

Mage Vows

Kathryn L. Ramage

In all the civilized world, only four universities boasted having a College of Magic: Wittenberg, Edinburgh, Padua, and Maryesfont. In truth, these were sufficient for the needs of those who studied the craft, and any more would be ridiculous. There weren't many independent students of magic. The few great wizards took the most talented youth as their apprentices, and the rest sought lesser magicians—the aged, long past their zenith, or the young and not-yet-established—to teach them. The universities accepted those who could find no more prestigious education, as well as scholars of magical lore who were not magicians themselves.

Mikha was the only magician at Maryesfont. Though still in his early twenties, he showed some remarkable powers and was considered a most promising talent, even if he was the son of a town merchant and had never found a mentor to train him.

The university at Maryesfont had begun as a convent school for the benefit of women in the dark days when such higher education was not available for females, but in these modern times, male students were also admitted provisionally if they were of good reputation and impeccable moral character. The rules of conduct within the university were exacting: students could be expelled for sexual impropriety, for drunkenness, blasphemy, obscenity, impudence, or irregular attendance of chapel, lectures, or tutorials—all evils that the Sisters of St. Mary, Font of Wisdom, were inclined to believe young men more vulnerable to.

Mikha, however, was just the sort of student they welcomed. In addition to being a serious scholar and a true magician, he had already begun the third purification phase of his mage's training before he'd entered the university. This phase was a seven-year period during which a young magician lived under strict vows of abstinence: he lived chaste, drank no wine and ate no blooded meats, fasted and kept sleepless on certain days of the year, and performed rituals on certain nights. A mage might as well be a priest, and there were several of those among the university faculty.

He had been given rooms to himself above the College of Magic's library. This arrangement gave him privacy and ready access to all the magical resources the university possessed so that he could concentrate on his studies at any hour. In return, he occasionally aided the university's other students of magic, who knew the collection less well, in finding books, and helped the librarian keep the collection in good order.

In this cloistered and monkish life, Mikha passed the first four years of his education with relative ease. His mage vows weighed lightly upon him, for he rarely felt tempted to break them.

Then, late one evening as he wandered the long rows of tall shelves on the upper floors of the library, returning any books that had been removed to their proper places, he discovered a little student asleep at a table, head pillowed on the soft parchment leaves of the original manuscript of *The Source of Human Magic* by Uillod of Orkeney, complete with notes of revisions and marginalia.

Mikha couldn't see the student's face, for the hood of the shapeless brown scholar's robe was up over the head. Girl or boy? He stepped forward to lean over the sleeping figure, and caught sight of the pink tip of a nose, a long lock of fair hair that had escaped from beneath the hood to fall over the young person's cheek, and a down of ginger-colored fuzz on a dimpled chin. Gently, he shook the student by the shoulder.

The student awoke. "Oh, I'm sorry! I must have fallen asleep."

"Old Uillod can be dry reading," Mikha said, "especially for a beginner." He thought he was acquainted with all the students of magic at Maryesfont, but this one must be new.

As the youth sat upright and twisted to look up at the mage, his hood fell back to show his face—the face of an angel. Mikha was not poetic; this was simply what he thought in that first astonishing moment. He knew that he spoke to a boy, but the youth's beauty came as a surprise. The boy looked like the angels in the stained glass windows of the chapel. In the light of the single candle he held in his hand, the boy's flushed face, still soft with sleep, was rosy and childlike; his mouth opened slightly in wonderment was like an angel's in silent song, and his fair hair was lit to fiery gold.

"Who are you?" Mikha asked him.

"Andemyon Lightesblood."

This was the oddest name Mikha had ever heard. He could not imagine what the family name meant. Was this a noble youth? Mikha had never seen a nobleman before, but they were popular figures in the comedies and romances performed in the city theaters; those foppish creatures with their dandified clothes and ridiculously elaborate manners looked nothing like this boy.

“Are you the librarian?” the boy asked in return, then looked him over, taking in the long, black robe the young man wore. “No, you have magician’s robes. I was told a mage lived in the library. Are you he?”

“Yes, that’s right. Mikha is my name.”

“Is the library shut?” Andemyon turned again to look out of the narrow window above his table. “It’s after dark. I must’ve been sleeping for hours. What time is it?”

“It was just ten o’ the clock when I shut the library doors.”

“Ten! It’s past curfew. I’ll be terribly late.” He rose and tried to dart past the mage, who unintentionally blocked his exit.

Mikha stepped back, but took the youth by an arm. “Wait,” he offered. “I’ll accompany you.”

Being out past curfew was not by itself enough of a breach to warrant expulsion, but the boy would be in for at least a scolding from the dean of his college and some severe penalties, such as being limited to his room except for meals, chapel, and classes, for up to a month. Mikha hated to see that happen. This was, after all, an accident. Andemyon had been up to no mischief. Besides, there were so few other young men in the university, and he didn’t like to see any one of them be caught and punished. If he couldn’t help Andemyon sneak into his room unnoticed, perhaps he could speak on the boy’s behalf? His position and mage state gave him certain privileges that other students, male and female, were not allowed.

They went down the stairwell together, to the library entrance on the ground floor. A large white moth was battering its wings frantically on the tall, mullioned window above the turn of the stairs; the light of the candle Mikha was carrying, reflected multiple times on the numerous small panes of glass, seemed to dazzle and confuse it.

“Poor thing! It will fly into the flame in another moment and be burnt to an ash.” Andemyon stood on tiptoe to reach up and carefully capture the moth under the palm of a cupped hand, then reached out with his other hand to unlatch the window and push open the casement. “I don’t like to see anything needlessly killed, and especially not a moth,” he explained as he brushed the fluttering insect outside. “Have you heard the old myth that moths are truly dead souls lost? People thought so in the old days, when this part of the world was wild.”

Mikha had heard this myth, but such pagan tales were not generally known among the common folk. Scholars might learn of them, but the Church did not encourage them among the unlearned who might confuse them with accepted doctrine. “Where did you read that?”

“Father told me.” Andemyon turned back to look up at Mikha, who stood several steps behind and above him. “I really must go.”

They swiftly crossed the lawns and gardens of the university to reach St. Ambrose's College, one of the smaller and older buildings on campus. They were met at the door by the college Dean. Mikha, surprised that they were caught so quickly, made ready some excuse—any excuse—for the boy's being out so late, but Andemyon spoke first:

"'Tis nothing to fret for, Auntie. I'm sorry if I worried you. I fell asleep in the library of magic. This is my friend Mikha—he's a mage."

The dean, who knew Mikha by sight, nodded and thanked him for showing Andemyon safely home.

As he returned to the library alone, Mikha was filled with an inexplicable burst of joyous energy; like a boy at play, he lifted his robe to his knees and raced across the grass, bounding over bushes and flower beds, leaping up to snatch at the leaves on low-slung branches of the trees above the path. He ran up the stairs two and three at a time, his heart light. He did not realize that he had left Uillod's book lying out where Andemyon had been reading it until the librarian asked him about it the next afternoon.

He did not sleep well that night. Andemyon's voice repeated again and again in his head: "This is my friend Mikha—he's a mage"—until the words lost all sense. He turned restlessly, and his dreams, when they finally came, were more confused than his waking thoughts, and were filled with moths and golden-haired angels.

In the morning, he rose early and went back to St. Ambrose's. He stood for ten minutes, twenty, on the dew-damp lawn of the quad before Andemyon emerged. The boy smiled at the sight of him; Mikha felt as if he had waited all night.

"Your aunt—the Dean—she isn't angry with you?"

"Oh, no. She couldn't be. Aunt Pacia was only afraid that I'd come to some harm. She was greatly relieved when she saw I was with you."

"You haven't been punished?"

Andemyon shook his head.

"Do you have a class now?" Mikha persisted.

"A meeting with my tutor."

"May I walk with you?"

While they walked to the tutor's rooms, Andemyon told his new friend more about himself. The Dean of St. Ambrose's was his mother's aunt, and Andemyon was under her protection while he was a student here at the university. Mikha had no reason to disbelieve this, but then Andemyon went on to tell him some absurd and fantastical tales: he claimed that his father was Lord Yryd Lightmaster, the premiere wizard in the Norman Empire. He had spent his childhood in the wizard's castle on the cliffs over the sea at the very tip of Greenwaters Island and had

been educated among his father's apprentices and his magically talented elder brother and sister, but he possessed no magic abilities of his own. At fourteen, he'd been sent to the Duke's court at Pendaunzel to be a herald, and had become a favorite of Duke Dafythe himself. Now that he was eighteen, he had left the court to begin his formal education at Maryesfont.

As he listened to these incredible stories, Mikha thought that this angelic boy must either be an accomplished and imaginative liar or completely mad. In time, he discovered that Andemyon had only spoken the truth.

This was their beginning. In the months that followed, their friendship grew swiftly. On other days, they took walks around the university grounds or on paths along the river beyond the city walls. Andemyon talked about his father and his family, and what it had been like to serve at the Duke's court. In turn, Mikha told Andemyon about his childhood as the younger son of a respectably prosperous merchant family in the city of Storm Port, and how his family had reacted when he'd first shown signs of being magical. While the peasantry and common folk might be superstitious about magic and cross themselves when they spoke of a wizard's power, among the merchant classes magic was considered to be in questionable taste. Mikha's family had been at pains to suppress his burgeoning talents, just as they would if he'd shown a fondness for writing poetry or a desire to run off with a troupe of actors. Once he'd reached an age to decide for himself, Mikha had left home to seek his own education.

They spent long hours discussing magic. Andemyon asked question upon question: What did it feel like to cast a spell? How did Mikha *do* it? Andemyon could speak the same incantations, make the same gestures with his hands, and it would come to nothing. Could Mikha form a cloud from a cup of water? Could he light a candle's wick? Could he move this book across that table without touching it? Where did this power come from? The Church claimed that magic was a gift from God, or a tool of Satan, depending on the use it was put to, but was there also a physical source to it? Were there any other magicians in Mikha's family?

He took an interest in Mikha's studies, and Mikha was astonished by how much Andemyon had already read. That foray into Uillod of Orkeney at their meeting had not been the first time Andemyon had opened this book. It seemed odd to Mikha that this angelic boy with no magic of his own should know as much of wizard craft as the most promising adept apprentice, but Andemyon had been reading the books on his father's shelves since he was too small to understand them.

“I grew up among magicians. All of my family are magical, save myself,” Andemyon explained. “But I’ve always wondered—why I am not too? Why am I different?”

He meant to find the answer. He often observed Mikha while spells were being cast. Could he place his hand over Mikha’s while he made the requisite gestures? He wanted to see if the power were transmitted through the fingers. Could he touch Mikha’s chest to feel if his heartbeat changed?

No, Mikha had no objection to these requests. The hours they spent working together were the most exciting and fascinating of his day. He felt that they were making important discoveries into the nature of magic. His own studies were the traditional course for young magicians: spellcraft, the history of wizardry, the philosophy of magic, and plenty of practice to hone his skills. Andemyon’s questions and experiments, by contrast, seemed unusual and imaginative.

As a magician, Mikha sensed the natural world around him: the living energies in the leaves of the trees, the shimmering grass, the clouds of midges over the deep river water. All things, he perceived, were endowed with an individual power that might be channeled and controlled. With Andemyon, he felt the Earth begin to open its secrets to him and believed that it was all part of the same energy. The boy drew him into it. Andemyon possessed a keen intellect, immature but developing, and yet there remained an elfish strangeness in his clear blue eyes. He had a childlike wonderment at the world around him, and his ideas were often bewildering, even to a young mage. It astonished Mikha to think that such a remarkable creature as Andemyon Lightesblood was his friend. Beyond doubt, this friendship was the most important thing ever to happen to him.

He didn’t understand why, until they were caught one afternoon in a rainstorm outside the city. In the sudden downpour, they fled from the open fields, pausing only briefly under trees in their dash, but never stopping long once they heard the rumbles of thunder. They slipped in the mud and slick grass as they ran, stumbled against each other, caught and dragged each other back to their feet to go on, laughing all the while. When at last they reached the city, they sought the first shelter within the university gates, the porch of a college. Andemyon reached it ahead of his friend. When Mikha caught up, Andemyon flung both arms around him and collapsed against him, breathless and soaked.

“Can’t you stop a storm, Mikha?” he teased. “My father could do it. He can pull lightning out of a clear sky, and dispel a storm as quickly.”

“My talent doesn’t lie that way,” Mikha answered. “I’m no master of rain and lightning, and I’m not so powerful a wizard as your father. Nobody is.”

“Oh, but you will be, one day.” Andemyon smiled at him.

“You sound more certain of that than I am.”

“Of course I am. Don’t I know your talents better than anyone? Haven’t I watched you perform hundreds of spells? You never go wrong. I used to watch Father’s apprentices at their exercises—you never miscast the way they did. You’re going to be a great wizard. I know it.”

Mikha was immensely gratified at this expression of confidence, but there was something in the way Andemyon was gazing up at him, something in that smile, that made him feel very odd. He released his friend in confusion. “I don’t know if we can reach St. Ambrose’s without getting in a worse state,” he said. “It’s on the far side of the campus.”

“The College of Magic is much closer,” Andemyon agreed, and darted away.

They went into the library and raced up the stairs to Mikha’s rooms. Mikha was no master of light, but he could create a spark to set the tinder on the hearth afire. A good magician had no need of matches. When he turned to look up from this task, he found that Andemyon was already shedding his drenched clothes.

Mikha stopped in the act of shrugging off his own soggy robe. His mouth felt dry and his heart began to race. He and Andemyon had been alone together in his rooms dozens of times before, but he was aware for the first time how isolated they were at the top of this building. He heard the rain drumming down on the roof immediately overhead, and no other sound. There was no one in the library below. No one would interrupt them. No one ever had while they were up here on other afternoons, and it would be no different today.

Andemyon pulled off his shirt and hung it over the back of a chair near the fire. Drops of water ran down the long curls of his hair and onto his bare shoulders and chest, where they trickled down in tiny rivulets. One drop hung suspended for a long moment off the end of a cold-puckered nipple; Mikha couldn’t take his eyes from it. He felt a shocking desire to kiss it away...before it fell.

When Andemyon shook out his hair with spread fingers, more droplets showered around him in a sparkling spray. Next, he peeled off his hose and stepped out of them. Mikha was used to thinking of his friend as a young boy, but Andemyon was nearly nineteen and no longer a child. His body was not childlike. The joints of his arms and legs, like his hands and feet, were raw-boned and outsized in proportion to the rest of his body, but the rest of him was growing rapidly to catch up. He was

not yet so tall as Mikha and not so bony, nor was he as ungainly. There was little hair on his body, only a cluster of reddish curls where his legs met, darker than the hair on his head. And dangling beneath these curls, pink and flaccid... Mikha stared, then quickly averted his eyes. He was not in so blameless a condition himself.

"I'm muddy to the knees!" Andemyon laughed as he picked up his dirty hose from the floor. "I'll have to give these a wash before I can put them back on, or else go home barelegged. Auntie will be scandalized." Then he noticed that Mikha was still sitting on the hearth. "Aren't you going to get out of those wet things?"

Undressing was the last thing Mikha wished to do. He didn't dare let Andemyon see him in this embarrassing state. "I'm not so wet," he answered, and removed his mage robe to set it aside. Beneath, he wore black hose and a loose, white shirt. "I can dry myself here by the fire."

"I never saw you without your magician's robe on before!" said Andemyon. "You look quite ordinary. Almost like any other boy. Is there something else I can put on?"

"There's a spare nightshirt in the chest, over there."

Andemyon walked unselfconsciously naked to the chest of drawers to find the nightshirt. Mikha shut his eyes and tried to will his body into obedience. He had performed similar efforts of self-control countless times. He knew how to discipline his mind and flesh. During his childhood, he had suppressed his magical abilities in the face of parental disapproval. As a mage, he had fasted for days at a time and had kept sleepless vigils over many nights. He could command the rhythm of his breaths and the measure of his heartbeats. He could control *this*. He must, before Andemyon noticed.

After he had found and put on the nightshirt, Andemyon rinsed his muddy hose in the wash-basin and lay them over the back of the chair beside his shirt. He kept up a cheerful chatter about Mikha creating a spell to dry clothes more quickly, which gave Mikha time to master himself.

"When are you expected back at St. Ambrose's?" he asked once he had regained some control.

"Not for hours. Aunt Pacia knows I'm with you." Andemyon sprawled across the foot of Mikha's bed.

"Doesn't she mind that you're with me all day?"

"Oh, no. When I first came to the university, she was afraid I'd be taken up by some older lad who would want to take me out to the drinking-houses and gaming-houses, and worse places, in the town and corrupt me. She was relieved when we became friends instead." Andemyon grinned and, as his friend crossed the room to stand over him,

raised his foot to poke at Mikha playfully with his toes. “A mage is as safe as a young man can be.”

He had placed his foot squarely on Mikha’s breastbone. Mikha gripped the bare ankle, and his head swam with a delicious haze. He was overtaken by a fantasy so vivid that he almost believed it was real: he saw his own hand moving up Andemyon’s bare leg, ruffling the ginger-colored fuzz on his calf, and gently brought Andemyon’s knee to his chest. Andemyon smiled up at him, waiting. Mikha leaned down and kissed him.

He shook his head, dispelling this picture, and let Andemyon’s ankle go.

“I tell Auntie all about our experiments, everything we do,” Andemyon went on. “She doesn’t understand my interest in magic, but she says I mustn’t occupy too much of your time with my silly questions. Your studies are too important. She says that the university hasn’t had a graduate magician in over fifty years. They’re so proud to have one now—and such a promising one! They wouldn’t want anything to spoil your chances. You’ll be tested soon, won’t you?”

“In three years,” said Mikha.

“As long as that?”

Mikha nodded. “There’ll be a difficult time ahead, but once I pass into my fourth phase, I’ll leave off my mage vows and become a full wizard. A minor one.”

“You must have a wizard to test you.” Andemyon sat up. “Shall I ask my father to do it? I want very much for you to meet him.”

Mikha quailed at the idea of meeting Andemyon’s father. He’d heard too many tales of the foes the Lightmaster had met in wizard-battle, and how he had vanquished them. Some still lived.

Andemyon saw his expression and laughed. “Don’t be so frightened, Mikha! Father won’t be hard on you. I’ve seen him test others, and he is fierce, but fair. Besides, you’ll do wonderfully. Haven’t I said so before?” He lay back again, propped on one elbow, perfectly at ease and unaware of Mikha’s efforts to keep up his side of the conversation.

Mikha’s heart was thumping so loudly he was surprised Andemyon couldn’t hear it. His innards felt gelatinous, and his head bubbled with more wild, impulsive, delightful thoughts. He imagined lying down beside his friend, holding him in his arms. He thought about kissing Andemyon, tasting those lips, tugging aside that flimsy nightshirt to cover his body with kisses. He imagined burying his face in the puff of reddish curls.

After awhile, Andemyon looked up at the beamed ceiling above them. “The rain’s stopped. I should go.” He rose from the bed to feel his

clothes laid out by the fire and decided they were dry enough to be put back on. In a few minutes, he had dressed. Mikha dared not watch him this time.

“Will I see you tomorrow?” the young mage asked.

“Of course! I’ll come as soon as I’ve finished my classes. That is, if it won’t inconvenience you.”

“No, you’re no inconvenience, Andemyon.”

As he opened the door to exit, Andemyon turned to give Mikha a smile—a smile that pierced Mikha through to the core of his being. Andemyon might not be magical in the usual sense, but he certainly held some enchantment of his own. A powerful spell had been cast today.

After his friend had gone, Mikha curled up on his bed and groaned. This strange new sensation that had overwhelmed him was achingly sweet, agonizing, bewildering, wonderful, terrifying. He felt deeply shamed as if he had been caught in the act of a mortal sin, for he could not deny the nature of what he was feeling, but neither Church upbringing nor a mage’s self-command could banish it. It was the very worst thing that could happen to a magician bound by a vow of celibacy. He’d fallen in love. It had happened months ago, but hadn’t seen it for what it was until today. Andemyon was all he desired...and couldn’t have.

The mage vows he had barely felt restrained by these last four years were suddenly unendurable. Three more years! Could he hold out for so long without facing disaster? How could he bear to have Andemyon near him? But he did not wish Andemyon to go away. No. That was worse. To see Andemyon, to think about him—that must be enough, for now. For the next three years this must be endured. At the end of that time, he would be a full wizard, free of his vows, and Andemyon would be a young man of twenty-two. He could tell Andemyon the truth then. What would Andemyon say to that? And what would they do?