



## Cold Iron (The Malorum Gates Book 1)

By Stina Leicht

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Fraternal twins Nels and Suvi move beyond their royal heritage and into military and magical dominion in this flintlock epic fantasy debut from a two-time Campbell Award finalist.

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Disowned and dismissed to the military, Nels establishes himself as a leader as Eledore begins to shatter under the attack of the Acrasians, who the Kainen had previously dismissed as barbarians. But Nels knows differently, and with the aid of Suvi, who has allied with pirates, he mounts a military offensive with sword, canon, and what little magic is left in the world.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“This is a thoroughly enjoyable book, with solid, believable characters, absorbing action, and sprawling scope. It’s what I think of as ‘90s Epic Fantasy (mostly because of how many books like this I was devouring at the time) — fantasy that’s figuring out its relationship to its own history and lineage in order to unabashedly revel in it. It reminded me, pleasurable, of Robin Hobb’s *Assassin’s Apprentice* series.” (, NPR Books)

“In *Cold Iron*, Leicht has written an approachable, entertaining epic fantasy, peopled with engaging characters and replete with dramatic incidents. *Cold Iron* rapidly progresses towards *very entertaining indeed.*” (, Tor.com)

#### **(Epic Best Book of 2015)**

“There are quite a few underrated authors out there. These are authors with a disgusting amount of talent, but not nearly the attention for said talent that they deserve. Stina Leicht, in my humble opinion, is at the top of that list. I truly loved this book.” (, Bookworm Blues)

“In many ways, the world building is fascinating. Its protagonists have complex motivations, failings and insecurities. It’s a book with big ideas and an epic storyline.” (, Fantasy Faction)

“Leicht loads up on all the thrills we love in the genre (Huge battles! Countries in peril! Heroes facing impossible odds! Coming of age stories! Banter! So much banter!), she also plays with the formula, twisting expected tropes in unusual ways. I don’t think I have ever come across a fantasy novel that used the advantages of being, you know, *fantasy* to think around giving martial power an honored, or at least feared, place at the table of power.” (, B&N Sci Fi & Fantasy Blog)

“[*Cold Iron*] offers a full scale flintlock fantasy world in which a pair of young scions stretches beyond their royal heritage and into realms both military and magical. Stina Leicht, whose previous books were historical/urban fantasy, makes a promising turn to epic fantasy [with] an excellent trio of central characters.” (, SF Signal)

“The allure of fascinating world building permeates *Cold Iron* from its foundation. There are distinct races and cultures, a magical system with spirituality and ritual within it, ‘flintlock’ technology, and rumors of mythical ‘Old Ones’ soon to return. But rather than being plot driven as epic series often are, *Cold Iron* gets its page length from firmly character driven exploration.” (, The Skiffy & Fanta Show)

#### About the Author

Stina Leicht is a science fiction and fantasy writer living in central Texas. Her second novel, *And Blue Skies from Pain*, was on the Locus Recommended Reading list for 2012. She was a Campbell Award finalist in 2013 and in 2012. In 2012 she was also shortlisted for the Crawford Award. When she was small Stina wanted to grow up to be like Vincent Price.

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*Cold Iron*

## ONE

It was late, but Nels couldn't sleep. Worries concerning the morning's journey circled his skull until he grew to hate the look of his bed curtains. Worse, when he had slept, he'd had terrible nightmares. He told himself that prognostication didn't run in his family line and the dreams were meaningless. Nothing seemed to help. The nightmares fomented feelings of nameless dread until the need to flee his bedchamber in search of company was huge.

Captain Karpanen might still be awake, he thought.

A fire in the hearth cast his room in ruddy shadows. Grabbing a thick velvet robe, he crept through his private parlor. Then he exited into the chilly darkness of the outer hallway, the door shutting behind him with a quiet click.

Placing a hand on the cold stone wall, he shuffled into darkness. The sound of his feet against the palace's stately marble floors echoed down the hallway. There were no carpets. They had yet to be replaced—a casualty of one of Nels's pranks. Marble chilled his bare feet until it was painful to walk. His trailing fingers brushed against a painting, almost sending it crashing to the floor, but he caught it and straightened the picture as best he could in the dark. He then resumed his journey. Taking the first left, he spotted warm light pooling at the bottom of the door at the end. He listened before knocking and then entered.

In contrast to the rest of the palace, the captain's sitting room was spare and precise. As usual, it made entering seem like a visit to a foreign country. What furniture there was was of Ytlainen make, carved from birch and decorated in intricate geometric patterns. This, in contrast to the current Eledorean fashion of organic curves and swirls. A lone painting graced the wall above the fireplace. It was a landscape depicting an unfamiliar mountain and executed in loose brush strokes. Unlike any work of art Nels had ever seen, it was his favorite. Up close, it appeared to be nothing but flat strokes of color. However, if he viewed it from across the room, the picture took on more depth and reality. Made of soft purples, blues, and greens, it'd taken him an entire afternoon to realize that there was no black pigment in it at all. That in itself was unusual, given that it hung in a soldier's apartments. Nels had always assumed the painting originated from the Kingdom of Ytlain like its owner. Never having been outside of Eledore, let alone the city of Jalokivi, he didn't know for sure.

Nels surreptitiously shut the door behind him. His nose was immediately met with a comforting mix of old incense, warm candle wax, and burning charcoal.

Captain Karpanen paused and then placed a wicked-looking dagger between a beeswax candle and his saber on the birchwood altar table. Several other items were arranged on the table's surface, among them a small, stoppered brown bottle, a black bowl of herbs, and a second ceramic bowl painted dark blue. The ornate blue bowl contained white sand and a single piece of glowing charcoal.

"What are you doing?" Nels asked, eager to put his nightmares behind him.

Karpanen was dressed in a loose, worn evening robe of faded green linen decorated with an ornate Ytlainen pattern. Even the cut of the sleeves was foreign. Nels hadn't seen anyone else in the palace wear anything like it, and he had the impression it was older than he was. The collar of a white silk nightshirt half escaped the frayed robe.

He's not wearing any black, Nels thought. It struck him as a little more than daring. He's in his own rooms. He can do what he wants, can't he? In Eledore, the color was used to set soldiers apart. It served as a warning. Soldiers were unclean. Mother says the Ytlainen don't keep Blood Custom, not like Eledoreans do.

A small silver medal with the figure of a horse embossed on it hung off a silver chain around Karpanen's neck. His feet were bare, and his long, light brown hair rippled down his back. It looked as though he'd only just freed it of its braid. That was unusual for Karpanen. He was normally exacting and tidy. It gave Nels a bad feeling.

The quiet hiss from the charcoal filled an expectant silence.

Karpanen at last spoke in a cool tone. "Did I say you could enter?"

"I knocked like you asked. But you didn't answer."

"It's late, Nels. I might have been entertaining someone."

Aged fifteen—almost sixteen—Nels was annoyed that the captain thought him too young to understand. "You aren't. I listened at the door first. Anyway, I asked Lady Karita months ago if you had a lover, and she said you didn't. You don't even keep an automaton." He'd added that last bit to demonstrate worldliness and then regretted it when he spied a flash of insult in Karpanen's unyielding black eyes. "You've no lover at all. At least, not since you moved into the palace."

The Eledorean royal court was a dangerous place. As crown prince, Nels had learned early that he couldn't afford ignorance. Therefore, he paid regular bribes in exchange for information.

"Hasn't anyone told you that spying on people is impolite?" Karpanen asked.

"Sure," Nels said with a shrug. "You do. All the time." He gave the captain his most charming smile. "Doesn't stop me, though."

"Too bad," the captain said in a patient tone that bordered on amused.

"No one tells me anything," Nels said. "How else am I to know what's going on?"

"Shouldn't you be asleep?"

Relieved that the offense had been forgiven, Nels relaxed. Of course, the mistake would run over and over in his mind later, and he'd think again and again about what he should've said. He never seemed to learn. Unlike his twin sister, Suvi, he was always saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. Luckily, Karpanen rarely stayed angry with him.

Nels stepped farther into the room. "Is this a soldier's ritual?" There wasn't anyone around to be shocked by his curiosity. Showing off ill-gotten knowledge, he pointed at the contents of the black bowl. "That's sandalwood, isn't it?"

"That would be one of the ingredients." Karpanen sounded almost pleased. His irises changed from hard black to a warm gray.

“And clove oil? That's clove oil.” Nels pointed at the little brown bottle. “That's for keeping rust off blades. Oh! I know. This is a cleansing ritual, isn't it?” He'd stolen—borrowed—one or two of Karpanen's books on martial practices. Of course, he'd done so one at a time and returned each before Karpanen could notice the loss. “Will you show me how?”

“You know good and well such things are forbidden.”

“Show me anyway. Please?” Nels stepped closer to the birchwood altar table with its silver inlay design. “You promised you would one day. I won't tell anyone. I swear.”

“I can't. Your mother—”

“Ooooooh! Is that blood?” Nels pointed at the saber lying on the table. He'd heard that there'd been an execution earlier in the day. He didn't know the details. No one of quality spoke openly of blood or death, nor did they associate with those who dealt in them. In any case, the execution wouldn't have involved anyone he knew, other than Karpanen. Karpanen's responsibilities—in addition to watching over the queen and the crown prince—included standing in as royal executioner whenever Nels's father, King Henrik Ilmari, demanded it.

That seemed an odd combination of duties now that Nels thought about it.

“Don't touch that! It's unclean!”

Nels jerked his hand from the blade before it could be slapped, and frowned. “I wasn't going to.”

Captain Karpanen sighed, and his eyes lightened to dove gray. “All right. If I show you how to reconsecrate a blade, will you go to bed? Tomorrow will be a long, tiring day, and you need your sleep.”

Nels's pride stung. “I'm not a child.”

The morning's journey would be his first attempt at independence. Publicly, the intent was to travel south to Gardemeister where the Silmaillia, Saara Korpela, the king's seer and personal healer lived. It was to be a dull holiday excursion—even if it was his first. He'd told everyone he wanted to see the country over which he would one day rule. In reality, his intentions were far more dangerous. If I'm caught, Uncle Sakari will have me killed. But I have to do something. Now. Before father names Suvi heir in my stead. Disturbing, persistent questions about the future gnawed at his confidence like rats. I'm not afraid. I'm not. Eledorean princes were never afraid. Fear was for the powerless, and he had power. His mother said her side of the family often matured late. She told him she'd had reassurances from the Silmaillia. He didn't have anything to worry about. I'm a royal prince. I'm not a changeling.

“Any experienced soldier would know that getting enough sleep can mean the difference between life and death,” Karpanen said.

“We're not going into . . . battle.”

Karpanen raised an eyebrow in question.

He senses the danger even if you haven't told him the truth, Nels thought. “Fine. I'll go to bed. After.”

Karpanen stared him directly in the eyes. The color of his irises had returned to that flinty black. "Do you promise?"

"I swear." Out of habit, Nels made the oath in Acrasian and crossed his heart using his index finger. He understood it was an Acrasian custom. He made a habit of studying foreign languages and cultures. Being able to speak more languages than anyone else made him feel accomplished in spite of his other failings. There were advantages in such information. His father's spies couldn't report what they didn't understand.

Karpanen frowned. "What did you say?"

"I'm sorry," Nels said. "I give you my word, sir." He used formal Eledorean court speech for the oath and had added the "sir" without thinking. His cheeks grew hot, and he looked away. This, after the latest stern talk from the king. Fixing his attention on the altar table, Nels hoped Karpanen didn't notice the slip.

"Stand on the carpet," Karpanen said. "Here. On my left." He paused. "Where are your slippers?"

"I forgot them."

"Aren't you cold?"

Nels nodded.

Karpanen left briefly for his bedchamber and then returned.

Nels noticed a bloodstained rag resting on the table. "What's that?" he asked, pointing at the rag.

"Never mind that." He dropped a pair of old slippers on the floor next to Nels's feet. "Put those on."

Worn brown velvet warmed Nels's frozen feet at once. The slippers were too big, of course. He wiggled his toes, enjoying the feel, nonetheless. "Thanks."

"Be quiet, please. And stop your fidgeting."

"But—"

"Do you want me to teach you or not?" Karpanen asked. "Close your eyes. Focus on your breathing and empty your mind like I taught you."

"Why? Aren't you going to show me how to clean the blade?"

"Don't waste time asking useless questions. What did I tell you about the distinction between what people do and what people say?"

"Actions speak truth even when words lie."

"Exactly. Now be quiet and observe. Empty your mind and then listen carefully. I'll answer your questions afterward."

Nels shut his eyes and breathed in the peaceful atmosphere. The ticking of the mantel clock over the

fireplace and the slow ebb-and-flow rhythm of his breaths marked the time. He heard the quiet rustle of silk against linen as Karpanen moved. Nels opened his eyes at once. He didn't want to miss a thing.

Karpanen poured a small amount of herbs onto the charcoal. Thick white smoke rose from the blue bowl. He waved a hand over it, breathing in the scented fumes. He then resumed his former posture, closed his eyes, and raised his hands. Then he spoke in a low voice, almost a whisper. "Great Hasta, White Queen of Crossroads, Horse Mother, Protector of the Weak, Giver of Life, Escort of the Newly Dead, we beg your favor this night." He paused and then bent at the waist with his hands folded in front of his face in prayer. "Your servant asks your forgiveness, and forgiveness for those I've slain, that they might pass into the next world without the great burden of anger or fear. Bless us, those you have chosen for your rite of life and death. Remove the stains of our inequity, for all are equal in your eyes. Forgive me my rage felt for fallen brothers and sisters. And forgive my pride in my skill as well as my joy in victory. I will remember with respect those I kill, although I remove their life's blood from my blade." He took up the damp, stained cloth and began working at the small amounts of dried crimson on the saber in silence. When he finally finished, he followed this up with a coat of clove oil from the brown bottle, using a clean rag.

Breathing in the spicy mixture of incense smoke and oil, a combination of feelings overcame Nels. He had a sense of the sacred, but he also felt a thrill. Father would have apoplexy if he knew I was here.

"Please grant Sir Joonas Pohjonen an easy and safe passage to the next world, Lady Hasta."

Nels blinked as he recognized the name. Sir Pohjonen was a notorious court dandy and a flirt. He was also—had been—one of his father's favorite violin players. Nels looked to Karpanen, and the sense of danger intensified.

"Please watch over the loved ones he leaves behind." Karpanen next picked up the wicked-looking dagger, shoved up his sleeve, and sliced the back of a scarred forearm. "I hereby pay the blood-price for their care." He let a few drops of blood fall onto the hot charcoal. It hissed, and the scent of burning blood met the air. He then used the clove oil-soaked cloth to dab the wound clean. When the bleeding stopped, he collected both rags, went to the fireplace, and tossed them into the flames. "Please, Hasta, free your servant and his weapons of all blemish so that he might continue to do your holy work." He turned to the water bowl and rinsed his hands, drying them on a clean white cloth. Then he used the whetstone on both the dagger and the saber. Once they were sharpened to his satisfaction, he gave them a last coat of clove oil before replacing them on the altar. "With this water, please bless your humble servant, Great Hasta." He sprinkled a little on himself, and as if on a whim, Karpanen playfully flicked a bit of water in Nels's face.

Nels was only just able to keep from laughing.

Karpanen resumed a serious demeanor. "Thank you, Lady Hasta." He bowed again with his hands folded in front of his nose. Straightening, he placed another pinch of herbs onto the charcoal and again breathed the smoke. After a few moments of silent prayer, he turned. "All right, Nels. You may ask your questions."

Nels hesitated, not out of a lack of curiosity. There were at least twenty questions burning on his lips. However, there was one in particular he deeply desired to ask. At the same time, he didn't want Karpanen to think him perverted. It wasn't as if Nels had a secret wish to kill. That would be an abomination beyond any he could imagine. It was only that he wanted to know what it was like to be a soldier, and the question was at the heart of what being a soldier was about. He decided to take a chance. "What's it like to kill someone?"

Karpanen blinked and looked away in shame, and Nels felt an overwhelming guilt for having hurt the one

person he looked up to and cared for as much as he did his mother and sister.

Stupid! You are a defective, just as they say. How could I ask him that? Nels said out loud, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It's time for you to go to bed," Karpanen said without looking at him.

"I do mean it, sir. I'm so sorry."

"Go." Karpanen turned his back on him and ran a hand through his untidy hair. "Now. Please." The hand trembled as he lowered it to his side.

## Users Review

### From reader reviews:

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