Bryony, we welcome you to Kallorway,” Zora said, handing her a purple robe.

A brief shiver ran through me as Bryony accepted the robe and spoke the required words. “I pledge myself to Kallorway.”

And then it was my name being called. I moved forward, the crowds forgotten, although whispers had once again broken out among them. I glided along, not feeling the ground beneath my feet, as I focused on the Academy Head.

Before starting at the Academy, I had dreaded graduation, anticipating a ceremony that held more farce than meaning. Becoming a qualified mage meant less than nothing for someone with no ability.

How much had changed since then.

Now the words held more meaning than I could have imagined. Not only was I now truly qualified, but I was also pledging myself and my immense powers to the service of a new kingdom.

Somehow, despite all the impediments before me, I had discovered and mastered my abilities—and along the way, I had found a home and a purpose. As the purple robe settled onto my shoulders, my eyes sought Darius.

Our gazes locked as I said, “I pledge myself to Kallorway.”

The burning fire in his eyes made every past difficulty and future risk worth it. In a moment, he would step forward as the last to graduate, the traditional words turned on their head. Instead of welcoming him to Kallorway, as she had done for me, Zora would declare Darius qualified and ready to rule. It was time for us to leave the Academy behind us and begin the rest of our lives.