

Font

Font Color

Font Size



Background Color

“I HAVE YOUR CHILD.”

“No!” Elena screamed, as she looked upon the face of the one man she hated more than Alexis Scarvan.

“She is safe and well,” said Wolf Madraga. “I have brought a nursemaid for her. I will let you see her if you cooperate.”

“I have no choice.” Elena couldn’t help weeping.

“Such words come ill from such beautiful lips. I am not Scarvan. I have rescued you from him. I shall make you my wife.”

“I will never be anyone’s wife but Eldene’s. You can take my body, but you can never make me consent to it.”

Madraga leaned down to her. “You have been a torment to me, woman,” he whispered. “Because of you, twenty-five years of alliance is gone. Your beauty has obsessed me.”

He put his hand on her neck and stroked it.

“You *will* do as I wish. I have your child...”

Rebecca Locksley
THE THREE SISTERS

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Contents

Prologue

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33

“... I am going to pay a visit to your hut and take away the beautiful Briseis, your prize, Achilles, to let you know that I am more powerful than you, and to teach others not to bandy words and defy their King.”

Agamemnon, *The Iliad*

THE THREE SISTERS

Prologue

Mathinna's Story

*Three children born of life force,
A bridge from death to life,
from imbalance to harmony.
The warbird flies at their command
to rein in the people of the dragon.
A demon fire that burns toward Ermora
Yields to their quenching
A melded child of their making
is born to rule the dragon
To bring harmony in clasped hands.*

Pushing aside the fallen stones of Asgor's fortress with bloody hands, Mathinna pulled herself out of the smoking rubble. She felt... shaken, devastated—no, those words were too lukewarm for what had happened. Mathinna had killed Asgor and in killing him had, like all her people, been forced to share his experience of death. She felt as if her own heart had stopped and her own skin had been blistered with agonizing fire, even though she was well and mostly whole.

Ah, but it had been worth the pain!

Mathinna looked over at the charred body of the dead demonmaster and felt a shamefully unclean glow of pleasure. To kill must always be wrong, but she was still glad she had done it.

"You are avenged, my son!" she thought.

Yet in her moment of triumph she knew how small the gain was. Asgor's death could not bring back Garroway. The demonmaster had fed her son's life spirit to a demon and it had gone into the Abyss, ripped from the Circle of Life, never more to be part of the conscious world. Unlike Asgor, whose life spirit could still meld with the Circle, Garroway was utterly destroyed.

Her triumph turned dark. At first she had longed to feed Asgor to his own demon, but to do anything to feed the Abyss... the life spirit forbade such revenge. Revenge would not bring Garroway back. Her body drooped, then she shook herself. At least Asgor was dead and his evil had died with him. Her own grief was personal—no one's burden but her own.

With difficulty she crawled forward. I must leave this place, she thought. Asgor had drawn on the power of his demon servant; it had been a hard fight to overcome them both. And he had created all manner of vile creatures. She could sense that they were still lurking about.

Mathinna was astonished to see that there was still light outside. The demonmaster's fortress stood on a headland above the city of Olbia. On the opposite headland was the Tower of Olbia where even now Gorice, High Chieftain of the united Seagani tribes, may his name be cursed forever—covered with his court. It was he who had called for Tari assistance against Asgor, and he who had trapped the three

unsuspecting Tari mages and handed them over to his supposed enemy. Now that she had defeated Asgor, someone would come to take Gorice to Ermora, where he would be submitted to the judgment of the life spirit. There in the Spirit Cave he would be made to live through all the wrongs he had done as if he had been the victim himself. Mathinna could not begin to imagine the horror of it.

Her limbs were shaking. She sat down upon a huge tumbled stone block to catch her breath and recover. That was when she noticed two figures farther along on the same headland as herself. Two Tari figures.

Had those snail brains in the council already sent someone? Amazing! The figures looked familiar. Who... ?

Sweet life, it was her son's wife, Shara. This was no place for a grieving widow, especially not a pregnant one. Mathinna strained to get to her feet to hurry down to her, but she was so exhausted she could barely hobble.

Who was that with her? He should have stopped her coming. Ah, Jagamar! Shara's horrible brother, who'd never done a useful thing in his life. But he hated the outlanders. What was he doing... ? As she watched, Jagamar squeezed Shara's shoulder as if to make a point. Shara nodded once, raised her clasped hands and pointed them at the Tower of Olbia on the opposite headland. Mathinna felt, rather than saw, the bolt of magic that came from between those hands.

The bolt hit the headland beneath the tower with a deep thud. There was a cracking noise and small rocks fell. With a horrible, groaning slowness, the tower and the houses and the rock beneath them began to slide.

"No!" screamed Mathinna. She tried to summon the power to stop the collapse, but she had no more strength than a newborn baby.

The entire cliff face and the tower plunged into the sea with a roaring crash. A monster wave was thrown up, smashing against the remaining headland and washing over the beach beneath, pounding boats and little huts to kindling, then crashing over Olbia's walls.

Mathinna was frozen with horror. She could feel the screaming terror of the people within the tower, within the houses below and in the little boats. She could feel the balance of nature tipping as if a jagged piece of night had suddenly ripped through the curtain of day. It made her so sick that she fell sideways to the ground.

The moment her sickness passed she thought of Shara.

What had she done? What would happen to her now?— and to Garroway's baby within her womb? Mathinna dragged herself upright and staggered toward the others. Shara was convulsing on the ground. Jagamar, that worthless man, stood uselessly over her, hands on his face. The baby! The last reminder of her son Garroway—what if it were lost? Mathinna threw herself down beside Shara.

The young woman was choking and clawing at the air. Suddenly, with a last terrified gasp, she went limp.

"What's happening?" cried Jagamar, horrified.

"You fool!" screamed Mathinna, punching at Jagamar. She gathered Shara in her arms. She could feel the tiny half-formed child within her writhing in distress.

Shara's eyes had flown open again. Once more she was convulsed, struggling and pawing at the air. There was nothing Mathinna could do for her but let things run their course. But the baby... Mathinna put her hand firmly on Shara's belly and, using what felt like the last of her strength, tried to calm the unborn child and bind it safe within.

"What's happening?" cried Jagamar, grabbing Math-inna's arm.

“Let me go, you fool. What did you think you were doing here? What possessed you? Now she must suffer every death she caused.”

“It wasn’t enough to put Gorice in the Spirit Cave. He killed three Tari, the dirty outlander,” shouted Jagamar. “Death is the only thing enough for—”

“Can’t you see that the judgment of the life spirit would have been worse than death? To live on with the knowledge of your own wrongdoing?” Mathinna was so angry she resorted to violence, hitting him on the shin. “How can you understand so little of the life spirit? He would have suffered as she will suffer now. She will experience every single death she caused *one by one*.”

It was difficult to calm the unborn child when she herself was so furious.

“‘One by one,’ ” echoed Jagamar in a horrified voice. “We didn’t realize it would be one by one.”

“Your ignorance never ceases to amaze me,” Mathinna snarled between clenched teeth. “How could you even contemplate causing so much destruction? The two of you must have killed over one hundred people! Oh, my little child,” she crooned to the baby in Shara’s womb. “Be calm!”

“They deserved to die. They stood by while...”

“What?... Servants, children, fisherfolk? Prisoners in the dungeons? Are you insane? What say did they have in the madness of their leader? Of what horror is your mind made, Jagamar? What kind of Tari are you?” Shara collapsed limply again, leaving Mathinna free to look up.

As she did so she saw something glittering on the ground beside Shara. She snatched it up. It was a big blue lump of cut crystal—a Mirayan power crystal. She had seen such things on a visit to Mirayan Ishtak.

“What is this, Jagamar? This is yours, isn’t it? One of those Mirayan trinkets you bought back from Ishtak. What is this for?”

“Shara wanted it to focus her power.”

“Oh did she?” cried Mathinna. “Why? She never had any interest in those evil little trinkets before. All she could think of was my son and babies. This was your idea, wasn’t it?”

“She asked me for the crystal and I gave it to her.”

“And came along to see that she went through with it. You vicious horror! You’re the one who hates outlanders, not her. This *was* your idea, wasn’t it?”

Jagamar looked scared. “No! I just came along to support her. You saw. She’s the one who did it. I did nothing wrong. How could I have stopped her? You know I’ve got very little power.”

Mathinna waved the power crystal at him. “She could never have forged such destruction without this thing.”

Shara began to struggle and choke again. Mathinna turned back to her. Jagamar hovered over them.

“I did nothing. I’m too weak to bring that cliff down and you know it. I did nothing!”

“You disgust me!” snarled Mathinna. “Don’t just stand there justifying yourself. Go and get help, murderer! Can’t you see your sister has a terrible time before her, and she may lose her child?”

Jagamar lunged forward and grabbed the power crystal out of Mathinna’s hand. She was too caught up with Shara’s child to stop him.

Then he was gone, running away over the headland to where the Circle of Power could take him back to Ermora, leaving Mathinna to struggle with Shara’s continuing death and her unborn child.

Help did come in the form of other Tari, although Jagamar played no part in sending them. Mathinna and Shara were taken back to Ermora, and although Shara continued to die for a day and a night—over 150 deaths—she did not lose her child.

Afterward she could do little more than sit and stare into empty space, as one does when the mind is numbed by horror. Mathinna struggled to suppress her own grief so that she might help her son's widow, but it came as a relief when the Guardians came and told Shara that she might enjoy the relief of unbeing in the Spirit Cave without the fear of being punished further. Shara was glad to go. She had never been strong-minded and she could not bear the knowledge of all the suffering she had caused.

Friends urged Mathinna to seek the relief of unbeing as well, but Mathinna wanted to grieve. She felt her son deserved such a sacrifice, and indeed she found some comfort in making it.

Jagamar was noticeably absent from his sister's side during this time, yet Shara refused to bear witness against him. An inquiry into the destruction of Olbia was held, but the council was dominated by Jagamar and Shara's father, a man who served political necessity rather than the life spirit. Jagamar was exonerated of any blame; and Shara's actions were pronounced justified madness. It was a popular verdict even though many were shocked by it. For violence can never be justified to those who truly love the life spirit, even in the case of revenge. If it had been, then surely Shara would not have suffered so.

Mathinna paid little attention to the debate that followed when many Tari cried out that the lands outside Ermora were too full of demons for it to be safe for Tari to travel, that the outlanders had shown themselves to be unworthy of being helped.

Normally Mathinna would have been one of the most powerful advocates in favor of traveling outside Ermora, for she was widely respected and one of the senior members of the Society of Travelers. She had always felt passionately that for their own good, energetic young Tari needed to leave the wonderful easy life of Ermora and contend with the less perfect world of the outlands. It was the Tari's duty to repay the care of the life spirit by bringing its balance and love to the people there. As for the danger of demons... that was ridiculous. Mathinna had traveled all over the Archipelago and knew that most outlanders would have fought to the death to protect the Tari from demonmasters like Asgor.

Yet in those bleak days she cared for little but to sit in her bower and look over her son's things. When the council took the decision to disband the Society of Travelers and forbid outland travel, she spoke out against them, but by then it was too late. She let herself be ruled by the will of the majority as was proper for a Tari, and took the vow to abide by the decision.

Then Shara came back from the Spirit Cave. She had been gone some months by then and was now enormously pregnant. The darkness had gone from her face and in its place was a joyful light. She and Mathinna spent a few happy days talking over old times.

She told Mathinna that she had come to her for help with her labor. She seemed convinced that she would give birth soon, despite the fact that seven months was far too early. Mathinna wanted to examine her. Tari women do not give birth easily or safely, but Shara said the life spirit wished for things to follow their proper course.

It was only when Shara told Mathinna she did not, under any circumstances, want Jagamar to raise her daughters that Mathinna had any inkling that Shara did not expect to survive.

By then her labor had begun despite the earliness of the time, and only now did she allow Mathinna to use magic to look into her heaving belly. To her horror Mathinna discovered not one but three children within. Triplets! No Tari woman had ever given birth to triplets before! Where had the extra children come from?

She could feel the life spirit blazing in them with a power she had never felt in any being before. It was as if they were twice as alive.

“The life spirit made the one into... three,” said Shara through her pain.

“It is to replace the gap... in the great circle that was left... when Garroway and the other two were consumed. They asked me if I would undertake this task and... and I was glad to make some restitution for what I did at Olbia...”

Mathinna could feel her heart faltering under the strain. “Hold on,” she begged Shara with tears in her eyes. “You can make it through.”

“Don’t be sad,” gasped Shara. “The life spirit... has gifted our... daughters greatly. And I am... not sorry to... die.”

It was the last thing she ever said.

By the time her family had arrived, her father, sister and that worm Jagamar, poor Shara was dead and three baby girls wailed lustily in their moss-lined cots.

Three sisters.

Elena, Yanimena and Marigoth.

Chapter 1

Fleurforet.

Twenty-four years later.

Elena worked hard on the potion all afternoon mixing it over the fire, adding herbs and heating and reheating it until at last she could feel the life spirit strongly in it. Then she stopped. To do more now would diminish it and weaken the potion’s effectiveness against joint pain. Elena was not especially skilled at healing. She preferred to make things like boats and spears, but she had a special feeling for the life spirit, because of her Tari heritage, which was useful in making such potions.

She took a long luxurious stretch and looked around. She was surprised to find that it was almost dark. The light had turned velvety with evening, and people were gathered round their cooking fires. The Mori camp looked cozy. Skin tents were clustered around the tall thin finger-like tower of Fleurforet. A group of pipers was practicing somewhere on the other side of the camp. Some young people of courting age were dressed up in their festival finery and strolling with studied casualness around the base of the tower, and children played a chasing game between the tents. Elena’s daughter, Alyx, was running among them.

Elena inhaled the scent of woodsmoke and the delicious scent of mangiri trees with a happy sigh. The trees’ scent was the scent of home. She had lived with the Mori for seven years. Of her own people, the Tari, she knew little. She did not even remember the holy land of Ermora where she had been born. She had grown up on an isolated island with only her foster parents and two sisters for company. Always she remembered her grandmother’s warning that if the Tari found her they would harm her. There was some prophecy involved, but her grandmother had disappeared before she had told them more. Once Elena had been curious about the Tari and chafed against her hiding. Now she did not care. She was happy here. This forest, singing with the life spirit, was her home. These were her people.

The Mori were a nomadic people roaming in small family groups throughout the large forest on the

eastern side of the island of Yarmar. They worshiped Labwa, the lord of the forest, and tried to live in harmony with the life spirit. Consequently the watchtower of Heurforet that towered above them now was the only permanent building found in their territory. Four times a year they gathered here in large numbers to meet with each other and to allow their queen to mediate disputes. The shamans, who possessed magical vision, would climb the tower and watch the sea for the merchants who came to the nearby river estuary to trade with the Mori.

When the merchants came, guides would lead them to the Mori camp. The place was hidden by strong magics, and any non-Mori venturing alone into the forest nearby quickly found himself lost.

Elena was just wondering how the afternoon's trading had gone when a pair of arms came snaking round her waist and squeezed. She spun round, laughing with delight.

"How do you do that?" she cried, embracing the dark-haired man behind her. "I never hear you coming."

"A hunter must take extra care when stalking *clever* prey," said Eldene lightly. He kissed her. Eldene often told her how clever she was. She loved his rare and generous spirit. Elena had been veiled when he met her and they came to love each other without his ever seeing her face.

Elena sensed he was troubled. Over seven years of marriage she had become good at reading his moods.

"What is it, my lord?" She guessed at the cause. "Did the merchant have bad news? Will he not be able to bring the arrowheads?"

Eldene's eyes twinkled. "Tree and leaf. Now, be honest with me. You read my mind, don't you? It's Tari magic, isn't it?"

Elena laughed. "Oh, wouldn't you like to know, my lord and master! But don't change the subject. What did the merchant say?"

"He said the Mirayans were stopping and searching ships. I do not understand the Mirayans. They seem to have some idea that they have the right to do these things. Where do they get this idea?"

"They are so strong."

"Aye. I know. They simply do it because they can. But it is so hard to understand how they justify it."

Elena hugged him. It was puzzling. How was the life spirit served by this will to dominate? But there were more important matters to consider at the moment.

"So the arrowheads? Did the merchant refuse?"

"The merchant will bring them. He will even bring them more cheaply this year. He has a grudge against the Mirayans. All the Danians do now. Now, do not be frightened... but it seems the Mirayans were behind an attempt to kill their queen."

Elena gasped. "Yani!" Her sister Yani was one of the Danian queen's bodyguards.

"Your sister is safe; a hero in fact. Her quick blow killed the assassin and saved the queen's life."

"She killed? Oh, poor Yani!"

"Poor Yani?" Eldene was surprised. Few outlanders really understood how violence affected the Tari.

"To kill is the greatest crime against the life spirit. It brings the deepest agony to the Tari. I must send her some comfort. What else did the merchant say?"

"He says it is likely that Duke Wolf will break our treaty—there has been a buildup of troops in Lamar-taine. You were right. Do these people care nothing for balance?"

It was a rhetorical question. Everyone in the Archipelago knew that the Mirayans were only interested in the kind of balance that came from their being masters of everything.

Elena and Eldene held each other in silence.

When they had first come to the Archipelago eighty years before, the Mirayans had simply come as traders, but as time went on they began to take more and more control over the ports they traded from. More recently a civil war in their homeland had brought them to the Archipelago in greater numbers and with a view to settling on the land.

Twenty-three years ago a group of Mirayan mercenaries had sailed into the harbor at Olbia and offered to help the Southern Seagani clear up the chaos left by the destruction of Olbia; to hunt down the remaining servants of Asgor the necromancer and to re-establish peace between the four Seagani tribes who, if they had no strong High Chief, fell easily into quarrelling and raiding each other.

Peace and security had been established but soon enough the Southern Seagani at Olbia had found themselves compelled to offer their Chieftainship to the Mirayan leader Alexis Scarvan, and soon after that he announced himself High Chief of all the Seagani. After a series of battles the other Seagani tribes had learned to accept his overlordship. One of High Chief Scarvan's vassals, Duke Wolf Madraga, now ruled the Eastern Seagani from his fortress at Lamartaine. This meant his lands bordered on the lands of the Mori. He seemed to be busy perpetuating the old tensions between the Mori and the Eastern Seagani for purposes of his own.

The Mirayans were frighteningly ruthless in their determination to dominate. Seven years ago Duke Wolf had taken Eldene captive and, using him as a hostage, threatened his mother, the queen of the Mori, into trading exclusively with them. Eldene escaped and Elena found him, wounded and exhausted on the beach of their little island. She and her sisters had hidden him from the pursuers.

Now Eldene laughed, a little ruefully. "It is ironic to think that the Mirayans brought us together. They would curse if they knew they were the reason I have such a clever wife who understands these stupid evil people and warns me to hoard arrowheads and double patrols."

Elena felt herself melt. Eldene was the only one who ever treated her as if she had a brain, and everytime he did she turned to soft butter in his hands. No one else seemed able to see beyond her looks. She had never ceased to thank the powers of life that she had been able to meet and know such a man without her looks getting in the way.

She tightened her arms around him. He smiled down at her.

"I am glad I heeded you, clever wife, and had the shamans strengthen the warding at the forest edge and around this place." He laughed. "Do you know the merchant could not even hear us until he came into the clearing? At least we are safe here. Only a Mori can get through those wardings." Then he sighed. "What is it, Rowl?"

Elena turned. Eldene's second-in-command was standing behind her. He was a hard-bitten old veteran who like many of the Mori men was too shy to look Elena in the eye.

"Montagne has returned from his patrol," he said to Eldene. "You said you wanted to see him."

"Yes I do. I'd best go." Eldene took Elena's hand and kissed it with a romantic flourish. "Till we meet again, my love. I shall count the moments." With a half-affectionate, half-mocking smile, he strode away across the clearing.

Elena watched him go. He filled her with such joy, yet today she was left with a dark feeling in her breast. Sometimes it felt as if a trap were closing in around them. The Mirayans owned all of the coastal land to the borders of the Mori forest, and now it looked like they were going to try and take the forest as well. It seemed likely that such a warlike people would want to rule the whole island of Yarmar. There was already frequent fighting at the forest edges, where Mirayans—in defiance of their own treaty—kept

attacking the trees, which the Mori regarded as holy beings, with fire and axes.

She shook herself. Surely the magic of the forest, where the sink of the life force was strong, would protect those who honored it. She checked that her daughter, Alyx, was safe and turned back to her potion.

She was so intent on straining the liquid through a cloth that at first she did not notice the shouting or the armed men running out of the trees.

Like most of the other Mori, she only realized that the camp was under attack when the alarm horns began to sound.

It was a long night of blood and fire. Elena had quickly scooped up Alyx and a couple of her playmates from among the screaming people running to the safety of the tower.

Sonnette Verdey, the queen and Elena's mother-in-law, was already there hustling mothers and children into the safety of the tower. Elena grabbed some weapons, had wanted to go back out and fight beside Eldene, but Sonnette barricaded the tower door and refused to let her out. Shortly afterward a wave of Mirayan soldiers came slamming against the tower walls. The women within kept up their shooting, sending arrows down into the fray.

All night they prevented the Mirayans from taking the tower.

At last, as dawn struggled through the trees, the din of the battle had died away. In the early morning stillness the Mirayan mages lit up the sky with flares. By their light, Elena could see the wreckage of the camp, the destroyed and smoldering tents, the broken bodies. She saw four men kneeling on the ground, their arms tied behind their backs. Round them stood an implacable wall of Mirayan warriors, the red dragon flag like a splash of blood across their chests.

One of the kneeling men raised his head and looked up at the tower. Elena saw that it was Eldene. He was still alive, a realization that flowed through her like fresh spring water. Her husband, her love, was still alive.

As he looked up at the tower, Elena pressed closer to the slit window but it was too narrow for her to lean through. And then a man stepped out beside Eldene with an axe raised in his fist.

"No," screamed Elena with all her heart and mind. She would have leapt if it had been possible. The other women pulled her back just as the axe fell. Eldene's body slumped forward. Dead.

Eldene's executioner killed the other three men too— Eldene's second-in-command and two brothers, the youngest only twelve. Thus died all of Sonnette Verdey's sons. When the deed was done, another man stepped forward. He looked up at the tower and spoke, his voice made louder by magic. Elena pressed closer to the slit window but it was too narrow for her to lean through.

"Thus die all enemies of the Mirayan Empire! I am Wolf Madraga, High Chieftain of the Eastern Seagani people. Your leaders are dead. Submit to me and your lives will be spared."

So now they must face surrender and slavery, or death.

Eldene was dead. Elena sank down against the wall, her face in her hands. She couldn't believe it! Wouldn't! She could still see his face as he had bent to kiss her. He couldn't be dead. She tried to clutch the sweet memory of his kiss to her, to force it to be real. He was dead. He would never kiss her again. He had called her his clever wife. Would anyone ever do that again?

She would never forgive herself for not dying there beside him.

"Mumma," cried a voice in her ear. Alyx!

Her little daughter stood beside her, face anxious and puckered, ready for tears. Elena snatched her to her chest. Alyx was left. She must be strong for Alyx.

All was not lost yet. Alyx clutched at her, her eyes big with fear but she did not cry. Sweet life! If only she had some way of getting Alyx safely away from here. Elena felt a hard knot of panic settle on her. If only she had magical powers like her sister Marigoth. Or even a strong sword arm like Yani.

Frightened children pressed all around her, their hands clutching at her, their little faces pushing against her sides. Sweet life! All these little ones. This couldn't be real. She couldn't be here; they couldn't be trapped like this. There must be some way out of this nightmare. If only she had not lost Marigoth's stone. If only she could have called for help somehow. She was Tari. Why couldn't she do something? Couldn't the life spirit save them?

An argument was raging on the other side of the room.

"We must surrender," said Sonnette. "They say they will not kill the boys."

Her mother-in-law looked a hundred years old. She had lost two daughters to the Mirayans in earlier fighting and now in one night she had lost her three sons as well. But still she was strong. She had to be. She was the leader of these frightened women and children.

"They lie! They always lie!" cried someone.

"Let them burn us," screamed someone else. "Better to die free than live a slave."

"No!" shouted Sonnette. "Labwa forbids self-slaughter. It will be bad. I cannot say otherwise. But while we live we are still Mori and we can hate. We can still find some way to strike back at these filthy pigs. If they put us to weave, we can weave poison into the cloth. If they set us to care for their children, we can smother them in their cots."

There was silence throughout the room.

"Seek death if you wish. There are swords enough here for those who wish to kill themselves," she said. "But I will live if I can, for those who live can always fight again."

Many of the women had begun to weep. The children were wailing. Alyx clung to Elena with a strangling grip. Her trembling hands brought strength back to Elena. She forced herself to stand up.

"We must be brave," she whispered softly to her daughter. *Your father would wish it.*

Sonnette came to Elena's side and squeezed her arm so strongly it hurt.

"You must protect Alyx," she hissed. "She is the last of the Verdey. My daughter is dead and I may die tonight too. Alyx is the next queen. You must protect her."

"I will," said Elena. "With my life."

"They will not kill you," said Sonnette. "You are too beautiful. You will survive. Buy Alyx's survival too. Do it for Eldene."

The sun was red through the smoky dawn. Only a tall thin stone tower and piles of smoldering ruins remained of the Mori settlement.

The Mirayan commander, Duke Wolf Madraga, had delivered his ultimatum to the survivors in the tower. Now he stood among the smoking remains of the skin tents and regarded with satisfaction the huddled corpses that littered the ground.

Large numbers of Mori had died this night. Both the men and their strangely warlike women had put up an impressive fight though they had been significantly outnumbered and outmagicked. You had to

respect them for that. The duke bore the Mori no particular malice. This punitive expedition had simply been the logical result of the continuing Mori raids on peaceful Mirayan settlements. They needed to be taught a lesson. The Duke hoped that this attack would finally make them learn.

He hoped too that the handful of women left guarding the children in the tower would surrender. He had no taste for unnecessary killing, even in the case of Mori women who were quite likely to stab you in the back given half the chance. Unnecessary killing was wasteful.

Duke Wolf was a practical man. Cool. Efficient. It showed in his appearance. Though he had the weather-beaten face of one who had spent most of his forty years campaigning in all weathers, there was something very neat about him—the way he moved, his cool expression, his compact body, the cut of his graying hair. He was not tall for a Mirayan, not at all an impressive physical figure, yet his soldiers trusted him and followed him with unswerving loyalty.

“How goes it, brother-in-law?” a jovial voice hailed him.

The high chieftain of Seagan and Wolf Madraga’s liege lord, Prince Alexis Scarvan, came limping through the debris toward him. A bad leg wound four years ago had put an end to his fighting career, but he had been unable to resist coming off his ship to survey the battlefield. He is not aging well, thought Wolf Madraga. Sad when a man is forced to give up his life’s vocation.

Scarvan’s always large body had softened and spread with inactivity, and his face was red and puffy. He was a lecherous bull of a man—fond of women, food and wine—but he had been a good leader, bringing his followers from a rout in civil war-torn Miraya to new lands and honors here on the island of Yarmar. You could respect the man’s skills even if occasionally you had to distract him from mauling unwilling serving girls.

Madraga had always been a loyal vassal to Scarvan and happy to be so. He had married Scarvan’s sister and though she was long dead, the bond between the two men was still strong. There had been a time when Wolf had been regarded as Scarvan’s logical successor, but due to the ministrations of the very skilled native physicians, Scarvan’s sickly son seemed likely to survive after all. This did not bother Wolf. He had only a practical amount of ambition and was content with his large dukedom. It was more than he could have expected back in Miraya. The only tension that had ever occurred between the two was due to the black-and-white-clad priests of Mir who even now followed in Scarvan’s wake. In Wolf’s opinion, during the last few years they had come to have far more influence over Scarvan than was reasonable.

“Well, you’ve done a fine night’s work here, brother-in-law,” said Scarvan, clapping Wolf on the arm with one of his big paws.

“Aye,” said one of the priests at Scarvan’s side. “Watch them burning in their own sin.”

No wonder these priests had so little luck converting the natives, Wolf thought, chilled by the avid look in their eyes. He turned away, only to be confronted by another avid face.

Giron Mori.

“You promised me Eldene’s widow, Lord Wolf. I brought you through their magic so you could take Eldene. You promised me Elena Starchild.”

“Yes, yes,” said Wolf. “You may have first pick of the female captives, Giron.”

“So you’re not going to fireball the tower.”

“We shall if they don’t surrender.”

“No!” shouted Giron. “You promised me!”

“Shut up!” said Wolf. “I doubt it will come to that. Women seldom have the guts for self-destruction.”

“You promised me Elena Starchild! She’s in that tower!” Giron lunged at Wolf. A couple of men-at-arms grabbed him even as he moved.

“For Mir’s sake! Just wait, you fool.” Wolf nodded at the men. “Take him away and cool him down.”

“Lusty fellow!” said Scarvan in amusement. “These Mori are animals. But I’d put him to death if I were you. I’ve got no time for traitors.”

“Yes, it’s a tempting thought. But if I deal honestly with him others may betray their leaders. Eldene may be dead but there are plenty of other Mori men out there.”

“I’m curious to see this Elena Starchild,” said Scarvan.

“You’d better hope they surrender, then. We’ll lose too many men in an assault to make it worth our while to take the tower. Mori woman are good archers, and vicious when they’re defending their children.”

“Like bitches with their pups,” grinned Scarvan. “Are they pretty though?”

No doubt he’d be wanting to sample some of that pret-tiness tonight.

“You have to watch your back with them,” said Wolf. He never made use of captives, preferring his women to give some semblance of consent even if it was only bought with money. But to each his own. “They spin and weave like all women and they make fine field slaves.”

“Valuable enough, then,” said Scarvan. “I’ll give you a good price for the woolworkers if you get them out.”

“Done!”

At that moment there was a shout.

A green flag was being waved out of one of the window slits of the tower. The duke turned and moved closer. A single arrow came flying out at him but bounced uselessly off the magical protection barrier that covered him.

“Who’s leading them?” Scarvan asked of a nearby man-at-arms. He didn’t speak any native languages.

“Sonnette Verdey, Eldene’s mother. Like most of these native tribes she’s called Queen. Her son was only a war leader.”

“Perversion of nature,” muttered Father Gaius.

“Who in their right mind follows a woman?” snorted Scarvan. “These peninsula tribes! No wonder Mir has allowed us to beat them.”

There was a general nodding among the priests.

“She’s agreeing to come out if we don’t kill the boy children,” said the man. “The duke’s giving his word.”

“She’s got no choice,” said Scarvan, who had made many such deals in his time... and not always kept them. Boy children were valuable, but they were also dangerous.

“Eldene got any sons?” asked Scarvan of Madraga, who had come back to his side.

“Just a daughter. This is the end of the direct male line, though no doubt someone will rise up to fill the gap.”

“Just like old times this,” said Scarvan. He clapped Madraga on the shoulder.

Wolf grinned back at him. He’d always been fond of the old devil. They were two men certain of their power and their loyalty to one another.

It was to be the last time.

The door of the tower opened. The mages moved forward to check which of the captives could use magic and to disable them with iron witch manacles.

The women and children came filing out—defeated, heads bowed and covered, some of them sobbing. The Mori were short, dark-haired, olive-skinned people, but there was one among them who was noticeably taller. As she came through the door the child she was leading began to pull back. She leaned with noticeable grace to pick the child up and as she straightened the shawl fell off her head.

Everyone stopped. Every man in the clearing stared. The mages forgot their duties. The mouths of the priests fell open. Even the men stripping the dead bodies felt the silence and looked up to stare in their turn.

For she was fair, fair as gold with skin like ivory and huge dark green eyes. Her face! Each feature so delicate and fine! Her neck was slender, her body shapely. Skin as soft, soft as a whisper, as the touch of lip upon lip. Perfect! Surpassing perfect! Astonishing! She was the most beautiful woman they had ever seen.

And by the time the sun had fully risen, Wolf Madraga and Alexis Scarvan were no longer friends.

“You promised me the woolworkers,” Scarvan had shouted and later, “It is my right as your liege to have the pick of the captives. How dare you oppose me!”

Madraga had almost struck his lord. The sight of Scarvan’s puffy red hand touching Her arm made him desperate. Scarvan’s bodyguard had stopped him. Then Giron, the Mori traitor, had thrown himself at Scarvan and by the time he had been cut down, Scarvan was pulling Her up the gangplank of his ship. The time for rash action was over and sense had stepped between Madraga and his desires.

All through the argument, the widow of Eldene Mori had held Herself with dignity, holding Her eyes downcast, clasping Her child close to Her bosom, though several times he had offered to relieve Her of the burden. Paragon of womanhood. How beautiful She was. Like a white swan, like a supple birch tree, a fine jewel... Words could not describe. No wonder they called Her Elena Starchild.

Madraga could tell She was frightened and repelled by Scarvan. He was certain that was what the flare of Her nostrils and the quick backward glance She had given him as Scarvan had pulled Her away had betokened. The thought of Her fate now tormented Madraga. He knew that rutting bastard Scarvan. He strode up and down among the ruins of the Mori village wishing he could turn back time, that he could have argued better, that he had had the spine to have his men attack Scarvan, even that he had never attacked Fleurforet. Stop being such a fool he told himself, she’s only a woman. There are many others. He could hear their screams echoing across the clearing even as he paced.

Yet there was no one else who mattered. He clenched his fists and his teeth, trying not to look behind him at the ship, where a rape must now be taking place. Scarvan’s puffy red body...

“Brother Wolf,” said a voice, and suddenly Jark, leader of his Seagani allies, was at his side. “That woman. You must save her! You must take her from Scarvan.”

Madraga turned on Jark. There was no one else to punish.

“Would you have me attack my liege lord? There is such a thing as honor! Or don’t you understand that?”

Jark Seagani’s face showed outrage. He was a noble among the Seagani and he and Wolf had sworn blood brotherhood when the Seagani had voted to give Wolf their chieftain’s crown.

“Damn you!” he cried. For a moment he seemed about to strike Wolf. Then he said coldly. “I will forgive your words for I know that it is lust that makes you speak so. But do not press me too far, blood brother.”

Something in his voice calmed Wolf. He realized what he had almost done and regained control.

“Do not think the woman is for you,” continued Jark. “She is Tari—a man might as well lust for a goddess. She is not to be owned by such as us. And ten times not to be owned by such as Scarvan. We must rescue her lest the anger of the Tari fall on us and destroy us as they destroyed the cursed ones of Olbia. They will hate for one of their women to be thus used.”

Wolf was amazed, astonished by Jark’s words. “What are you talking about? This is superstition! For twenty years, I’ve been in this Archipelago and I’ve heard Tari this and Tari that, but I’ve never seen one of these creatures. They don’t exist.”

“You Mirayans,” said the Seagani’s senior shaman, who was standing behind Jark. “Just because you don’t see something, you won’t believe in it.”

“Don’t try me, shaman!” snarled Madraga. He was usually very polite to shamans. Native religious leaders made bad enemies, as that shitbag Scarvan had found. But shamans were purveyors of superstition, and he disliked them even more than he disliked priests.

“Wolf! Brother!” said Jark, catching his arm. “The Good Father is right! Did you ever before see a native woman who looked like that? The golden hair, the green almond-shaped eyes—these are marks of the Tari. Believe me brother. They are real. I saw them as a child. And they are dangerous. Mighty mages. They threw Olbia into the sea to avenge their dead and it was easy for them.”

“She is some Mirayan half-breed,” snapped Wolf. “And I am not going to destroy my honor for her sake. She’s only a woman, by Mir’s blood.”

He shook himself. He had to get control. Jark was right in one thing. This was lust—just a stupid animal feeling.

He must get the better of it. Try to think clearly.

“Do not speak to me more, blood brother,” he said, managing with difficulty to speak calmly. “I am angered and fear to be unmannerly.”

He strode away.

At that moment a Mori woman ran screaming past them, chased by a group of laughing Mirayan soldiers.

“We must do something!” cried the shaman, looking out at the ship disappearing down the river.

“What?” shouted Jark. The thought of Alexis Scarvan touching that woman horrified him even more than it had horrified Wolf Madraga. It was like seeing someone pissing in a sacred grove. “What can be done? Look, the ship is already out in the bay. Shall we take to boats?... There are no boats! Curse that man!”

He threw his sword on the ground and turned away, covering his face with his hands.

The shaman tried to calm his own shock and horror so that he could comfort Jark as a spiritual leader must. He put a hand on his arm.

“Good Father!” said Jark in a broken voice. “I am a man, and I feel now as any good Seagani must, but I’m not so bewitched that I would attack Alexis Scarvan. It would kill our whole people to do so.”

“I know,” said the shaman, who did indeed understand. “But what of the Tari? What of their just anger?”

“The Tari have not been seen these twenty-odd years. Perhaps they are sleeping. Or dead.”

“Never think it!”

“What can we do?” A thought struck him. “Surely their wrath will rightly fall on Alexis Scarvan.

Think, Good Father. What if they destroy him like they destroyed the Seagani of Olbia? Perhaps..." A savage look came onto his face. "Think if that despoiler of the sacred groves should be washed into the sea. Think of it!"

"Yes," said the shaman. The thought soothed him a little, but not enough. The Tari could see beyond immediate cause and effect, and his Seagani had been instrumental in causing the woman to be captured and impious in letting her remain so.

The thought stayed with him through the rest of the day, as it stayed with all the Seagani. What should have been a triumphant victory over their traditional enemies, the Mori, had become some kind of defeat and all because of this Tari woman.

Elena Starchild did not seem to be a mage or they would never have been able to take Fleurforet. Nonetheless she was valuable simply because she was Tari, a conduit of the life spirit and a member of a powerful and unpredictable race. The fact that Eldene Mori had a Tari wife could only mean that the Mori had Tari favor. In order to avoid possible repercussions the shaman instructed the Seagani to refuse their fair share of the Mori loot and not to touch the Mori women. His orders were willingly obeyed. After the disaster at Olbia, no one wanted to anger the Tari.

There was another consideration too that preyed on the shaman's mind. Elena Starchild was dangerous in and of herself. The legends had talked about a power some of the Tari had, one they called fatal beauty. The shaman had always thought it a myth but his own senses had been enchanted by her as had Jark's, as had perhaps those of every man who beheld her. Giron Mori had betrayed his lord to own her. And as for their godless Mirayan lords—look at how they had fallen out over her. The shaman had never seen the pragmatic Wolf Madraga in such a state before. This power of fatal beauty was truly a power and like all powers—like the Tari themselves—able to unbalance the whole world.

The shamans of the Eastern Seagani recognized that in Wolf Madraga they had a lord who would not interfere with their beliefs. But if he were to fall out of favor with his own liege—if he were to be killed and replaced by another... Great Stallion, forbid it. Another Mirayan might not be so light-handed.

And such a replacement would set disastrous events in motion. Many of the clan leaders still cherished the illusion that they had had some choice in accepting a Mirayan chief. They would not accept another man without a fight and they would lose that fight, as native people always lost against the Mirayans. The shaman had always seen Alexis Scarvan, ruler of the Southern Seagani, as a kind of punishment on those Seagani for their impiety in killing the three Tari mages. But the Eastern Seagani could as easily be used and ground away under the foot as the southerners were being. A precarious, precious balance was in great danger and all because of that woman. It would be a good thing if her people came and took her away so that she was no longer a focus for chaos.

And if her people decided to punish those who captured her as well? The Mirayans with their godless, life-destroying ways were entirely worthy objects for their anger. But how to be certain that their anger was directed in the correct way?

As the day went on the shaman became more and more certain that positive action was needed.

So it was that a few days later after consultation with other elders of the Shamanic Brotherhood, the shaman found himself traveling toward Ermora, the holy land of the Tari.

Three groups of people had traditionally shared the island of Yarmar. On the Western side were the

Seagani, herders and farmers, and on the Eastern side in the great forest were the Mori, who lived as hunters and gatherers. In the center of the island at its hub as they had once been at the hub of Yarmarian life, lived the Tari in their hidden land of Ermora high up in the Gen Mountains.

These mountains were so tall that clouds were often caught on the peaks and shrouded them from view. The shaman traveled toward the center of Yarmar until he left the borders of Eastern Seagan. Here, among the tumbled foothills of the Gen Mountains, lived the Red Seagani, shy, secretive sheep herders who as yet had had little to do with the Mirayans.

They were not a dangerous people, but they were odd and it took all the shaman's courage to deal with the way they would come and peer into his face while he was sleeping at night and yet run and hide from him all during the day. Some of their faces showed the signs of Tari blood—the dark green, almond-shaped eyes and the pale skin and hair. Perhaps this was what made them so fey.

As the shaman approached the foothills and Gen Gateway, a large cluster of roughly hewn wooden and thatch buildings scattered among mysterious ruins of much larger stone buildings, he could see how truly sheer and craggy the Gen Mountains were.

Here the Red Seagani were not so shy. The shaman found lodgings in one of their huts and hired a guide. That evening two shamans of the village came to sup with him and to ask him of his business with the Tari. He told them of the captive Tari woman and of the Mirayan brutality toward her. It seemed wise to be honest in this place.

The following morning he and his guide set out to climb the mountains. They were not far out of the village when a hawk with rich red-brown plumage flew past them and up the mountain.

“Is it a messenger?” the shaman asked of his guide, but the guide, a lad of about fifteen whose red manhood tattoos were so new on his cheeks that they were still raised, merely grunted.

For three long days they climbed the mountains. Just as the shaman was beginning to think the hard climb would never end, they suddenly topped a rise and found themselves on a lushly forested plateau.

“Penterong,” grunted the guide, pointing to a path that led away into the forest. He left the path and sat down on soft green grass beneath the trees. The shaman understood that he meant to go no farther.

The Tari were regarded as a gentle, kindly people by the ordinary folk, and the shaman himself was old enough to have fond memories of their traveling folk. Yet he could not help remembering how easily they had thrown the city of Olbia into the sea. A wise man always approaches the powerful warily.

Yet as he walked through the forest of Penterong that fear left him. His sight gorged on the beauty of the forest as a hungry man gorges on food. Its beauty satisfied and delighted him as nothing had ever done before. He felt young and free again, full of energy, twice as strong as he had ever been and able to deal with everything.

Though he sensed that there were watchers among the trees, he was not afraid. He felt completely a part of this landscape as if he were a part of a perfect pattern that included rocks, trees and sky; or as if he were a dancer in a complicated dance, performing his part perfectly while all around him the world sang in joyous harmony. The world was him and moved through him and he belonged to it. At the same time he saw how tiny was his part in it all and how much more there was to understand—a world of mystery, richness, and beauty which could never be entirely known and would never sour.

He had not had such feelings since the day he had taken the sacred passage to shamanhood. Unlike that day, when the feeling had been brought on by drugs and his senses had been hazed, here he saw everything with great clarity.

A part of him, the part that had assessed the effect of the Tari woman on the Mirayans so coldly, saw with a fearful wariness that he was falling into a religious ecstasy, but even that did not really trouble him.

At last he came into view of the great rock and rose-covered wall that was the healing hall of Penterong. As he stood open-mouthed and staring, there was a rustling in the trees nearby. A great cloud of small birds burst through the foliage and flew past him, twittering brightly. Suddenly a woman stood there. She was dressed in gray, and her pale gold hair was interwoven with red feathers. She reminded him of the kuok, the tall stately herons that lived on the margins of the sea.

Sitting on her hand was a hawk like the one seen earlier, with rich red-brown plumage. She stroked it with her finger and regarded him out of the corner of her eye.

“You are the one with the message for the Tari?” she asked. Her eyes seemed as wild and predatory as those of the hawk.

“I am, lady,” said the shaman, beginning to feel afraid again.

“Then come with me,” she said and led him away into the forest.

In a clearing sat two Tari, a man and a woman. They were tall and fair as Tari always are, but there was a coldness about them that the shaman could not remember in the Tari he had met as a child. The woman wore the clean white robes of a healer and her hair was gracefully braided with gold thread and green beads, but her dark eyes were full of cool mockery. The shaman thought he would have had to be at the very door of death before he would have asked her for healing.

Neither of them gave their names, though at the beginning the woman called the man Jagamar. He gave her a severe look when she did so, however, and she hardly spoke after that.

The man was handsome, with a fine-boned face and smooth, elegant silver hair. His eyes were not cold but fiery and, as the shaman spoke, increasingly full of excitement. The shaman told him of the battle for the Mori stronghold of Fleurforet, emphasizing the Mirayans’ guilt as much and as subtly as he could. This was easy, for the Tari was far more interested in the Mirayans than in the Seagani. He called the Mirayans the people of the dragon and asked the shaman much of how they did things and what they believed in. He asked particularly about High Chief Scarvan and Duke Wolf. He did not seem to have any special fondness for the Mori, but he asked a great many questions about Elena Starchild.

After a long period of questions and answers, the Tari man thanked the shaman. Later, as the shaman was on his way home, it occurred to him that it was almost as if the Tari man had never seen Elena Starchild. It puzzled the shaman, though he could make nothing of it.

“You have done well and shown us great friendship in coming here,” the Tari man said.

“It is an honor to serve the Tari,” said the shaman. “Their presence is much missed in the lands of the Archipelago.”

“Yes, yes,” said the man dismissively. “We thank you. If you wish to continue to serve us, you will not speak of this matter too widely. Now one of the attendants will return you to your guide.”

The shaman found the bird lady at his side and followed her without further ado. He was disappointed that he was not going to see more of Penterong but somehow relieved to be going.

The Tari were more frightening than he remembered them to be.

Chapter 2

The ship was slowing, its timbers creaking as it changed direction. The calls of the sailors echoed

from above. In the dimly lit cabin, a figure was sitting on the side of the bunk with its face in its hands. Its thoughts were as dark as the feathers of a raven.

A little girl came charging in through the cabin door. "He told me to stop the breeze. Says we should go into port more conventionally. Attract less notice."

"Seems wise," said the figure on the bunk quietly.

The little girl looked at the figure through narrowed eyes. She took in her quiet voice and the slight droop of her usually strong shoulders. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," said Yard softly.

"You're thinking about what we saw at Heurforet, aren't you?" She bustled to the other end of the cabin and flung open the shutter. Bright white light filled the cabin. "You've done nothing but mope since we left. It's hopeless. We're coming into Lamartaine and you have to pay attention."

"I *am* paying attention!" said Yani tartly. "I can't help feeling bad. I should have been with Elena, not dallying about enjoying my own honor in Dania."

"Oh, this again. What is the point of this? We both should have been with her. But we weren't. And Fleur-foret burned. You're a warrior, Yani! You should be harder than this!"

"Do you think it's a virtue to get so hardened that you are not upset to see your sister's home turned to ash and hear of her husband and friends killed, and she and her child taken captive?" Yani turned on Marigoth. "Don't tell me what I should and shouldn't feel. What do you know? Sitting on your island dreaming your life away."

"If you and Elena had stayed on the island none of this would have happened. Grandmother told us to stay hidden. Why did you two want to... Change is a mistake."

Yani bit back a hot retort. She didn't want to fight with Marigoth. They needed to be united for this quest. Sooner or later she would need Marigoth's magecraft. What there was of it. Mages came into their true power when they reached puberty. Marigoth had not aged for many years. She was still an eleven-year-old. Why hadn't she changed? It was crazy.

A difficult silence fell in the cabin. Marigoth swung on the windowsill.

"Where's this port, then?" she snapped. "Are we even moving?"

"Slowly," said Yani. "It takes time to come into a port, Mari."

Marigoth began to pace.

"Too much time. Everything takes so much time. It took us three months to find out about Fleurforet. And it's taken nearly two days to get here."

"Be calm. We still have to get to Olbia after this," said Yani. "That's where they have her."

"A Circle of Power would have been much faster."

"And run the risk of having *them* notice us? And making us disappear as Grandmother did? How will that help Elena?"

"I don't think the other Tari can still be interested in us. They didn't save Elena after all."

"Perhaps they didn't know. It's taken us three months to find out what's happened. Or perhaps they're all gone, like the stories say."

"Oh, they're still in their stupid hiding place at the top of their little mountain," said Marigoth. "I would have felt it in the life spirit if they had gone."

"Then why don't they do something? They must have some idea of what's going on. In the old days

they would never have stood for bloody-pig-arrogant Mirayans taking Mori land and cutting down their forest.”

“Do you know what the captain told me?” said Marigoth. “He told me the Mirayans were just looking for an excuse to sack Fleurforet because it was the only trading center on the island of Yarmar they didn’t own. They like monopolies, he said. It’s outrageous. What gives them the right?”

“Might,” said Yani bluntly. “They do it because they are stronger and because they can. That is the value of warcraft you see. The Mirayans are the biggest children in this game. They can use force to make the smaller children play their way.”

“That’s not how it should be,” snapped Marigoth. She kicked the wall beneath the window. “How is the life spirit served by might and monopolies? Such actions cause imbalance.”

She turned back to the window. A large stone wall had come into view. “Finally! Is that the sea wall?”

“You know what really annoys me about the Tari,” snarled Yani with sudden anger. “It’s how nice people are to me because I’m one. It’s all—yes, Lady Tari; no, Lady Tari. Please give me your blessing, Lady Tari. Tari don’t deserve such respect. The Archipelagans depended on them to protect them, to keep a just balance between weak and strong. In the old days, if Wolf Madraga had threatened to invade Moria, Queen Sonnette could have called for help and Tari mages would have come and made Madraga’s army fall asleep until he was prepared to make peace. Then suddenly, just because three Tari are killed by some madman with a demon, they turn their backs on everyone who relies on them. Now the Archipelago is full of people who have no experience with war. No wonder the Mirayans came in and took over so easily.”

“Is that why you went off to learn to fight?” said Marigoth. “I never understood it. Our beliefs say what you do is wrong.”

“And to sit by and do nothing while the strong oppress the weak is right?” snapped Yani. “I am not lucky enough to be magical like *some* people. But if you cannot bring justice peacefully, then it must come through the sword. If you fight for a just cause and with a pure heart... I do not feel the life spirit is wronged by this. Queen Sharma rules her people with justice and mercy, and if the world were properly in balance that would be all she needed to do. But in this world, especially with the Mirayans, she needs to have warriors to back her up.”

“But how can you help anyway? It’s all show. You can’t kill people because then you would have to share their deaths. You’d be useless in an actual attack.”

“But I can look threatening,” said Yani. “A warrior is about the threat of violence as much as the violence in itself, Mari. Not many people know of the Tari’s weakness, and I have a reputation. I’ve been the queen’s bodyguard and champion for three years, and I’ve defeated all comers.”

“How?”

“The queen’s champion never fights to the death. I never had to kill anyone.”

“Have you ever killed anyone?” asked Marigoth curiously.

“Has anyone ever told you you’re a self-righteous little toad?” snapped Yani.

“No, No! I’m not being self-righteous, I promise! I just wondered what it felt like. All that dying and everything. Is it bad?”

Yani looked at her feet for a moment.

“Yes.”

“So you did kill someone!”

“An assassin. He came at Queen Sharma. I hit. He was dead before I thought and then...”

“And then?”

“I was dying. Truly dying. I didn’t know that it was not for real. I felt such loss... you want more life. You’re so angry and terrified. Then blackness. Nothing...” Her voice trailed off.

“And afterward when you woke up. How did you feel?” asked Marigoth avidly.

“Dirty. I hated myself. I felt the offense against the life spirit as if it had been a wrong against me. And ever after, the sense of it has been with me. Sometimes now I hear the voice of ravens in my mind and their cawing is like the voice of death. And certain thoughts... they seem to take a raven’s shape. Do you know what I mean?”

“Eew, no! And I’m glad I don’t. Who’d want to feel the presence of the Warbird? Does it haunt you, then?”

“No, it’s not like that!” said Yani with a little laugh. “Don’t be ridiculous.” She looked at Marigoth’s avid face and said affectionately, “You are the most terrible little ghoul.”

“I am not!” cried Marigoth. “I just... if it is so bad, why are you still a fighter?”

“Swordplay is an art. A great physical pleasure and beauty, like any other sport. Like dance. It is not about killing. It is about pitting yourself honorably against an opponent. Striving against your own fear and weakness. And in the service of the life spirit, of justice and balance... What greater honor could there have been than to have been there at Fleurforet helping to drive off Wolf Madraga’s forces? To have protected all those innocent people. Surely that is serving the life spirit, not damaging it.”

“You might have had to kill someone.”

“I would gladly die a thousand deaths for Elena. Wouldn’t you?”

Marigoth looked startled. “There’s no need. I can just put people to sleep. I’ll never have—”

“No!” cried Yani, suddenly serious. “Enough of this avoiding facts. Think about it seriously. Because this is not the island now. It’s the real, dirty world. You may have to do things for Elena you don’t like. Would you kill for Elena?”

“I...”

“I need to know that you are up to this,” said Yani. “I need to know you are not going to just run away and hide when things get difficult.”

Marigoth flushed. “How dare you! Do you think I don’t love our sister? Do you think I would... ?”

“What is wrong with you, Marigoth? Why haven’t you grown up? Why? What are you hiding from?”

“I don’t have to grow up,” cried Marigoth. “I don’t have to become some stupid, serious, self-satisfied adult always laying down the law like you. Just mind your own business, Yani!”

“You would be better able to help Elena if you grew—”

“Shut up! Shut up!”

“Marigoth, think! Your power is—”

“Chaos on you!” shouted Marigoth. She waved her arm and suddenly she was gone.

“See!” shouted Yani. “Running away from reality. Just like a Tari.”

She stared savagely at the empty space. Then suddenly her face fell; she remembered a very similar argument seven years ago and Elena’s voice saying to her reproachfully, “We could have used her help.”

She clapped her hand on her forehead.

“Idiot!” she told herself. She needed Marigoth. Elena needed Marigoth. What had she been thinking? Elena was what was important now, not Yarn’s idea of what was good for Marigoth.

“Marigoth, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have spoken like that. I was wrong. Look, please, for Elena’s sake. We have to stick together.”

Silence.

“I promise not to mention it again.” In the silence Yani heard heavy boots coming across the deck toward the cabin. A fist banged on the door.

She pulled her boiled leather jerkin off her bunk. It had extra padding to give her body a more manly shape. With this, her breasts bound down and her hair cut short, she had been able to pass as a man ever since she left Dania. Women swordfighters were not very common and so people usually didn’t need much prompting to assume that a person with a sword was a man. And everyone knew that the Mirayans had peculiar views about women. The fact that they always insisted on talking to Queen Sharma’s husband, whose only official role was to father the queen’s children, instead of the queen herself was testimony to this. Privately Yani thought masquerading as a man was a ridiculous concession to make to such fools, but Queen Sharma had insisted it was a good idea and she was usually right about such things.

She had barely shrugged the jerkin over her shoulders when the door flew open and a Mirayan man stood there with another man.

“Commander Barius! Highness! He’s just a passenger!” cried the ship’s master, who seemed to be trying to slow his companion’s progress. An employee of the queen, the master was well aware of Yani’s gender and was probably trying to give her time. “He’s not responsible for anything. You really have no need to bother with him.”

“I’m going to see everything on this ship. Don’t try any of your cunning native tricks on me,” said the Mirayan. He flung into the room like a walking brick, a large man with a red jowly face, big belly, broad shoulders and big beefy fists. Two men-at-arms peered in behind him. He glared at Yani.

“So who the hell are you?” he demanded.

“Lord Yani, I told him you had nothing to do with my trading,” said the master anxiously, “but he insisted on coming to speak with you. It’s not my fault, lord. I didn’t know.”

“Of course not,” said Yani. The shipmaster looked scared. Evidently there was some serious problem here. Time to attempt some diplomacy. “How may I help you, Commander Barius?” she said courteously to the Mirayan.

The moment she spoke she knew she had said something wrong. She could tell by the master’s grimace and by the reddening of the official’s face. Damn! Why was she so bad at diplomacy?

“This ship is being confiscated and the crew are to be taken in for questioning on a small matter of illegal trading,” said the commander. “What’s your business here?”

“I’m a passenger,” said Yani.

“Boarding where?”

“Dania.”

“Ah, so you’re Danian, are you? Don’t look like any Dani I’ve ever seen. What’s your business? Perhaps the queen of the Dani sent you to find out about Duke Wolf’s fortifications.”

“No,” said Yani. “Why would she care about that? I’ve come here looking for my sister. She’s married to a man somewhere down here and we lost touch.”

She turned to the master. “What does he mean illegal trading? What’s illegal?”

The only trading they had yet done on this voyage was when they had stopped at Fleurforet to examine the remains of the camp. The Mori survivors had come out of the forest to trade furs for arrowheads with the Danians, just as they had before the disaster.

“His Highness Duke Wolf Madraga has declared all trade with the Mori to be illegal and this fellow had a hold full of Mori furs,” snapped the watch commander.

Anger filled Yani at the sound of the name of the destroyer of Fleurforet.

“But we didn’t know it was illegal!” she snapped. “That’s not fair! What say does the duke have in it anyway?”

The master groaned and put his hands over his face as the watch commander lurched forward, grabbed a fist full of Yard’s shirt and pulled her face down to his.

“Ignorance of the law is no excuse, shit-for-brains. I don’t like your attitude. What say does the duke have in this indeed! I think he’ll have plenty to say about a rich young Dani lordling like you and his bullshit stories. I think it’s about time we taught you a lesson or two about what business it is of the duke’s to say who trades what in his own port.”

He shoved Yani away hard so that she should have stumbled, but she was ready and kept her balance.

This seemed to annoy the commander even more. He turned on his heel with a disgusted look.

“Bring him!” he ordered the soldiers. He turned to the master, who was wringing his hands anxiously. “And you! Carrying illegal cargo *and* Dani spies! Just thank your heathen gods that I’m not the magistrate or I’d burn this piece of driftwood to the waterline.”

“But Highness, he’s not a spy. I swear it.”

The commander was gone. The two men-at-arms moved in beside Yani and demanded her weapons.

“Yes, of course,” she said. They seemed more than willing to shove her about so she showed them her sword and dagger on the bunk. They insisted that she pick them up and hand them to them. Some attempt to humiliate her? Who could understand Mirayans?

They were tied up alongside the dock. It must have taken some kind of magecraft to have brought the ship so neatly in. Knowing the Mirayans, they had official mages to do this kind of thing. All around them towered huge Mirayan ships, three times as tall as their ship and covered in gaudily painted statues. Three huge ballistas, the biggest Yani had ever seen, stood on the foredeck of the nearest one.

On their deck a long line of crewmen stood, drearily waiting to climb the tall ladder up to the dock. Men-at-arms stood implacably behind them.

“I could make a diversion if you want to run,” the master whispered.

“Are they likely to strip us?” asked Yard. “No? Well then, thank you but I think we will stay here for a while.”

“Lord, where is your sister?” The shipmaster had a healthy fear of Marigoth.

“Around,” said Yani, hoping she was right. Now she really did need Marigoth. “What will they do to us?”

“I don’t know. We are to go to jail and that commander fellow talks of taking my ship. They are trying to stop people trading weapons with the Mori.”

“Well then, I shall tell them you traded nothing but cheeses.”

“No, lord. I beg of you, say you stayed aboard during the trade and know nothing of it. You have not the way of dealing with these Mirayans. You are too proud. They do not like proud Archipelagans.”

“But that’s outrage—”

“It is best to humor them in this. You should let them think they are cleverer and stronger. Also you should always call them Highness. They like that.”

“But why?” cried Yani, mystified. “Are they all princes, to be called Highness? My honor does not like this.”

“Move along there, and no talking,” shouted one of the men-at-arms, nudging them with his spear.

Surrounded by the men-at-arms, they left the dockside and went through the gate into the city. Yani was both impressed and disturbed. The houses of the Mirayan town were enormous and built of stone. The streets too were paved with stone and built with small paved depressions on either side, which were obviously there to collect the rubbish and ordure. Not a bad way of keeping streets clean, thought Yani, remembering the filthy mud streets of the Dani capital.

Yet though all this building was impressive, it was also stifling. How could they bear to live in these tall stone houses with no sight of anything green apart from some slimy moss growing on the refuse ditches? All these people crammed in together. How did they stand it?

Most of the people on the streets were Mirayan, but there were plenty of Archipelagans, many of them wearing iron slave manacles around their necks. Apart from a couple of Seagani who stopped and stared at Yani, no one paid much attention to the prisoners, except for some small boys who had fallen in behind them, throwing rotten fruit and chanting something that sounded insulting.

After a short time, however, the chanting was suddenly cut off by shrill screams of pain. She craned backward to see what had happened. Could Marigoth have... She wasn’t very tolerant. Neither was the guard. Before Yani could see what had happened to the little boys, she was shoved in the back with the shaft of a spear and roughly urged on.

At the end of the street was a big arched gate leading onto a paved yard surrounded by square stone buildings. They were certainly good builders, these Mirayans.

The column of prisoners was lined up in the yard and a man in a dark blue mage’s robe came down the line and held a crystal up to every man. A dignified-looking man with gray hair looked at Yani carefully and then said something to Commander Barius. Barius looked disgusted but grunted his consent. Yani had made an enemy there.

When the blue-robed mage reached Yani, he waved the crystal over her a couple of times, peered at it and her and then said, “Put a manacle on this one for good measure.”

The search over, the prisoners filed into the big stone building, which was full of cages floored with straw. The stench of the place was dreadful—stale urine and sweat with an underpinning of excrement. Yani found it hard not to gag. The cages were full of men, most of them dirty as well as ragged. All of them were Archipelagans, mostly the local Seagani. They jeered as the crew filed through the door but fell silent when they saw Yani.

Thinking that if anyone needed hope these fellows seemed to, Yani said, “May the Circle of Life enfold you and bless you all.”

At this several of them shot out their hands to be touched, and she touched them, repeating the blessing, until the commander came charging through, hitting their hands and shoving Yani roughly away from the cage.

“Hey!” shouted one huge man. “You can’t treat a Tari like that.” A clamor of protest arose from the cage.

“Get in there,” snapped the commander, twisting Yani’s arm and hustling her to the end of the corridor. Pulling open a big wooden door, he pushed her into a tiny cell no more than a man’s-length long with a stone grating cut in the wall to let in light.

“What the hell were you doing out there?” he shouted.

“It’s supposed to be lucky to touch a fair-haired person,” lied Yani.

“I’ll give you touching! Scum!” growled the commander.

He kicked Yani in the leg so hard that she crashed onto the floor.

She was up in a moment, fists clenched ready to fight, her mind full of raven thoughts. The look on the commander’s face stopped her. He was just itching for an opportunity to beat her up and he probably wasn’t above calling others to help.

She stood there defensively, scowling at him.

“Learning already, are you?” said the commander. “We don’t like your kind here. Coming round and stirring up our natives. I’d like to see what the Inquisition will make of all this.”

It was on the tip of Yani’s tongue to tell him to go to destruction, but she had to avoid a fight. Too much physical contact might reveal her sex to this, the worst of all possible people. She just glowered at him and moved over into the corner of the cell as if she were worried about another blow. She had come across this kind of malice before. It was the reverse side of the respect which most people showed. This was so chillingly open. Well, why shouldn’t it be? She was very much in the power of this man. She felt a twinge of fear at the thought.

He looked satisfied and left the cell, locking the door behind him. A moment later there was a yelp from outside and a kind of muffled roar from the other prisoners. Through the grating in the cell door Yani saw that the commander had tripped and landed facedown in a very dubious-looking puddle. She heard a little girl laughing out in the corridor. A wave of relief came over her. She moved away from the door before the commander could see her smiling.

The commander did not return. When night fell Yani rented a filthy blanket from one of the warders and did her best to sleep curled up in the corner of the cell. Her soldier’s training helped a little, but the cell was too small and dark and she kept having unpleasant dreams about the walls squeezing in on her till she oozed out from between them like guts out of a stomach wound. After a while she wanted to shout at Marigoth to come and get her out of here, but she knew she had to take her punishment bravely. When Marigoth thought she had suffered enough she would come.

Sure enough sometime in the early hours of the morning Marigoth was there in the cell with her, nudging her none too gently in the ribs with her foot.

“Time to go, sleepyhead.” From the tone of her voice she was determined to pretend nothing had happened between them. That suited Yani. The less said, the soonest forgotten.

Yani heard the bolt sliding back and a light flared on Marigoth’s fingertips. She got up, easing her cramped muscles, and pushed open the door. But once outside the cell, she remembered something.

“Mari,” she said, catching hold of Marigoth’s wrist in the darkness. “Can we get the ship’s crew out of here?”

“What? Oh, why Yani? What’s the point?”

“Well, I don’t want the master to lose his ship and have to stay in this horrible place. The commander’s a pig.”

“Well, he’s wallowed in shit today,” said Marigoth with a satisfied laugh.

“So can we do it?” persisted Yani.

“Oh, Yani,” groaned Marigoth. “You’re *so* sentimental. I thought warriors were meant to be hard. What are these people to you?”

“It’s a matter of doing the honorable thing. Come on, Mari. Would it be so hard to let out a few extra captives? You’ve already put the guards to sleep, haven’t you? It would make getting away much easier if we went on the ship. And think of how it would annoy the commander. And his superiors.”

“Oh all right, then. But now that you’ve helped them there’ll be no end to it, just you mark my words.”

But the idea of annoying Commander Barius, or even better, getting him into trouble appealed to Marigoth so much that she opened every single cell in the watchhouse so that by the time the jailers awoke from their magical sleep to greet the morning sun, the whole place was empty.

It fell to the marshal of the city to be the one to explain the jailbreak to the duke. It pained him to have to report failure to his leader. He promised himself that those guards would feel the whip. Yet they were not the kind of men you would have expected to have slept through a jail-break. At least not all of them.

The duke did not get angry. True, he had never been one to rant and rave over spilt milk, but he hardly even seemed interested in the emptying of his jail. The man had changed since the raid on Fleurforet. There was no gainsaying it.

“We’ve picked up a couple of the local escapees already this morning. Both of them drunken sots who went to the closest tavern the minute they got free. Most of the others seem to have gone off on a boat with this pale-haired freak.”

“So what did the drunks tell you? You mindsearched them?”

“Had to. They were both too drunk to make any sense. It looks like they were both asleep when whatever happened happened, but they both show that the freak was definitely the ringleader. Somehow he got out of his own cell, opened the door of their cells and led them out past the sleeping guards. There was a little girl with him. I don’t understand it, my lord. Where would she come from?”

“And was this little girl like the man? Pale skin and pale hair?”

“Not sure, my lord. The drunks only caught a glimpse of her. Maybe it was just the tail end of some drunken dream, though it was in the heads of both men. But it doesn’t seem to make sense. How could a little girl get into the prison? And the man was wearing a witch manacle.”

“Was he?” said the duke, impressed. “Even though the fellow showed no sign of magery? Commend the mage who did that. That was very perceptive of him.”

He got up and went to the window. The marshal noticed that there was a small brown bird with green wings standing on the windowsill, watching them with beady eyes. It did not seem at all disturbed by the duke’s proximity.

“So one, maybe two of these fair people. Where did the man say they came from?”

“Commander Barius told me he claimed to be a Dani, but I don’t think he had interviewed him very carefully.”

“Commander Barius.” The duke pulled a face. This particular commander of the watch was a good leader of men, but notoriously bad with the natives. “It all becomes clear now. So do we have any idea what this tall fair man was doing in Lamartaine?”

“Barius was certain he was a spy.”

“And what else did Barius say?”

“Said the fellow could give no good reason for being in Lamartaine. Said he gave some stupid story about looking for a sister down here.”

The duke looked quickly at the marshal. “Looking for his sister? He said that?”

“So Barius claims.”

The duke looked grim.

“He came off a ship you said.”

“Yes. One that was being impounded for trading with the Mori. It had a cargo of Mori furs onboard.”

“And the master of this ship?”

“Among those who escaped from the jail. The ship went out on the early morning tide. We’ve sent out one of ours, but we don’t have much hope. It must have been sailing very fast... there was no sign of it. There must be a mage involved here. And there weren’t many witnesses on the docks either. A lot of people asleep. But the watch mage found a couple of hairs this Yani’d left on his blanket, and he cast a bowl of seeing on them. The man is out at sea, no doubt with the rest of that ship. Heading back to Dania.”

“I see,” said the duke. “Well, I want no more outbreaks of this kind. But do not punish the guards too harshly. These tall fair people are notorious among the natives for their subtle magery. I don’t doubt that there was magic involved here. As for our good Commander Barius, reprimand him soundly for being overzealous. Tell him that next time he encounters one of these people he should send for me immediately. They are called Tari for future reference. You may go now, marshal. I know you will do your best to round up the other prisoners.”

As the door closed behind the marshal, the duke sat down at the table and put his head in his hands.

There was a feathery rustling of bird’s wings and suddenly the small green-winged bird was gone and a woman stood before the window. She was tall and dressed in green, with green feathers plaited into her long pale blond hair. Her eyes were dark and slightly slanted above her high cheekbones.

“Why the attitude of despair, Madraga?” she said, smiling cynically.

“Your people have come to take her back,” he said. “Now I have no chance.”

Sometimes without meaning to, a person looks at the sun and though he may look away quickly, the afterimage of the sunlight is burnt onto his eye and is part of everything he sees till it fades. So it was for Duke Wolf Madraga now he had seen Elena Starchild. Except that the afterimage did not fade, but continued to remain part of everything he did.

He burned.

It was worst at night. When he closed his eyes he saw her shining beauty again as she came forth from the tower. The Mori had called her Elena Starchild with good reason. He had such dreams of her—such sweet and ecstatic dreams. The very memory of them turned him hot.

He should have taken up arms against that brute Scar-van, he should have. But opposing his liege lord had never been one of Duke Wolf’s ambitions. It had taken time to work up to that. Though not very much time.

Why did she haunt him so? Why did the memory of her fill his mind at odd times of the day when he was sitting in judgment or inspecting troops or riding through the forest to hunt?

Up till now women had intruded very little on Wolf Madraga’s inner life. Well-bred Mirayans kept their womenfolk secluded—protected from the outside world, so that they saw no one but their close

male relatives. Women who went out in public were either serfs (although the usual social classes had broken down somewhat in the Archipelago) or native slaves. One didn't really talk to such women, though one might have brief sexual relationships with them.

Of his female relatives, his thirteen-year-old daughter, Stasia, was the only one he had strong affection for. He was fond of his mother, but the bonds had weakened under the force of her constant hysteria after his father had been killed and she had found herself a widow, six months pregnant, on a ship to a strange new country with only her fifteen-year-old son, Wolf, for protection. Wolf had been immensely relieved when older women had taken on the task of caring for her and later Prince Pirus of Ishtak had found her a new husband.

His own late wife had been a much stronger woman, dutiful, calm and affectionate when appropriate, but the deep affection he felt for her memory was mostly a product of gratitude. She had been an undemanding woman, attractive enough to make getting his four children no chore, but he had not felt passion for her. He had never thought of himself as a passionate man. So why did he burn for Elena Starchild and why did he feel such deadly anger when he thought of Scarvan's big red paws touching her beautiful skin?

"I said it would happen, didn't I? You were too slow," said the Lady of Birds, at the window now.

Though the duke called her the Lady of Birds, Jindabyne was her real name.

The Tari sorceress had appeared to him one night about a month ago in the shape of an owl. The Tari, so it seemed, were not a myth. Were very much not a myth. It seemed this strange island of Yarmar still had mysteries. The morning after, he had sent for a native shaman and asked him all about the Tari. What he heard would have been frightening if he had believed every word of it. Fortunately he knew how superstitious and easily impressed the natives were. Anyway, Wolf Madraga no longer cared about danger. All he wanted was the release of a night in Elena Starchild's arms.

Yet he had had enough self-possession to resist all Jindabyne's urgings to go to war with Scarvan over Elena. He had not lost his mind that completely. He saw clearly that she might well be some ill-wishing native force sent to create fatal disunity among the Mirayans.

"Well, if it has happened perhaps it is better so," he said now. "Such obsession as I have is dangerous and should be fought. At least *he* will not keep her." ?

The Lady of Birds put her hands on her hips.

"Oh, please," she said sarcastically. "Spare me the heroics. If ever I saw such a hopeless man. I cannot imagine why destiny says you will breed rulers with Elena Starchild. You have no spine at all."

The duke tensed angrily.

Then he relaxed, sat back in his chair and looked at her with a tolerable copy of her own cynicism. "A Mi-ryan woman would never speak to a man so."

"And I should wish to copy such dull creatures? It is not surprising you have fallen for the first Tari woman you saw. How can a strong man bear endlessly obedient women?"

She leaned casually against a chair and watched him working to suppress his anger with amusement.

"You have no choice," she said sweetly. "If you want my help."

"Did I say I wanted your help? How can I be sure I can trust you? I've never believed in prophecy. People cannot foretell the future."

She was suddenly serious. "You should. The Tari are destiny's intimates. We *can* foretell the future. And we foresee that it is you and not Alexis Scarvan who will breed rulers of Yarmar with Elena Starchild."

“So you say,” said Madraga coolly.

She smiled. “Oh, I know that you think I am here to sow disunity and make you Mirayans weak. That shows you are not a fool, and thus worthy to father Tari rulers. I want some of that wine,” she said, pointing to the jug on the sideboard.

He got the wine and ignored the way she just sat down in a chair without so much as a by your leave. She had no more shame than a whore, this creature. It did not bother her at all that he could see her ankles and some of her calves. Elena Starchild had not been such a woman.

Nonetheless, the Lady of Birds was a beautiful creature and had Elena Starchild not filled his mind he might well have found her very attractive. Perhaps there was something in her taunts about obedient women. The forthrightness of native women was rather refreshing. Though no one in his right mind bedded a sorceress.

“Perhaps you were right to resist my persuasions. Perhaps this will serve us just as well,” she said.

“That is a concession indeed,” he said, pouring himself a glass of wine. “But really I still can’t see why you are prepared to go against your own people for my sake.”

“Those two are no people of mine,” said Jindabyne. “Nor is Elena Starchild. Their grandmother went against our council and took her granddaughters to live outside our land. Her actions undermined Ermora’s safety. She was an evil woman That is why when prophecy showed that Elena was to marry one of the Gibadgee, my master had no qualms in sending me to help destiny along. We are destiny’s children, we Tari.”

“So you have often said. You were telling me how this event might serve me.”

“I predict these two, for there were definitely two of them, will show up in Olbia very soon. And they will disturb the prince. I’m sure he wants to keep Elena Starchild as much as you want to have her.”

Wolf was sure of it too. He ground his teeth at the thought of the fat old pig touching—

“Calm down. He hasn’t got your strength of character, Madraga. I don’t know why you are so faithful to him.”

“It’s about honor,” he said. “So I don’t expect you to understand.”

She smiled sweetly at him and went on. “I think—with a little help from me—he can be persuaded to send Elena away to one of his other fortresses and you can snatch her on the way. Quite possibly without his even knowing it was you.”

He thought of this and his spirits began to rise. The plan did have distinct possibilities. His ships were better than Scarvan’s. He would be better informed.

“You are going to Olbia soon, aren’t you?” she said.

“I usually go for the feast of St. Stefan,” he said, “but I thought this year... I hear rumors that Scarvan is going to publicly rebuke me for not following his religious edict.”

“The man is a fool,” she said. “You should not interfere with a people’s religion. Not if you wish to keep harmony.”

“On that, we are agreed,” said Madraga, lifting his cup.

“As on so many things. We Tari like you, Madraga. If we must have Mirayans, and that appears to be our destiny, we would prefer you. You are so much more practical.”

“Why, thank you,” he said. “So tell me more about you Tari. Are they all like you?”

“Some are and some aren’t,” shrugged the lady, her eyes glittering with amusement. “I should not worry. Apart from Elena Starchild, I am the only one you are ever likely to meet.”

He wondered if this was true. He hoped it was.

Meanwhile on a ship sailing as fast as it could toward Dania, Marigoth was shouting at Yani.

“Did you tell them that I would becalm them if they didn’t agree?”

“No,” snapped Yani. “And I’m not going to. I don’t blame the master for not wanting to go farther into Mirayan territory. He says the punishment for escaping from prison is slavery and I believe him. This ship is no match for one of those monstrous Mirayan things with the ballistas.”

“But I am.”

“Are you really?” asked Yani seriously before she remembered that this was dangerous ground.

Marigoth dropped her eyes. “Very well, then. Let us go some other way if you’re scared.”

“We’ll just have to get our own boat,” said Yani. “Or I guess we could walk. It would take no more than thirty days by my reckoning.”

“Yani, be serious! Do you want Elena to have to stay in captivity any longer than is necessary?”

“I am not going to force this ship to take us! It would be wrong.”

“Then maybe we should try the Circle of Power. There is one very near Fleurforet. I saw it that time I was visiting Elena. Surely it wouldn’t hurt. Just the once.”

Chapter 3

“I have been very honored to be a part of this regiment,” said Ezratah Karanus, trying to look as if he meant it. The son of an impoverished family should never give offense if he could help it and he’d done his best to hide how disappointed he’d been to find himself at this dusty little outpost with no chance of fighting or loot. “It’s just... my family, we have lived at Vaskom for four hundred years but the war... they look to me to do something...”

“Ah!” said the magelord. “Yes. These northern-border outposts are not good places to get rich. The Red Seagani have accepted civilization far too peacefully for that, not that we would have them otherwise.”

Once again Ezratah blessed the fact that Duke Wolf Madraga’s magelord came from the same kind of background as he did. Most of the duke’s regiment of mages were rough colonials who might have Mirayan blood but who had been born in the Archipelago and in the worst cases educated there as well. But the magelord had been born and bred at home and knew, intimately so the rumors said, the problems the Mirayan civil war had caused for families of their rank.

Ezratah suspected he had a soft spot for him, which was why Ezratah had come to him for advice. He wanted to be somewhere where there was a chance to make some loot fighting the natives. Rumor had it that the magelord had managed to accumulate quite a fortune during the war of settlement in Southern Seagan, so he should have some good advice.

“I thought maybe the border with the Mori,” said Ezratah, perhaps a bit too eagerly. The sacking of Fleur-foret had been big news among the garrison here.

“You will certainly see fighting there,” said the magelord. “But if it’s money you need... The Mori are savages. The only valuable thing they have is fur, and you’ll have to see a lot of fighting to get it. No, I have another suggestion to make which you may find outrageous but which I want you to consider

seriously. If you want to make a lot of money fast, do what I did when I first came. Go to Olbia and take service with a merchant.”

“A merchant!” cried Ezratah, unable to keep the distaste out of his voice. In Miraya it would have been a great disgrace for an aristocrat like him to have worked for a merchant. He could already hear his elder brother, Marcus, scoffing at the very idea.

“This is the Archipelago, not Miraya,” the magelord said with an understanding smile. “What you do here will have little effect on your life back home. And you will find it answers your needs admirably, Karanus. Merchants pay well and the work is not demanding. It can even be exciting if you have to fight pirates. And merchants can put you in the way of making money discreetly in trade. Yes, I know, but look at how rich the merchant families are. I wager they traveled in the deck cabin on the trip over, didn’t they?”

Ezratah remembered his miserable little hammock just above the bilges that was all he had been able to afford on the duke’s wages. How they had stunk! How he had resented the lowly born merchants who had strutted about on the deck and eaten pork and apple stew with the shipmaster. Yet he was still Mirayan enough to find the magelord’s words hard to believe. He was Ezratah Karanus, a nobleman. Nobles did not work for those beneath them.

“If you will pardon the impertinence, sir, did you really work for a merchant?” he asked with polite incredulity.

The magelord’s eyes twinkled. “Yes, I did. I worked for Caius Vassilus in Olbia doing a variety of things. Pirate protection was the most exciting. It took me back to Miraya several times on free passage in the deck cabins, and there was a considerable amount of loot to be had. My family have had reason to be very glad I did it. I’d recommend either of the Vassilus brothers as good masters, but any reputable mercantile house in Olbia would recognize the value of a good Mirayan-educated mage, especially one with your talent for languages, Karanus. You can always take a more suitable post afterward, as I have, if you feel the need to reestablish your honor. There is always call for Mirayan-born men.”

Ezratah nodded—mostly to cover his surprise. The magelord had seemed such a well-bred man. For a moment he almost thought he might be mocking him. But he was quite serious. Then another terrible suspicion came to Ezratah.

“Sir, if I may ask, is that why you stayed here?”

“What, because I worked for a merchant? Oh no!” the magelord laughed. “I promise you no one at home will know. Or care as long as you are a rich man. I don’t really know why I didn’t go home. I like it here... I think. These islands are not Miraya, but they have many advantages Miraya does not. I do not miss the winters in Akieva, for instance. And my son will inherit more land here than his cousins back home, despite his father being a mage. And he may never have to know the horror of death magic...”

Ezratah knew how much the magelord’s home province of Callona had suffered from rogue death-mages during the early part of the civil war. Thank god that had never happened in his part of the country, just the endless banditry that had ruined crops and killed peasants and the endless need for money to keep the men-at-arms armored and fed. Even when a good strong warlord had brought peace to the area so that the family could spare Ezratah’s defensive powers, there had been a sense of exhaustion throughout the province that was pleasantly absent here.

“For all its faults, these are lands of promise,” continued the magelord. “I think we Mirayans have the chance to build fine societies here, to lead the natives into the life of Mir and of civilization. You’re a smart lad, Ezratah. You have abilities beyond magecraft that might serve you well. Don’t close your eyes to those opportunities. Think it over and if you wish, I can give you a letter of introduction.”

Thus it was that two months later Ezratah found himself on the road to Olbia with a letter of introduction to one of the Vassilus brothers in his pack. As the gate of the fortress swung shut behind him, he had a moment of self-doubt. His place in the duke's regiments had been assured and the pay had been reliable, if poor. The other mages, though crude colonials, had been good-hearted fellows. What was he doing going off to work for some merchant?

He could already hear his brother's snide remarks. Marcus had always accused him of having a faulty sense of honor.

But Ezratah knew in his heart of hearts that what he did was for more than Marcus. It was for the Karanus family, for their honorable name, for their continuance at Vaskom, for his father, who had first suggested that he come out here, and had told him that he would not blame him for what he did whilst in the Archipelago. It was also for his dear little sisters, Saskia and Julia, whose safe and honorable future marriages were now assured because of the money Ezratah had sent home. Ezratah himself would have preferred a more cultured life in one of the colleges in the Mirayan capital, Alia, but the civil war had put an end to any chance of that.

Thinking of his sisters always reconciled him to being here in this barbaric place. Awful to think if his sisters had been forced by poverty to remain unmarried and childless, useless, incomplete women. At least in providing their dowries, he had achieved something worthwhile. Now that their futures were assured, he felt free to take this risk.

With any luck he would not need to use the letter anyway. All kinds of things might happen in Olbia. Prince Alexis Scarvan had much more trouble with the natives than Duke Wolf did. Surely he would be interested in a young mage of good family and silver-level power. In Miraya the fact that Ezratah had no one to sponsor him to the prince would have been a problem, but this was Yarmar. Anything might happen here.

What if he could come home a rich man and restore the family fortunes? Marcus would have to keep his sneers to himself then.

With this thought he set off at a brisk pace along the road toward Olbia. There was a small Seagani village near the garrison, and he passed many natives in their usual costumes of flowing linen trousers and tunics, finely wrought silver and copper jewelry. Even the women wore trousers, though in deference to the Mirayans they also covered their long flowing hair and wore longer tunics. The brown cloud of boredom that had been weighing on his mind at the outpost lifted and he was filled with a sense of adventure.

The Archipelago might be barbaric but there were consolations for being here. It was exciting to be somewhere different, and learning Archipelagan languages was much more fascinating than learning the peasant dialects at home. The many quaint customs of the Seagani made them interesting too. Mind you, that could be part of the problem as well. Walking along the road that late summer morning Ezratah found he was still very shaken by the scene he'd had with his native mistress a few nights before.

Because he'd been interested in learning Seagani, in addition to the more obvious reasons, he'd formed a liaison with a young Seagani woman. Her family had been badly in debt and pathetically grateful for the tiny amount of money he paid her. He'd kept her in one of the small native bothies that stood in the little settlement outside the fort and they'd got along very happily together, so that he'd felt he'd understood her.

What a complete illusion! He thought he'd treated her very decently. He'd been careful not to give her any children and when the time had come for him to leave, he arranged to pass her on to one of his fellow officers. A Mirayan serf woman would have been very grateful for this treatment but she... When she'd found out what he intended, she carried on dreadfully.

"I thought you'd cared about me," she screamed. Well, hadn't he showed that by trying to assure her

future? What had she expected? Surely not marriage! She had become so upset, he sent for her mother; only to find that her mother, instead of beating her for ingratitude like the mother of a Mirayan serf woman would have, had taken her part against him! He flushed hotly just thinking of the difficult scene.

He would never understand these people. He'd thought a lot about what the magelord had said but, no, he couldn't imagine thinking of the Archipelago as home. That was that. Things were too disordered here. This was exile. As for the climate that everyone raved about—was it really so wonderful? The winters were well enough, but now in late summer the midday heat was dreadful. The air smelled of heat and dust, and insects chirruped loudly in the short dry grass. These were the grasslands where the all-important sheep were raised. There was little shelter from the strong white light of the sun on the paved Mirayan high road.

It was strange country. In most of the landscapes Ezratah knew, you walked along in valleys and hills rose above you. Here you walked over undulating plains, and valleys scooped out by streams occasionally dropped away beside you. There were stands of trees here and there, but only the valleys were really forested and the main road didn't enter those.

Sometime before the sun reached its highest point, Ezratah turned off the main road and took a steep path down into a shady valley. Here the air was redolent with the smell of sun-warmed mangiri trees and full of the sleepy chirruping of cicadas. At the bottom of the valley was a small stream. He followed its course, looking for some cool spot where it would be possible to rest a few hours in comfort.

It took him a little time to find a suitable spot, for the sides of the stream were thick with ferns. Then, when he did find a clearing where the stream widened to a ford, another small valley opened into it, and something about that second valley made him curious.

It was not exactly a valley but a large hollow that looked like a big bite had been taken out of the hill. Within that large hollow, almost filling it in fact, was a huge circle of standing stones, rough hewn but definitely man-made. Fascinated, Ezratah examined them for some time. The fact that the wall of the hollow was covered with moss and little ferns made it impossible to tell if it had been carved or not. If it was natural, it was remarkably even. The stone circle fitted perfectly within the hollow. Each stone was an even distance from the wall so that he could walk easily through the space between.

Who could have made this thing? Surely the natives were not capable of such stonework. They were barely civilized enough to build themselves proper dwellings, and they did all their religious stuff in groves of trees.

He explored the surface of the stones and was fascinated to find a carving of five concentric circles shot through with crossed lines on one of them. He'd never seen that sign before. He must ask someone what it signified.

At last however, hunger drew him away from the interesting circle and he stretched out in the shadow of one of the stones to eat his bread and cheese. His cheese had gone all melty in the heat. To tell the truth, after two years of eating melty cheese on patrol, he was beginning to like it, and could see himself, an old man in Miraya, annoying the serfs by asking them to melt cheese onto his bread. He was lying there eating and wondering idly how melted cheese could be made without toasting the bread underneath when suddenly he felt something. Something magical. He sat up, his trained senses alert, but he couldn't detect what had disturbed him. It had been just a frisson, something too small for even the smallest spell.

He was just sitting back down again when suddenly someone stepped out from within the circle just beside him and let out a yell of exhilaration.

Ezratah started up with a cry. The man, a tall pale-haired warrior dressed in black, saw him and jumped back also.

For a moment the two of them stared at one another in shock.

Then the warrior seemed to shrug off his surprise.

“Tell me, sir, which way is it to Olbia?” he asked, in a heavily accented version of trade talk.

“That way,” said a dazed Ezratah, and pointed back toward the road.

“And how far?”

“About five days’ walk,” said Ezratah.

“I thank you, sir,” said the warrior, and took off down the path at a fast jog.

Ezratah just sat there gaping after him. Mir’s blood, where had the fellow come from? He looked around in confusion. By all that was...

“Wait!” he cried, but the warrior was out of sight and probably out of earshot. Ezratah ran between the stones, looking everywhere. Where had the man come from? There was no way he could have entered the circle without Ezratah’s knowing. He’d already examined the wall of the hollow. He looked again, hoping to find a possible hidden cave, but there was no sign of anything. As he passed back and forth between the stones he became aware that his senses were a jangle. He felt as if he had whacked his funny bone, only the feeling was all over his body. At first he thought it was the shock of seeing the man, but the moment he left the circle, the feeling disappeared. Instead he simply felt refreshed, as if he had jumped into a cold pool of water.

How peculiar!

He stepped back between the stones and the jangle came back. He stepped out of the stones and it was gone. At that moment, there was the scream of a hawk and a bird plunged down from the air nearby, grabbed something from the ground and flew off. It took Ezratah a moment to realize that it was his bread and cheese.

“Hey,” he shouted, throwing a stone uselessly after the already distant bird.

He cursed and turned back to the stones, but this time as he stepped between them the jangling was much less. So much less he wasn’t even sure he really felt it. He cursed again and kicked one of the stones in annoyance. What on earth had happened here? Now he’d never know. Or...

The one person who could answer his questions was probably still jogging away down the road to Olbia. The same road Ezratah was going to take. He could probably catch up with him if he hurried and since they were going the same way what could be more natural than falling into conversation? Quickly Ezratah gathered up his belongings and swung his pack onto his shoulder.

The warrior had moved fast. There was no sign of him on the path or on the paved main road that was now shimmering with heat haze in the midday light. By the time he reached the road Ezratah was beginning to wonder if this was a good idea. The locals showed a naive lack of fear for magical strangers, but Mirayans knew that a magical stranger could easily be a death mage or one of his slaves. Yet Ezratah felt sure the warrior himself wasn’t magical. In fact apart from the strange jangling among the stones, which was as like magic as water was like wine, he had felt no magic at all.

So why did he feel so certain magic had taken place? Because it was the most logical explanation? Maybe there had been another person, some invisible mage... But he would have felt him.

Oh come on, make up your mind! he scolded himself. He’s getting away! If you’re too scared to approach him, at least observe him from a distance.

Suddenly resolute, he pulled his army-issue straw hat (an embarrassing ugly peasant sort of a thing) out of his pack. Jamming it on his head, he set off down the road toward Olbia.

He walked as fast as he could. Soon his head began to swim with the heat. He kept telling himself that the warrior must be around the next bend. Nobody could jog far in this heat. But every time he rounded

the next bend there was no sign of him.

At last he threw himself down in the shade of a distance marker, took a long drink of lukewarm water from his canteen, ate an orange and took stock.

He was a fool to think he could catch the fellow. He was probably used to these temperatures. Although, was the fellow a native? Natives were dark. Mirayans were the only people in Yarmar with fair hair. Although Ezratah had never seen any Mirayan who looked like...

Suddenly he remembered the garrison commander reading out a circular from Duke Wolf. The duke was interested in any sightings of tall, pale-haired natives with high cheekbones and green eyes. *Just like the warrior at the stones!* Sweet Mir! The duke would doubtless be in Olbia for the feast of St. Stefan when Ezratah got there and might be very impressed by a young mage who could give him some information on such a native.

Sweet Mir! He simply must catch up with the fellow, even if it meant using magic.

With a theatrical flick of his hand, Ezratah threw away the last segment of his orange and sat down cross-legged on the ground with his mage's staff across his lap. In the middle of his chest below his breastbone lay his center of magic. Different people visualized that center as different things. Ezratah saw it always as a place of liquid gold. He spoke the words of power, using their hard force to drive his will down-down-down hard into that liquid gold, hitting it like a hammer on an anvil so that suddenly under the pressure of his magic the gold burst forth, flaring up and filling him with power. Magical power was innate but the ability to control—his ability to mold that power to his will still filled him with pleasure. He rose quickly but with satisfying smoothness till he was levitating half a man's height off the ground. Then with a push of his staff and another spoken word, he launched himself off along the road, gliding, still sitting cross-legged, over the ground faster than a man can run.

Yani was traveling fast, using a scout's pace, a mixture of jogging and walking.

"He's still there," said Marigoth, flying at Yani's side in the form of a hawk. "He's using magic to catch up now."

"Fire and earth!" exclaimed Yani. "What a pair of fools! Letting ourselves be seen like that."

"Who was to know there would be someone there in such a lonely place? And a Mirayan of all people!"

"You had no idea where we would come out and you know it."

"You're the one who went leaping out in front of him. At least I stopped and looked. Do you think we should try and shake him off?"

"I don't think we should bother with him. It might just make him more suspicious. Anyway, we've done nothing wrong."

"Humph! The Mirayans have probably made using the Circles of Power illegal. Let me call up a storm. That should put him off," said Marigoth.

"No. Don't try and lose him. Perhaps we should let him catch up."

"Why? I thought you hated Mirayans."

"Have you thought that we are going to a Mirayan city and we know almost nothing of Mirayans? How are we going to find Elena? We can't speak their language. We don't know their customs or the reason they do what they do."

"They're bad people," said Marigoth. "It's perfectly simple."

“Yes, very helpful,” said Yani sarcastically. “It might be well to speak with a Mirayan and find out more about them. They are very different from the Archipelagans.”

“Like horse manure is different from cheese. You’re crazy, Yani. You’ll get nothing useful out of one of them. I wonder if I could get lightning to strike him.”

“Mari! Leave him, just leave him alone! Let me deal with it. You concentrate on the Tari. Is there any sign that they noticed us?”

“None at all. Probably too busy communing with the pure life spirit of their holy land to notice us,” sneered Marigoth.

“I hope you’re right.”

A few minutes later there was a rumble of thunder in the distance.

“Hey! Is that a storm? You agreed you’d leave the fellow alone.”

“It wasn’t me. It’s coming up anyway. Don’t you trust me?”

“Of course, Mari dear. Why ever would I not?”

“Humph!”

* * *

Throughout the afternoon the sky grew dark and heavy, and Yani began to keep her eye out for a place to shelter. The countryside was not promising. On this flat plain, the trees and the little stone shepherds’ huts seemed likely victims for lightning strikes. She was just beginning to wonder if she should turn off the road into one of the valleys and build herself a little shelter when Mari swooped down beside her and said, “There’s a settlement up ahead.”

“Great! I think we should seek a place for the night there. Where is the mage?”

“He caught up a while ago and now he’s walking along just behind the next bend. He seems a bit wary of you.”

“Maybe we won’t have to bother with him after all. No sign of the Tari?”

“Not a one. I think we’ve got away with using that circle.”

The settlement was in a large valley, a strange place with a couple of big stone buildings in the main street, surrounded by horribly tumbledown little buildings built of wickerwork and mud. Both women had heard that the Seagani did not build strongly, for they moved their settlements every couple of years so that the land that they lived on could renew itself. These buildings looked a long way past their useful age and yet people were clearly living in them.

“Perhaps the Mirayans have outlawed moving house!” snorted Marigoth, only half seriously. Later they discovered that that was pretty much what had happened.

It was now quite dark though it was not very late in the day. Despite the sounds of habitation and lights in some of the tumbledown-looking hovels, there was no one much on the paved road. The streets that led off it were dusty tracks that smelled horribly of manure.

“Erk,” said Marigoth, walking invisibly at Yani’s side now. “This is worse than that city.”

“The worst I’ve seen,” said Yani, who had often witnessed in Dania how disgusting streets got when too many people lived in one place. It would be even worse after it had rained.

“Look up there,” she said suddenly. “A tavern.”

“You want to drink?” asked Marigoth.

“Taverns have places to sleep too,” said Yani. “Though an ale wouldn’t go astray.”

“You’re going to go into a room full of strangers?”

“Of course. I did it all the time in Dania. It’s a great way to find out things.”

“If you say so. I think I’ll stay hidden, thank you very much.”

For a moment Yani was going to retort that a tavern was no place for a little girl anyway, but she thought better of it and held her tongue. Really she was becoming quite diplomatic these days.

The tavern was a quite substantial-looking wooden building. Inside men were seated at long benches along grubby trestle tables, with earthenware jugs and beakers in front of them. Despite the greasy straw on the floor, the place had a cheery atmosphere. Someone was playing a harp in the corner and several men were singing along.

The harp fell silent the moment Yani came in. Everyone stared, not surprisingly. They had not seen a Tari here for years. She walked down the room, doing her best to look unconcerned. They must have made it into Southern Seagan, for these people wore the facial whorl of the Southern Seagani tattooed on their cheeks. How would the bad blood between the Southern Seagani and the Tari over the death of the three mages and the destruction of Olbia affect things? Well, too late to worry about that now.

She looked for a place to sit. No one spoke to her; all of the tables were occupied and she felt uneasy about joining a group.

Then through an open door at the back she saw a lighter room. She passed through into it. This room was cleaner and there were flagstones on the floor. It did not have as nice an atmosphere as the outer room, but there were only about a dozen men and a couple of empty tables.

Yani went up to the Seagani tavern wench who was leaning drearily in a doorway and asked the price of a meal and a drink.

For a moment the woman simply stared at her. When she finally spoke, her voice was drowned out by a loud remark from a nearby table about the sudden stench in the room.

Yani looked round. The speaker was a thickset, curly-haired man. His two companions, a tall man with vacant-looking eyes and a little rat-faced man, were nodding. They were all staring pointedly at Yani.

Raven cawed in the back of Yani’s mind. She felt the brief exhilarating tingle of danger, but it would be sheer self-indulgence to rise to the fellow’s insults. She should try and keep out of trouble before she got to Olbia. Elena’s freedom was more important than her honor.

“May I have an ale, please?” she asked the wench.

“Ooh,” said his tormenter. “ ‘May I have an ale, please?’ Oooh, isn’t he nice. Doesn’t he have a fine opinion of himself.”

Yani turned in annoyance. “Why are you being so rude? I’ve done nothing to you.”

The Bullyboy was slightly taken aback by this unusual attack, but he recovered all too quickly.

“Who do you think you are, native, to come back here and drink with your betters?”

There were agreeing grins all round the room.

“Bettters?” asked Yani, genuinely mystified. She sized the three up and thought that Ratface was probably the one to watch. She should... no, she couldn’t resist it.

“Stop being such an asshole!” she said, and turned her back invitingly.

“Uppity shit, we’ll show you!” shouted Bullyboy and sprang at Yani.

Yani spun back around, ducked Bullyboy’s first blow and landed him a good punch in the gut. But

there were three of them on her and Ratface managed to get in a kick which knocked her off balance and gave Big One a chance to get hold of her arm and twist it up behind her back.

Leaning back into him, Yani kicked high, catching Ratface in the chin and sending him sprawling. She drove her free elbow up backward, hard as a hammer, and caught Big One a solid blow to the gut. He staggered and she twisted out of his grasp and got a good hit on his jaw. He went down.

“Bye-bye, Big One,” said Yani under her breath as she threw herself, fist first, at Bullyboy.

The two smaller men were dirty fighters. They rained a fury of punches and kicks down on her and Ratface even bit her on the arm. But Yani was stronger than either of them. A couple of punches knocked Ratface out, and with a clever duck and a twist she threw Bullyboy over her back. He landed winded on the floor.

“Just hold it right there!” said a voice behind her.

She swung round. A mage stood in the archway that led back to the front room. Seagani men crowded close behind him. He seemed to be addressing the men in the room with her, all of whom had risen from their seats.

“It was a fair fight,” said the mage. “Three against one and the stranger has won fairly. I say we leave it at that. We Mirayans can recognize a gallant fighter after all.”

A couple of the Seagani behind him grimaced.

The men in the room sat back down and turned their heads away. A low murmur that might have been a cheer came up from the Seagani in the doorway.

“That was well fought. Let me buy you a drink,” said the mage.

“Great!” said Yani, wiping the sweat off her brow. She sat on the chair with the feeling of a job well done.

The mage sat down with his long slim legs stretched out and crossed at the ankle and his staff draped casually across them. The others in the room ignored them pointedly, except for the wench who quickly pulled an ale and brought it over.

“It’s Busynose,” whispered Marigoth, who was suddenly standing unseen at her side. “The one who’s been following us.” Yani had thought he looked vaguely familiar.

He was a tall man with curling light brown hair and a hawkish face. Definitely a Mirayan face. Young and not bad looking. His legs were nice, but he had a mage’s skinny physique.

“You fought well,” he said, lifting his cup in a toast. Yani shrugged.

“I’m stronger than I look,” she said. She took a sip from her ale and winced slightly when she realized her lip was cut. But the ale tasted good and yeasty.

“You must be,” said the mage. “The name’s Ezratah.”

“I’m Yani. Thanks for the drink. Do you think these fellows were just looking for a fight or did they have a problem?”

“I believe this room is reserved for Mirayans,” said the mage. “Out here in the backwoods, we Mirayans tend to stick together.”

“Ah!” said Yani, suddenly understanding everything. “Then I have had a narrow escape and I should thank you for more than just the ale.”

She looked around the room. Could she have managed nine more of them? Probably—with Marigoth’s help. The Seagani in the other room were going back to their seats with curious backward looks. Would they have helped her or left her to her fate? They had seemed to support her, but Queen

Sharma had told her that Southern Seagan was now governed by Mirayan lords and a wise man does not fight against his lord's kind.

She looked round at the variety of faces in the room. "Are all these people Mirayans, then? I wouldn't have picked them all as such."

"Miraya's the size of ten Yarmars. We don't all look the same, though most of us are taller and fairer than the natives. Though not you, I see. Where are you from?"

Yani was watching the barkeep and another man easing Bullyboy and Ratface outside, with an expertise that showed long practice. The raven's eyes glittered with satisfaction.

Yani's eyes grinned. "I feel a shameful pleasure at teaching those fellows not to pick fights with strangers."

"Shameful?"

"It is wrong to take pleasure in violence."

"You're a warrior, aren't you? Violence is your trade."

"I suppose so. I like to right well and I love to win, but a good warrior should not enjoy violence for its own sake."

Chapter 4

On his side, Ezratah felt a sudden liking for the fellow. He knew he should probably disapprove of his beating the Mirayans, but his pleasure at winning the fight seemed as innocent as a child's with a toy. The natives often had a certain appealing simplicity about them.

Now, how to bring up the subject of the meeting at the stones?

"You must be going to fight in the St. Stefan's day tournament," he said to open the subject of traveling.

"Tournament? In Olbia?"

"Yes. Didn't you know? This is an important feast time. The midsummer festival of light is over and the harvest festival of Stefan, the warrior saint, occurs. Prince Alexis Scarvan hosts a tournament for all warriors, native and Mirayan. So you are not going to fight in it?"

"Oh yes, if there is a tournament and I may fight in it then I shall certainly do so."

"So what takes you to Olbia in the first place?"

"To fight in the tournament," smiled Yani teasingly. "As you say, it *is* the feast of St. Stefan."

For a moment Ezratah was at a loss for words. A native had never spoken teasingly to him before. It was as if this fellow believed himself equal and something in Ezratah protested this. It took him a moment or two to regain his balance. In the meantime Yani took over the conversation.

"Are you going to Olbia too? Is there a tournament for mages?"

"I would have thought you were a mage yourself when I met you earlier," said Ezratah. If the fellow was going to treat him as an equal there was no need to tiptoe around him, was there?

"Why?" said Yarn with a wide-eyed innocence that Ezratah suspected was satirical.

“You used magic to get into that stone circle.”

“Did I? I really wouldn’t like to say. They are a Tari secret, the stone circles.”

“Tari?” asked Ezratah.

Suddenly the table lurched. The mage’s ale toppled into his lap.

“Fire and earth!” swore Yani. “Get away, you beast. It’s a dog,” she added quickly.

Ezratah pulled his robe away from his body before the beer could soak coldly through to his skin. Using magic, he pulled the liquid off his robe and back into the cup. The unseen dog was well gone by the time he had leisure to pay attention to it.

The wench came to the table to replace Ezratah’s beer with one that was not full of dust and bits of cloth.

“Lord,” she said softly in Seagani, and Ezratah was surprised to find that she was addressing the Tari. “Lord, it is not safe for you to stay here tonight. Some of the other guests are angry that you beat their friends. They are sure to attack you in the night.”

“It’s a cruel night to be out on the road. You are certain of this?”

The wench went back to the bar for another two cups of ale.

When she returned she said, “When you leave here, turn to the left. There will be one there who will lead you to a safe place to stay.”

“Why does she call you lord?” asked Ezratah when she was gone. “Are you one?”

“No,” said Yani. “But her people have great respect for mine.”

“Your people? The Tari? And why is that?”

“I’ve never been much on history,” shrugged Yani.

“Fascinating,” said Ezratah sarcastically. “So no one ever explained to you why they respect you?”

“If you ask them, perhaps they will tell you,” replied Yani blandly. She lifted up her cup and drained it in one gulp.

“Ahh!” she said with a sigh of satisfaction. “Well now. I think it is time to go. The wench is nodding at me.” She stopped and looked at Ezratah for a moment as if considering something. Then she said,

“Tell me, how will the other Mirayans take your disloyalty? You are welcome to come with me if you wish.”

Ezratah thought he would probably be safe enough in a backward place like this. He was unlikely to meet anyone with comparable magical powers. But he had no wish to lose track of the Tari, so he accepted the invitation.

As they walked through the bar, there was a low cheer of approval. Several people put out their hands and the Tari shook them all and muttered some words. At the door Yani turned, touched the posts and to Ezratah’s astonishment, said, “May the Circle of Life enfold and bless this house and everybody in it.”

There were nods and smiles all around.

It was raining heavily outside. Yani and Ezratah pulled their cloaks round them as the cold drops hit them in the face. As they moved away from the door of the tavern, a figure slipped forward, took the Tari’s arm and led them down the street and left into a stinking muddy little lane. Soon they found themselves on the outskirts of the settlement, moving very unsteadily down a slippery path that led through a grove of trees.

A sacred grove, thought Ezratah with a tingle of excitement, before he remembered that such things no longer existed here in Southern Seagan now the religious edicts had been passed. The high chief, Prince Alexis Scarvan, had outlawed all the sacred groves in Southern Seagan and the shamans who served in them. A little voice at the back of his mind began to accuse him of being an idiot. Here he was alone and unprotected among people who were not his own kind and who had all sorts of strange beliefs. He had heard stories of human sacrifice in the sacred groves.

He told the voice to shut up. Nothing interesting ever happened to people who listened to such cowardly little voices. He was a Mirayan. They would not dare harm him. And those human sacrifice stories were almost certainly exaggerated.

Bent forward into the pouring rain, they passed through more trees and by a rickety-looking hummock that was probably a Seagani bothy. Then another bigger building loomed ahead; its door opened and beyond it was candlelight. It was a barn. More substantial than many Seagani buildings and—Thank Mir!—weatherproof. Ezratah took off his cloak and shook it out. The place was lit by a lantern resting on a little table. There was a man with long curling native-style hair sitting on a low bench nearby. His face registered shock when he saw the two of them. Ezratah could not tell if it was he or Yard the man was shocked by, but the man's expression changed quickly, to one of bland calm. He had a hard, clever face. Ezratah thought he looked utterly untrustworthy.

Their guide, meantime, turned out to be a heavily pregnant woman. She turned to Yani and said, "Lord, do you wish for food?"

"Thank you, but I have my own food. I would not place a burden on this family."

"It is no burden, lord. We often have extra for guests and it would be an honor to serve you," said the young woman. Then she turned and saw that Ezratah was Mirayan and dismay showed on her face.

"There are no beds for natives at the inn so my father rents space here," she said defensively in trade talk.

"Do not fear," said Yani in Seagani. "He aided me against the others and has also offended them."

The girl nodded and went away, though she shot a suspicious glance at Ezratah as she went. Ezratah wondered if he should keep pretending that he didn't speak Seagani. He had a feeling he had already revealed himself.

Yani turned to the man at the table and introduced herself and Ezratah.

"I am Duprey of the Horse Seagani. It is an honor to make your acquaintance," replied the man. He stood up and came forward. He had a very bad limp. He was wearing native garb, including the boiled leather tunic that counted for armor among them. His face, however, was not marked by tattoos or tribal marks and he was cleanshaven. He wore his dark curly hair shorter than most natives and he was taller too.

"Half-breed," thought Ezratah distastefully, for the mongrel mixing of Mirayan and native bloodlines resulted in weaklings and sycophants.

That would probably explain the limp too. Though he might have got it in battle, it was the Mirayan practice to cripple convicted thieves in just such a way.

"It is unusual to see one of the Tari," said Duprey. "I must count it lucky."

"I thank you," said Yani, shaking the man's outstretched hand. Duprey held the Tari's hand for a moment longer than necessary, looking at her face almost as if he recognized her.

Was this Yani some kind of religious leader? When the girl came back with the food, she brought two other women, her middle-aged mother and a thirteen-year-old girl. They asked her to bless them, which she did, saying,

“May the Circle of Life enfold and bless you.”

She even blessed the woman’s unborn child, putting her hand on her swelling belly to do so. Though Ezratah thought he had become used to the easy intimacy between native men and women, he could not help being shocked to see how readily the woman let a strange man touch her belly. She seemed to trust the Tari as completely as a child trusts its father. He must be some kind of religious leader. Sinister!

“He will be a fine son,” said Yani in Seagani. “Be firm but kind with him and he will be your joy and support for many years.”

“How do you know it is a son?” asked Ezratah after the women had left. “Or did you just guess?”

Yani looked surprised.

“This close to its birth, you can feel the child’s sex in its life spirit. A strong, healthy child.”

“Life spirit?” asked Ezratah.

“Yes, the spirit that flows through everything living and non-living. It binds the world together. Surely you Mirayans must know about life spirit? Even those Archi-pelagans who believe in other gods know its strength.”

Ezratah was taken aback. “All life comes from Mir.”

“Is he one of your gods?”

“Mir is the only God. The one true God.”

“But what about this Kerum I’ve heard talk of?”

“Kerum was his messenger. His son. The priests say he is not separate from Mir but part of him.”

Ezratah was not sure he should discuss such an inflammatory subject as religion among so many strange folk. He sought to change the subject. “In truth if you want to know the way our religion works, you should speak with a priest. I am a mage and no expert on religion.”

For some reason this seemed to astonish Yani. The native man obviously understood why, for he shot Ezratah an impertinent, cynical look before returning to silently eating his soup.

Ezratah thought again. There would probably be no harm in trying to find out what the native believed. Native superstitions were fascinating and often myths hid an element of fact.

“So this life spirit, does it have a name?” he asked.

“No, of course not,” said Yani. “It’s not a person. Though it is conscious in a particular way of its own. Occasionally it does take on human shape to talk to us.”

“So it’s a god?” asked Ezratah.

Yani frowned at him.

“I believe the life spirit is a kind of god,” said Duprey, looking warningly at Yani. The man obviously took Ezratah for a priest, who would be outraged by talk of spirits.

“But it isn’t,” said Yani, ignoring Duprey’s hint. “Surely a god would be a separate being from us. The life spirit is part of us all. And I feel it—we Tari feel it always as part of us, making us one with the whole world. When I die the life spirit that animates me will return to the great Circle of Life and become part the life which animates the world. I shall live again in the life spirit of others who are born after.”

“We Seagani also believe in the life spirit and we believe the Tari to have a special closeness to the elements of the universe and the Circle of Life,” said Duprey. “It is a religious duty to treat them with care and respect.”

“I see,” said Ezratah. “Are the Tari gods, then?” He could imagine what the priests would make of all

this strange talk.

“No-no,” said Duprey quickly. “Just human. But they seek to promote harmony in the world and that is a valuable thing.”

“Harmony?” asked Ezratah, looking questioningly at Yani. Some kind of ritual no doubt.

“When the world is in harmony there is balance and the life spirit can be felt most easily,” said Yani. “All the actions of a Tari’s life should show this concern for harmony.”

It all sounded very cold and intellectual. “What did ignorant people like peasants pray to when they needed consolation with their lot?” Ezratah asked.

“We all commune with the life spirit,” Yani replied. “Withdraw from the world and listen to it.”

“But is it not true, there is a place in Ermora where a person can experience being part of the great Circle of Life while still being alive,” asked Duprey curiously. “I have heard that there the voice of destiny speaks to the Tari.”

“It is called the Spirit Cave,” said Yani carefully. “And it exists because the elements that make up the life spirit are strongest—are most in balance in Ermora. Here your outer self becomes invisible and you become only life spirit.”

“Ah,” said Ezratah. Now he felt himself to be on more solid ground. They did have sacred places and gods, just like any other native religion.

“So tell me, Highness,” said Duprey, suddenly speaking directly to Ezratah. “Are you going to Olbia for the Feast of St. Stefan?”

“I am,” said Ezratah.

“So am I.”

“Will you fight there?” said Ezratah in a tone cool enough to discourage the fellow from being too familiar. This Yani was bad enough.

Duprey smiled. “No. I am somewhat limited in my fighting. But my cousin will fight at St. Stefan’s. Do you also go to St. Stefan, lord? And will you fight there?”

“Very probably. But I am going to Olbia in search of my sister Elena. She was wife to Eldene Mori and taken prisoner at Fleurforet. Perhaps you have heard of her? There is a child too, called Alyx.”

The hair stood up on the back of Ezratah’s neck. He suddenly wished he had never come here with this Yani. The fellow had cause to hate Mirayans if he had some alliance with those pestilential Mori.

“The Mirayans hold one of your people captive!” cried Duprey incredulously. He shot a look at Ezratah. “I’m surprised to see you traveling with a Mirayan if that’s so.”

“He stood up for me against his own countrymen,” said Yard. “So mage, you don’t personally have my sister captive, do you?”

“No. Of course not,” said Ezratah, flustered.

“You see,” said Yani. “There’s no reason I should not be harmonious with this particular Mirayan.”

“You should ask him if he was...” began Duprey.

“And I wasn’t at Fleurforet either,” snapped Ezratah. “The Mori were making raids on Duke Wolf’s land and after warning them, he attacked them. He cannot be blamed for such a response after such provocation.”

“I see,” said Yani coolly. “But did the duke not take land from the Mori in the first place?”

“They weren’t using it,” protested Ezratah. “They were letting it grow wild, making a refuge for wild

beasts and outlaws that preyed on his lands.”

“Just because the Mori do not use the land as the Mi-rayans do is no reason to believe they are not using it at all,” said Yani gently. “The Mori are hunters, not farmers. A wild forest is like a farm to them.”

Ezratah stared at Yani. What a ridiculous remark! Civilization and human progress required settlement. His sense of survival warned him not to bring out these remarks. He could be in danger here.

Fortunately Duprey changed the subject. He had some uses. “Will you fight for your sister at St. Stefan’s, then?”

“Can I?” asked Yani, surprised.

“The winner of St. Stefan’s tournament may ask for one war captive to be released. Usually it is a Mirayan who wins, but if a native fighter makes a good showing, High Chief Scarvan is generous and allows him to ask for one too. After all, we have so many of our people in captivity.”

“What a strange custom,” said Yani. “I had thought to simply ask for a ransom.”

Duprey shook his head. “The Mirayans don’t do ransom except between themselves. Sometimes you can buy people back but it depends on the owner. They are valuable, our women, with their spinning and weaving. Scarvan and his merchant friends have got very rich importing woollen cloth to Miraya in the last few years.”

A slander on our good prince—to imply that a nobleman would dirty his hands with trade, thought Ezratah.

“I thought the Tari no longer left Ermora,” continued Duprey. “But now here you are and you tell me your sister was married to Eldene Mori. Was it an alliance?”

“The Tari have little interest in the outside world. But I enjoy traveling and fighting, and my sister loved Eldene Mori. That is all.”

Duprey looked as if he would have liked to ask more but did not.

So Ezratah did. “Is Ermora your land? I’ve never heard of it. Where is it? And why do the Tari never leave it?”

“Ermora is the holy source of the Tari,” said Yani. “It is a land where harmony dwells and the life spirit wells to the surface of the world. Magic is in the very air. Why would the Tari ever wish to leave such a place?”

“You are too generous, Lord Yani,” said Duprey. He turned to Ezratah. “Once the Tari used to roam among us. They are mighty healers and mages and wherever they went, they sought to bring harmony and peace. That was a Golden Age. Then a Seagani king—Southern Seagani, not one of we Horse Seagani—entrapped three of them and gave them to a death mage to feed to his demons. After that the Tari turned their backs on us and never again came among us. There is great regret among the people for that especially...” He shot a quick, careful look at Ezratah. He obviously meant a slur against Mirayans and he dared not go on. Instead he turned to Yani and said, “It was twenty-four years ago and those responsible for the wrong are all dead now.”

“It is not my decision to make,” said Yani uncomfortably.

“What exactly happened?” asked Ezratah.

“Twenty-four years ago, when the Mirayan death mage Asgor was laying waste to the Seagani lands around Olbia, my people sent three mages to combat him,” said Yani.

“Three!” cried Ezratah incredulously. What a ridiculously small number!

“Yes, they wanted to be sure he was defeated,” said Yani, misunderstanding his exclamation. “It has

always been our duty to the Circle of Life to fight such death magic. But the ruler of that region, Gorice...”

“May his name be cursed for all eternity,” said Duprey.

“... was secretly in collusion with the death mage. He took the three captives and turned them over to Asgor, who fed them to his demons. This gave him great power. There is no worse fate for the Tari than to become demon fodder. They are truly destroyed for their essence cannot return to the great Circle of Life to become part of the world again. One of the mages was my father, Garroway.”

“So it was your grandmother Mathinna who defeated Asgor!” cried Duprey.

“You know your history.”

“How could a single woman defeat a death mage?” cried Ezratah in astonishment. How could these men even act like they believed such outrageous nonsense.

“What?” cried Yani.

“Highness, we are talking of Tari mages,” explained Duprey. “And they are a people of such mighty magic that they defeat death mages and even demons in a single combat. As one who was there said,

*As Olbia exhausted lay
beneath the horror of that act
The world cracked open
And a Tari queen came walking
tall and calm,
To wrench the world back into joint
with a single flicker of her eye.*

“Fine words,” said Yani admiringly.

“I wish I had been there to see your grandmother come down that hill,” said Duprey.

“The words you speak are admiring, yet surely there must be some ill feeling over what happened next.”

“What did happen next?” asked Ezratah.

“Some Tari, not Yani’s grandmother, made the Tower of Olbia fall into the sea,” said Duprey. “There is little ill feeling about that. After all Gorice was giving over his own people to fuel Asgor’s spells and they were glad to see him dead. The real disaster happened after that.”

“Hold your tongue you cheeky fellow!” snapped Ezratah. “The countryside was in chaos when Prince Alexis Scarvan arrived. There were blood beasts and other death servants roaming the land, and no organization to speak of. That is why they offered him the crown. We Mirayans brought peace and the Seagani should be damned grateful.”

A flash of anger appeared in Duprey’s eyes.

“I meant only to refer to the disappearance of the Tari,” he said coolly. “You speak as one who has a guilty heart.”

The two men glared at each other.

“Good men, let us not have hard words,” said Yani quickly. “These matters are long past now.”

It was on the tip of Ezratah's tongue to tell the fellow to shut up and moreover to dispute this ridiculous story about Yani's grandmother killing a death mage single-handedly. But he was outnumbered here and far from help. He had been a fool to ever come.

"Will you tell me more about this tournament of St. Stefan?" asked Yani peaceably.

"I think I will sleep now," said Ezratah shortly. He was too annoyed to pander to this arrogant fellow any longer. He retired to a corner of the hayloft, which he warded very thoroughly against enemies before he went to sleep. He lay awake for a time listening to Yani and Duprey talking, but they were not saying anything nasty about Mirayans. The Seagani had traveled much on the peninsula (for nefarious purposes no doubt) and had many sprightly tales to tell, some of them as improbable as the tale of a single mage (a woman mage no less) overcoming a demonmaster.

Chapter 5

The following morning Yani arose at first light and went outside to say the Morning Chant. She knelt facing Ermora, as she had every morning and evening of her life. It had always struck her as ironic to face it when she could remember nothing of her life-there, for she had been but a babe in arms when her grandmother had taken them away. Yet all her life she had felt a part of the Circle of Life and honoring it seemed unquestionably right.

The Morning Chant was a prayer to the life spirit and a promise to respect its balance in the day to come. As she prayed to each element, she drew the five circles representing the five elements on the ground. Fire, water, earth, air and, encircling the other four, the separate but uniting element of life. Then she drew crossed lines through them to symbolize their connection. As she prayed she opened herself to the elements and felt them flowing through her as they always did—a great interconnected skein of being, warm and peaceful like liquid sunlight and at the same time strong, surging and urgent like the flow of a river or the roar of flame.

She wondered how long she would be able to maintain the useful illusion that she was a proper Tari, not the grandchild of an outcast. She hoped that they would find Elena safe and well and rescue her. These thoughts she bound up in her prayers so that her wishes might be given shape by the elements of the Circle and be made into destiny.

Prayers finished, she sat back on her heels savoring the peace of it all and wondering where Marigoth was. She hoped she had found somewhere warm to spend the night. It had gone to Yani's heart not to ask for an extra bowl of hot soup for her, but she had been unwilling to do so in front of the Mirayan. She looked around now to see if Marigoth was about and saw instead Duprey standing nearby, watching her.

His dark-eyed gaze made Yani's spine tingle with excitement. Duprey drew her. He was well-looking with his lean, hard body and face. She liked a lively man who could tell good stories. But there was more than that. He was mysterious, part of him held back, watching and secretive. She did not find him threatening, but she was certain he could be dangerous if pushed. Though he limped badly, she suspected he could give a good account of himself in a fight. Not just in a fight... she felt a certain longing... to feel his hard brown hands smoothing across her bare skin. The sexual opportunities open to her as queen's champion had been considerable—from the royal masseurs who had offered her "extra" services to energetic fellow officers and adventurous townsmen who enjoyed "grappling" with a strong woman. You have become spoilt, she had told herself last night as she lay on her pile of straw, regretting that she was

playing the man. A few weeks of celibacy won't hurt you.

"Good morning," said Duprey. "Is your worship now over? Arlette has brought us some bread and cheese."

"Yes, I have finished," she said. "Please. Sit down." She spread out the cloak she was kneeling on. He sat down beside her, passed her some bread and cheese.

"Is Ezratah...?"

"The Mirayan still sleeps," said the Seagani. "Will you be continuing to travel with him?"

"I'm not sure," she said. She smiled. "He is not a very harmonious fellow, is he?"

"It is odd to see one of the Guardians traveling with one of the Gibadgee," said Duprey. His face was difficult to read. Yani found this tantalizing.

"The Gibadgee? Seagani for rubbish, isn't it? I am tempted to leave without him, but a Mirayan companion might be useful. Last night I started trouble without meaning to. I'd prefer to intend any trouble I start."

Duprey's face lightened. "Still you really cut those men's harvest. But I've seen you fight before. In Dania."

"Oh!" said Yani. For a moment she was taken aback, then threw back her head and laughed. He knew who she was after all. The idea filled her with the same admiration and excitement as skilled swordplay.

Duprey smiled wryly.

"Did you think you had fooled me? You might have, but I had the advantage of recognizing you. You are a mighty fighter. It was that fight with Becktalan the Ogian."

"Ah yes! What a fight that was. We were well matched that day."

She smiled, remembering the smell of dust and sweat and the roar of the crowd when she had won.

"It was a poetry of swords and movement. For all your strength, you fight with a woman's grace."

"Flatterer!" grinned Yani. An idea struck her. "But if my sex is so obvious perhaps I should not try to ape the man. This padding and binding—hot gear for summer."

"No, no," cried Duprey. "You are very wise to pretend to be a man around the Mirayans. They have a very troublesome view of women. They would not let you fight at St. Stefan's for a start. It is a blasphemy for a woman to be on the field."

"Blasphemy? Is St. Stefans a religious festival, then? Yes. He is the special holy man for soldiers. Lord, er, Lady Yani, I think you must be very careful not to let Mirayans know your sex. They are not to be trusted with native women."

Yani's attraction to Duprey suddenly vanished. She had agreed with this masquerade as much to prevent this kind of protective interference as to avoid the attentions of attackers.

"I can look after myself," she said.

"I do not doubt it," said Duprey seriously. "But against a mage? Be careful. Mirayans regard peninsula women as prostitutes because they go around freely with their hair uncovered. Though a decent man would still at least give a whore her fee. Great Stallion knows what they will think of one who goes around dressed as a man."

This conversation was turning sleazy and irritating. Did this fellow think she was hopeless? And were his motives so pure? In her experience, Mirayans were not the only people who got strange ideas about a

woman who fought.

“Perhaps you should travel with us and protect me,” said she cynically.

“I must wait here for friends. But you are welcome...” He caught the look in Yani’s eye and flushed.

“Forgive me,” he said coldly. “It was an honestly meant warning.” He stood up and turned to leave. Yani sprang up from her place, instantly regretting her words.

“I have been rude,” she said.

“Not at all,” he replied stiffly.

“I can take care of myself,” said Yani. “But it was very good of you to warn me and I shall take proper heed.”

“You would be wise to,” he said shortly. “For myself, I will keep your secret. I’ve no wish to further offend a Guardian.”

He went back into the barn. Yani felt bad and she made to follow him, wondering what she could say to smooth things over. She was interrupted by Marigoth, who came rushing out with Yani’s pack on her back.

“The Mirayan is awake,” she hissed. “Quick, let’s get going.”

Perhaps they would be wise to ditch this Mirayan and if so, this was the opportunity. With a look of regret Yani shouldered her pack. She disliked being on bad terms with people especially if it was her fault, but it was a stupid womanish trait to care what people thought, and anyway the deed was done now and did not look easy to undo.

Shortly before this Ezratah had awoken in the loft. He had passed a disturbed night and, in the way of such things, had then fallen heavily asleep the moment dawn had broken. As he opened his eyes he saw a little girl kneeling by his pack, tracing the runes on his mage’s staff with one slender finger. It was moment or two before he was awake enough to realize that this child was interfering with his things.

“Hey!” he cried sitting up. The girl leapt to her feet, shot a cheeky grin at him and swung down the loft ladder before he was even out of his blanket. He made it to the edge of the loft just in time to see a slender laughing figure slip through the doorway. He snorted. Cheeky kid. He took a drink from his water bottle and pulled on his jacket. Why hadn’t the wardings warned him she was there? Probably because she wasn’t an enemy. It was too early in the morning to wrestle with such questions.

“There is food here,” said a voice. The native man, Duprey, had come limping in the doorway. He pointed to a plate of bread and cheese sitting on the table.

“Thank you,” said Ezratah. He climbed slowly down the ladder, sat down at the table, took some bread and cheese and poured himself a cup of the remarkably fine-tasting ale the Seagani always seemed to make. The man went over to the animal stalls and started grooming a little native horse that stood there. The two of them talked in a desultory way about the weather and other such morning things. The native was quite polite and friendly this morning. Perhaps he had learnt a lesson last night. Outside he could see a middle-aged Seagani woman throwing scraps to hens.

“Where’s Yani?” he asked Duprey.

“Out front praying, Highness.”

Not a thing to interrupt, thought Ezratah sleepily. He was happy to sit and eat.

“So tell me about the Tari,” he asked. “Where is this holy land of theirs?”

“Ermora is in a range of mountains at the top of the peninsula. My people call them the Gen mountains. They are very steep and heavily forested. Very few outsiders have ever been there, but I was

once at a border town there. A place called Penterong, where they run a healing hospice. They are masters of such gentle arts, a loving people who have showed me much kindness—though they are powerful and should always be treated with respect.”

“If they are so powerful why do they not rule?” said Ezratah.

“It is not their way,” said Duprey.

“It is everyone’s way,” said Ezratah.

Duprey shrugged. “Then I do not know the answer, Highness.”

“How is it I have never heard of these people before?”

“If you will forgive me saying so, Highness, there is much about Yarmar and the rest of the Archipelago the Mirayans do not yet know,” said the fellow, impertinent as usual. “Your people live on the coast and have barely brushed the surface of this land.”

“I find it hard to believe we would have missed such powerful mages. Why... ?”

A scream rang out outside and there was shouting. Ezratah sprang from his seat and ran to the door, Duprey close behind him.

Outside a group of armed men seemed to be holding the farm family captive. Ezratah called attack magic to mind, but even as he did so a man riding a horse and flanked by two huge yellow mastiffs came around the side of the farmhouse. He was Mirayan, as were most of the men surrounding the farm family; probably the local lord and his henchmen.

The man on the horse did not see Ezratah in the shadow of the barn. He was a thickset older man with graying hair, a hard, scarred face and a hawklike nose. He leaned on the pommel of his saddle and said conversationally, “So, Marren, I hear you had a visitor last night.”

“He’s gone,” said the farmer through clenched teeth. Two of the henchmen had his arms twisted painfully behind his back.

“I don’t think it’s very nice of you to give aid to a fellow who beats up my men. And I don’t think it’s nice of you to hide him now. Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” said the farmer. He yelped as the henchmen tightened their grip on his arm.

“Marren, I’m a fair man but I don’t tolerate disloyalty. You disappoint me. Perhaps your womenfolk might be a bit more sensible. *You* want to tell us where the tall fan-freak is, girlie,” he said to the young girl of about thirteen.

“I will never betray one of the Guardians,” said the girl, white-faced but determined.

“Oh, impertinent words, little one. Let’s see if you are so brave when my men have finished with you.” He nodded at the men and two of them closed in on her, grinning.

The other Seagani cried out as the two men seized the struggling girl. Duprey tensed and moved forward. Ezratah felt a chill go through him. Even native women deserved to be treated with the gentleness due their sex. A real man protected women. “Stop! They are telling the truth,” he cried.

Everybody froze. An unexpected mage usually had that effect. The horseman was still leaning on his saddle as he looked at him. Not a man to be easily scared.

“Hold!” he ordered the men. “And who are you, mage?” he called to Ezratah.

One of the henchmen, a man whom Ezratah thought he recognized from the right the night before, said something in a low voice to the horseman.

“I am Ezratah Karanus. Late of Duke Wolf Madraga’s Mage Regiment.”

“Karanus,” said the horseman. “A good Mirayan name and a long way from home. How is it such an honorable name involves himself with tavern scum?”

I might ask the same of you, thought Ezratah. But since it was always best to get across rough ground easily, he switched into High Mirayan, which none of the natives here were likely to understand and said, “If you are referring to the tall fair man, he beat three of your men single-handedly in a fair fight. All I did was prevent the fight from becoming ten against one. I thought he acquitted himself very honorably for a native. Though it pains me to say it, more honorably than the Mirayans. And he made no moves to provoke further trouble.”

“I see,” said the horseman. From the annoyance in his tone, he had not been told the whole truth. Not that it would probably have mattered. Mirayans had to stick together in a situation like this. “So where is this fellow now?” he asked.

“I think he went off very early this morning,” said Ezratah, suddenly realizing that this was probably the truth. He cast a dirty look at Duprey, who had obviously been distracting him. Duprey was looking at the ground.

“I don’t know what direction he took, but he told me he was heading for the Horse Seagani lands in the north,” continued Ezratah.

“Is this so?” said the horseman to the farmer.

“It is, lord,” said the farmer’s wife. “Sir, I beg you. Believe us. I saw the fellow leaving over that hill there this morning, when I got up. And not a word of thanks for our hospitality.” She threw herself on her knees and held up her folded hands. “Please, Highness, don’t harm my child. She’s young and stupid. She doesn’t know her place.”

“You should school your children better, Marren,” said the horseman, averting his eyes from this forward woman. “Or get her a husband who will beat some sense into her. I don’t harm the children of loyal servants. But take care I don’t learn otherwise. Stay there,” he told his men curtly. He walked the horse over the farmyard to where Ezratah stood. As he came up, he caught sight of Duprey in the shadow of the barn.

“Who are you?”

“Duprey, Highness. Of the Horse Seagani. On my way to St. Stefan’s.”

“Get over there with the other natives,” said the horseman.

He leaned on his pommel and looked down at Ezratah.

“I hope you’re not some kind of native-lover,” he said.

“These people gave me good hospitality last night,” said Ezratah. “And they are telling the truth.”

“Native-lovers make no friends in these parts,” said the horseman. He looked briefly over at his men and sighed.

“So, Karanus, what are you doing round here?”

“I’m going to Olbia for St. Stefan’s. I fell in with the pale fellow, Yani, on the road yesterday. I must admit, sir, to a special interest in him. My liege, Duke Wolf, has expressed considerable interest in meeting one of these pale people. A tribe called Tari.”

“That so?” said the horseman curiously. “Any money in it?”

“A duke’s gratitude might mean that,” said Ezratah. “However, now that he’s gone, I’ll have nothing to give but information.”

“You don’t seem too worried about it.”

“I have hopes of a good position in Olbia,” said Ezratah. “I cannot jeopardize it chasing the mere chance of a reward.”

“I see,” said the horseman coolly. He stared at Ezratah for a moment. He looked and spoke like a lowborn thug and probably was. That was the problem with a new country like this. Still he was no fool and was obviously not about to go running round the countryside after some phantom Ezratah had set him onto. Ezratah felt a sudden respect for him. It could not be easy bringing a new country under control.

“Then I will bid you good day,” he said to Ezratah. “I will not prevent your journey any longer. But if you will pardon the advice, don’t trust the natives round here too much. I’m surprised they didn’t cut your throat last night.”

There seemed nothing for Ezratah to do but thank the man, go into the barn and pack up his things. He did so quickly. Before leaving the building he cast his eyes around the place where Yani had slept and was very pleased to find a couple of fair hairs caught on a splinter in one of the posts.

“You won’t elude me for long, smart fellow,” he said to himself as he wrapped the hair in the piece of white linen he kept in his mage’s pouch for just such purposes.

As he came back out of the door, the horseman who had been waiting for him to emerge turned his horse back to the group of natives and henchmen.

“Since this noble Mirayan has backed you up, I’ll believe you this time, Marren,” he said. “But I don’t want to catch you sheltering any more traveling natives like this so I’m going to leave you a reminder. Burn down the barn,” he told the henchmen. The farmer protested halfheartedly. He knew he was getting off lightly. His wife was busy picking their weeping daughter off the ground and leading her into the house. The other three natives, Duprey, Marren, and his pregnant daughter Arlette, scrambled to get the animals out of the barn.

It seemed a fair lesson. Ezratah knew full well that the farmer was lying about Yani’s direction, because he had backed up Ezratah’s lies. Somehow the barn burning diminished his unease about undermining a fellow Mirayan. Now he was free to gain his advantage from the Tari. And he would too, the minute he caught up with him.

Chapter 6

Using the hair and a seeing spell cast on the top of the water in a horse trough, Ezratah located Yani easily. He was well within range, but it was still amazing just how far the Tari had managed to travel. He was quite a physical specimen.

The Tari warrior had left the main road and seemed to be taking a series of country tracks that led slightly more directly to Olbia—a good way to avoid pursuit. The countryside became more hilly and trees often shaded the road. Walking as hard as he could and flying at sensible intervals Ezratah managed to catch up with him by midday. Again he did not join the Tari immediately but followed a short distance behind him, dropping back whenever the curve in the track or a hill brought him actually into view. He was half afraid of Yani, and yet at the same time it could be dangerous for him as a Mirayan to camp alone in this poorly settled mostly Seagani area. He was still pondering this question when he rounded a corner just in time to see Yani draw his sword as four armed men rushed him.

Ezratah dashed forward to help. The Tari had already thrown back two of his assailants with a single

mighty sweep of his sword. He ducked a third and parried the fourth. The first two men had fallen backward and now just lay there. That must have been some blow, thought Ezratah as he stopped to watch Yani fight. With a few neat quick strokes of his sword, Yani badly wounded a third attacker in his sword arm. The other dropped his sword and ran for it only to trip up and fall on his face. When Ezratah reached him, he too was unconscious.

The attackers were Mirayan. They were probably escaped serfs, for they looked too wild to be any lord's henchmen. Who else would be attacking people this far away from the main road?

He turned back to Yani who was tying the wounded one's hands behind his back. Yani acknowledged Ezratah with a nod of her head and handed him a piece of cloth. "Here. You want to heal this man's wound? I don't want him bleeding to death before some kind of authority finds him."

"You really laid them waste!" said Ezratah admiringly.

Yani shrugged. "They weren't very good. Used to preying on farmers, I guess. I haven't made another mistake, have I? This is not some kind of official thing. I mean they are all Mirayans."

"No, no! I'd say they were outlaws." He knelt down and looked at the man's wound. He was an ill-favored fellow with native-style beard and hair, and an old scar down his face that had ruined his left eye.

"Then I guess I'll leave them tied up and report them at the next settlement. Can't leave them here attacking people like this."

Yani stood up. "You know, I've been in your part of Seagan two days now and I've been in two fights. Is this what your people call law and order?"

"Are you blaming us for banditry?" cried Ezratah. "Everyone has bandits."

Yani shrugged and went and tied up the other three men. Unconscious all of them. The fair-haired warrior had the devil's own luck.

With ill grace, Ezratah wasted good magic stanching the fellow's wound. He would probably be hung for his crimes.

His temper wasn't improved by the man saying to him with a serf's dialect, " 'Ere mate, you ain't gonna let some native do this to us, ar' yer?"

"Do you think I'm going to bother myself helping bandits and escaped serfs?" said Ezratah roundly, although it hurt his pride to see his countrymen in the wrong. "Just be grateful you're getting healed, worthless one."

The sense of humiliation lasted till the next village. The bandits had been troubling the area for some time and the Seagani villagers made much of both Ezratah and Yani. Yani did not enlighten them as to how small Ezratah's part in the business had been, which made Ezratah feel patronized but at the same time glad that he had at least saved Mirayan prestige with the local Seagani. It was scandalous that these fellows had been operating for so long, but the village was a small, dilapidated place with no sign of much Mirayan authority.

The Seagani offered them hospitality for the night, but Yani wanted to press on. She was in a hurry to make Ol-bia. Ezratah decided to go with him, determined not to give Yani a chance to disappear. He was going to stick to the fellow like a burr to sheepskin and win some honor from a grateful duke.

But was Ezratah wise to be traveling *with* Yani?

They walked on for a couple of hours, until dark, then stopped near an empty shepherd's lean-to. It was a lonely place, but somehow Ezratah trusted the Tari not to harm him. He warded his blankets and lay down to sleep quite easily.

Then later that night he woke suddenly and heard Yani talking.

At first he lay there, sleepily thinking the fellow was saying one of his prayers. Then with a sudden, horrible tingling down the back of his spine, he realized that he was hearing not one voice but two. Both the voices were speaking softly, but the timbre of the second was definitely different.

Horrible thoughts of being attacked filled him and the blood in his veins felt as if it was ice. After a moment of panic he got a grip on himself and brought his defensive spells to mind. Then he felt better and was even pleased he had not given himself away by moving. If they thought he was still asleep, it would give him the advantage.

So he lay there listening for any movement in his direction and straining to hear this chilling conversation behind him. Try as he might, he could not make out what was being said and he dared not use magic for fear of giving himself away. With his back to the speakers he saw nothing even though it was a bright moonlit night.

Finally the voices stopped. He tensed again, ready to fight, but nothing happened. Was it his imagination or did he hear footsteps crunching away on the dry summer grass? After a few moments he sat up and looked around. Of course there was nothing to see. Yani appeared to be sleeping peacefully and all around the moon shone coldly silver over the grass and dark shapes of distant trees. Inwardly he cursed himself as a coward. He should have turned around the minute he had heard them.

Now he no longer felt sure that he had even heard the voices. He could not remember even hearing Yani settle down in his bedroll. Had it all been a dream? Yet some of the chill he had felt when he heard the voices clung to his bones. After sitting for some time looking around, he lay back down. Though he thought he would not sleep again that night, morning came with surprising speed and with it even more serious doubts over whether or not he actually had woken in the night.

Yes indeed. Perhaps he should have contented himself with trailing the fellow. Aside from the midnight conversation there was also an easy assumption of equality about this Yani that couldn't help but annoy. Most of his regimental colleagues would have already given the Tari a short, brutal lesson in respect, but Ezratah was confident in the superiority of Mirayan civilization and had always figured that impertinent natives were simply ignorant and would quickly learn to be more respectful once they knew better.

So he did his best to school Yani, telling him all about Miraya and how they did things there. Somehow this led him onto the topic of the Mirayan civil war. Since Zarmartan the Second had died without viable heirs twenty-seven years before, the country had been divided into several smaller territories under a number of competing warlords who supported, sometimes inconsistently, one of three different factions. Since Yani seemed quite clever for a native, Ezratah did him the honor to treat him to the intelligent version of events, the causes and effects, not just the tales of mighty battles and ugly betrayals that were usually enough for primitive ears. And yet at the end, all the Tari could say was:

“So that is why you have come here in such numbers. I've often wondered. But why do the Mirayans seek to bring peace and order to the Archipelago when it is so lacking in their own land?”

The remark left Ezratah speechless; completely, embarrassingly at a loss. Why had the fellow asked the question when the answer was so obvious? The Mirayans were bringing a great civilization—their vastly superior magecraft, science, religion—to these backward little Archipelagan states. He was obviously not as smart as Ezratah had given him credit for.

It was much the same the following day after they had returned to the main paved road to Olbia—Mirayan-built, as he took good care to point out. The Seagani still farmed the hills in their inefficient way, using only the most rudimentary cultivation and moving their villages every few years instead of taking proper care of the buildings. The road itself was lined with Mirayan farms however. They were clearly recognizable with their beautifully neat little fields of golden wheat or sheep, their

whitewashed buildings and their tidy orchards. The sight of them filled Ezratah with pride, but the Tari was not impressed.

“I guess now that the Mirayans govern this land, they have replaced all the Seagani chieftains with Mirayan lords, yes? But what about all these farms? Where have they come from?” asked Yani. “It is not like the Seagani to part with their land willingly.”

“When Prince Alexis was offered the chieftainship, the Seagani were united but over the years there have been rebellions against him and land has been confiscated. Or the local lords have given grants of land that are unused.”

“Unused?”

“Well, as far as I can see the Seagani leave most of the land unused. I mean they pick up every three years and move house. It’s so wasteful.”

“I imagine that they do it so that the life spirit of the land they have been farming can recover. The spirit of this land is not very strong and gets worn out being farmed all the time. Just because it’s empty doesn’t mean it is unused, but resting instead.”

“Well, that’s ridiculous. I’m a nobleman—no expert on farming of course—but Mirayan farming methods can produce much more from a single piece of land. You put manure on it and crop rotate it and other things like that...”

He should have known better than to have troubled to enlighten the Tari. He’d continue to ask why, like some silly child. Why should the Seagani change their farming methods? Why were Mirayan farming methods better? Why did the Mirayans grow fruit trees where there was obviously not enough water for them?

The arrogant bumpkin wound up lecturing him— *him!*—going on about the life spirit and harmony and all kinds of other superstitious native rubbish. He truly believed the native way was superior.

“Mirayans don’t believe that inanimate objects contain life spirit,” said Ezratah at last, just to shut him up.

“That’s quite obvious,” said Yani tartly.

The cheek of the fellow!

It was the complacent assumption of Tightness that most annoyed Ezratah, the more so because it was so very wrong. But how did you convince these stubborn barbarians that their primitive belief in the life spirit was wrong? Every civilized person knew that only people had life spirit. It was the hierarchy of nature. People were superior to, and thus the rulers of, things, just as the highborn were superior to and natural rulers of the peasantry.

As they traveled along, however, Ezratah came to understand why the Tari had such an overweening opinion of himself. Every time they went through a village, the natives flocked around cheering and laughing. The women asked him for blessings for them and their children, which he gave, and made requests for healing, which he declined, saying that he was not a mage. A couple of times people were angry at his denial and once as they left a village, someone threw a clod of mud at him. The Tari’s hand caught the mud before Ezratah had even seen it coming.

He walked along for several steps afterward, tossing the clod thoughtfully in his hand.

“Disturbing,” said Ezratah at last.

“Yes,” said the Tari, tossing the clod away. “But on the whole I am surprised I have not had more of this. These people call my people the Guardians and my people have done nothing for them for over twenty years. I had expected more anger and instead I have received only love and kindness, for which I

feel most unworthy.”

His words set off alarms in Ezratah’s head. There must be some kind of religious connection between the Tari and the Seagani. They looked on him as some kind of leader. There was no doubting that Yani had leadership qualities and a sense of responsibility to them.

Yes, very worrying. The Southern Seagani were a restive, unruly people who bore the limitations of law and order unwillingly. There had been a number of uprisings against Prince Scarvan. Ezratah prayed he was not witnessing the beginning of another. It was a good thing he was here, traveling with the Tari. Once he got to Olbia it was imperative that he inform someone of the Tari’s disturbing effect on the natives. Whomever he informed was sure to be grateful.

Maybe it was the heat. As the day went on and Ezratah’s irritation grew, he found himself needling the fellow, who of course refused to rise to the bait, in a sickeningly superior way.

Only once did he ruffle his annoying surface.

He had asked the fellow about his previous life, and Yani told him that he had served in the Danian army.

My chance to scoff, thought Ezratah.

“Queen Sharma,” he said. “Is she as lascivious as they say? Does she really have ranks of men-at-arms whose duties are to pleasure her?”

“Queen Sharma is very happily married,” said Yani, coldly.

“Oh, come on! I doubt that! What kind of man could be happy letting his wife rule? It will be the ruination of that country, an inversion of the natural order. Like expecting a serf to general an army. Mir did not make women fit for rule. They are victims of their baser passions with no grasp of logic or diplomacy.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Yani. “Is that why you keep your women imprisoned?”

“They are not imprisoned,” said Ezratah. “They are protected. Protected from the hard world of men. Mir created them to be mothers and their world is—and should be—the world of family and children. In the household they are the rulers just as men are the rulers outside it. A man’s intellect and self-control is superior. That is why Mir put him at the pinnacle of the natural order. And that’s why a woman ruler... I’ve even heard she has a regiment of bodyguards who are women. Do they provide bedmates for her husband? Is that how she keeps him quiet?”

“Women can fight and these are very fine fighters,” said Yani. “In the old days the queen’s husband won her through combat. Now it is all done with champions, which is much fairer. For the strongest man does not necessarily make the best consort. Sometimes in the past, male bodyguards took advantage of their power to kill the king and forcibly marry the queen. A female bodyguard is not so open to that temptation.”

“What a way to run a country! All the power in the hands of women. How do Dani men bear it? The queen ought to want a strong man to come and help her rule. What must it do to a woman to have to give orders? Their nature is submission. They are happiest being directed. Well, some women do like to rule but they are the worst sort and they always do it badly. I can imagine this queen... hard, cruel, no doubt promiscuous.”

At that moment he tripped over something and fell flat on his face. At the same time he heard the sound of steel being drawn. He rolled over just in time to see Yani finish drawing his sword.

“Sir,” said Yani pleasantly, though his eyes were cold. “I have sworn to uphold the queen’s honor. I must ask you to cease talking about her like this or I will be forced to challenge you to a duel in her name, and I have no wish to fight a mage.”

“You’d be stupid,” said Ezratah, who was nonetheless a little nervous.

“But I will do it,” said Yani. “Queen Sharma is a fine and good ruler who has shown me great kindness. I will not listen to her being slandered like this. It is a matter of honor.”

Ezratah looked quickly round. Now was the time for any followers to attack if they were going to. No sign of them, though.

“Sir,” said Yani. “Your answer please. Are we to fight?”

“Of course not,” said Ezratah. “I too have my honor and it does not include dueling with those who have no magic.”

“And...”

“What do you mean?”

“We will not talk about the queen, yes?”

“If it offends you, I am willing not to speak of it.”

“Good,” said Yani. He put his sword back in its sheath.

That stupid Tari! Ezratah honestly thought the fellow would have attacked him. Mad. Mad as a headless chicken. When he’d stopped being stunned, he was even more angry. What about all the times the Tari had offended him today? All those things he’d implied about Prince Scarvan being a liar and a merchant. What about his feelings of offense? Hah! Personal kindness, heh! The fellow was probably bedding the queen himself. The whole thing was disgraceful.

It was all part of the fellow’s blatant arrogance. Ezratah was looking forward to when the Tari got to Ol-bia and saw for himself just how fine Mirayan civilization was compared to his pathetic native state. Actually as the day ended, he was almost looking forward to seeing the fellow taken into custody, even though normally he would not have wished that on anyone. They’d give him a good beating to knock the superiority out of him, search his mind without painkilling spells and find out all those things he was too high and mighty to tell.

Now, there was a frustrating thought. Scarvan’s mages would learn all the things about the Tari that Ezratah so longed to find out. They probably wouldn’t tell him either. It was enough to make him almost... After all, he could mindsearch the fellow himself. Yani had no way of preventing him. The temptation was great.

But it would be very wrong to act in such a way even toward a native. As a mage he had vowed not to prey upon them. That way lay death magic. Though, of course, an illicit mindsearch was a very long way from actual collusion with demons. No. No, he couldn’t do it. You had to maintain standards even in an uncivilized place like this. *Especially* in an uncivilized place like this.

That evening they camped in a stand of trees near a stream. Ezratah made sure that there were several rocks under his blanket so that he didn’t sleep too heavily. It did no good; he must have been exhausted after following Yani’s pace all day, for it seemed only a moment after he lay down that he was waking with the sun in his eyes and the sound of a child’s laughter in his ears.

He sat up and looked around for the child but he could see no one. By the time he had rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, he was almost certain he had been dreaming.

The sun had only just risen by the look of it. He was alone, but he was pleased to see that Yani’s bedroll and pack were still there. There was no sign at all of the annoying Tari. No doubt he was off saying his strange little prayers.

Ezratah slid out of his bedroll and stretched. He remembered his vindictive feelings of the night before and he was a bit ashamed of them. Still the authorities had better be informed about Yani. It was only

wise. Which reminded him! He went quickly over to Yani's pack and went through it. In among the provisions were vambraces, grieves and a helmet. These made the pack extremely heavy. Amazing that the Tari could move so fast while carrying so much weight! He must be immensely strong for all that he was not very heavily built. Apart from the armor, there was little else of note in the pack. Some clean clothes, food, a little sewing kit contained in a piece of sheep horn. Nothing for him to learn from.

Ezratah sat back on his heels, the familiar frustration creeping into him. He foresaw every chance of traveling to Olbia and finding out nothing more from the fellow. His mind filled with the tempting idea of mindsearches once again.

Now might be a good time for the Tari to have a clandestine conversation with someone. But where to find him?

Well, the river was the first place to look. If nothing else he could have a wash and a drink while he looked for Yani.

He walked as quietly as possible down the path toward the river. Though it was not a big river, it had a steep bank, covered with trees and underbrush. Through the trees he saw a white shape in the river, and peering more closely, he saw it was Yani sitting naked in the water rubbing his body with sand and water. Rubbing his back and then swivelling around and splashing water up over his breasts...

Breasts! Sweet Mir! Automatically Ezratah threw himself down behind a bush.

Breasts? Breasts!

For a moment he could only lie there, quivering with shock like an arrow newly hit its mark. Then cautiously he parted the branches of the bush and peeped carefully down at the person in the river.

He, or rather she, was standing up now. Breasts definitely and a triangle of fine hair between the legs where there was nothing... A woman. The Tari was a woman!

Suddenly his mind was filled with a burning red mist.

A woman... A woman... By Mir, a woman! How dare she! That creature was playing him for a complete fool.

He sat back on his heels shaking with fury.

Mir! Great Mir, the shameless... That brazen... That unmitigated whore. Sitting there naked, washing her breasts quite openly with no thought of who might come. Going about dressed in man's clothes full of brazen opinions and judgments on him. On him! Her superior! As if she were not flouting every natural law known. As if she had any right to have such opinions. Besmirching everything that was decent and honorable. The self-righteous, self-satisfied Yani. Sweet Mir, these native women had no shame. She deserved a damn good lesson. She deserved to be treated like the whore she obviously was. That would show her. That would teach her.

He was so furious, he was not thinking straight... Suddenly he was afraid of what might happen if he saw her face-to-face. All those raw feelings... Realizing that he... she would be coming down the path soon, he got up and, crouching low, crept off into the trees.

He wandered around the woodlands, for some time, seething.

How dare she? How dare she? Behaving like that. Oh, he longed to teach her a lesson, but he had already cooled off enough to know that throwing himself on her would not answer. He had no taste for such behavior. He was too repelled by her to even want to touch her, much less intimately. Oh, no... horrible.

Finding himself again near the river but well out of sight of Yani, he sat down on the bank and splashed himself. The cool water helped him think more clearly. He itched to humiliate her as she had

done him—to humiliate her in some clever way. He tried to think of some way he could use his magic. Of course he could injure her magically, but...

His father's upbringing stopped him.

Father had been the soul of chivalry. How would he have acted in this situation? He would have been flabbergasted, shocked, repelled that a woman could act so!

If only he could somehow take her to Olbia, hand her over to the duke. But to just swallow the offense of her masquerade till they got there. To let her keep laughing up her sleeve at him. Oh no, he was still a man!

He had to do something. He bitterly regretted the decency which had caused him to reject mindsearching her. Such a woman deserved no consideration. Maybe he could do it now.

Suddenly a wonderful thought came to him. He felt in his pouch and pulled out a pink crystal. Yes. The perfect solution. He could find out what he wanted and teach her a lesson at the same time. A crueler, more subtle lesson that would show the creature how decent men regarded women who set themselves up above their proper place. Something that would teach her her place.

Pempus, the garrison skirt-chaser, had given him this crystal as a farewell gift. A generous gift really, for such things were expensive, not strictly legal and hard to get. Pempus had only one solution for all life's problems, and he had always thought Ezratah was far too serious. The little pink crystal contained a charm spell designed to make people love you or, in Pempus's case, make women agree to go to bed with you. The charm was of limited use. You could not make the victim do something they really believed to be wrong, which was why there was no point in using it on a decent Mirayan woman. Not that you often got the chance to be that close to them. But a Mirayan woman would never have agreed to sleep with you anyway. At least not a decent woman. But a native woman as everyone knew, was perfectly willing to have sex with you for the right price; using a charm spell simply saved time and money. Ezratah had always secretly thought it rather distasteful and had had no intention of putting it to such use. If he charmed Yani, however, she would happily tell him all her secrets and he would also work out some other way to humiliate her as she had humiliated him.

When to do it? He could leave it till they stopped for the night, but what if other travelers joined them or she shook him off or... And the thought of following that creature all day, of having to look at those uncovered legs and hide the fury that he still felt... No man who was a man could expect himself to undergo such... by Mir, he was going to enjoy teaching her the lesson she was asking for.

No time like the present! He would do it now. Yes! All he needed to do was touch Yani's skin with the crystal and trigger it with a small touch of magic. The spell itself should be quite strong. The strength of Yani's adoration and the length it lasted would depend on how weak her resistance to magic was.

By the time he had reached the campsite Yani had returned. She was sitting on a rock beside her pack. Her slim, shapely legs encased in their dark hose were stretched out, filling him with fury again. For they were so obviously women's legs, and her smooth, unbearded face, which he had simply thought a sign of her youth... She looked so feminine to him now.

"Where did you get to?" asked Yani as he came closer. "There's some food here." She got up to go to the fire.

"Oh, I've just been walking around," he said casually.

"Well, come on. Eat up so we can get going," she said.

"Just wait a minute."

"You sick or something?"

"No, no. I've just had a surprise," he said. "I'm shocked and astonished and, well, I'm relieved too."

Yani looked at him narrowly. “Yes?”

“Yani,” he said. “Dear Yani. I have to confess I saw you bathing this morning.”

He was very pleased to see how embarrassed she was. He forged ahead.

“I’m so relieved. I... Well, I have to confess, I’ve been attracted to you ever since I first saw you. I’ve been so worried. I thought I was turning strange.” He gave a relieved laugh, which he thought was rather a good touch. She looked confused. Yes! Ideal!

“Yani,” he said softly, romantically tilting his head to one side. He reached out and took her hand and she, confused, let him take it without resistance, though he could see concern dawning in her face.

Too late, bitch, he thought as he pressed the crystal in his palm against her flesh. There should be a brief burst of magical light. Yes there it was... But suddenly green flame burst out of their clasped hands!

The flame shot up his arm. He shrieked and sprang back, tripping over his feet and falling over on his back. The green fire ran all over him. He beat desperately at his arms and legs. He felt the magic making his skin buzz with its power, felt it penetrating him.

Suddenly there was a heavy weight on his chest. A little girl was sitting astride him. Her long pale hair swung around her dark-eyed face as she swung back her fist and threw a great splat of green light into his face.

Everything went dark.

Then he was lying on his back looking at the blue sky. Where was he? What had happened? A hand hit his cheek.

A little girl was sitting astride his chest. She started slapping his face with both hands.

“Ha, you slimy toad!” she shouted. Slap. Slap. “I got you now!” Slap. Slap. “Put a charm on my sister, will you? Toad.”

“Marigoth!” cried a voice. “Stop it. What’s going on?”

Suddenly the most sublime woman appeared above them and pulled the little girl off him. He sat up and stared at her, forgetting everything else.

He had never felt love before this moment, no, nor even ever really seen a woman before. His eyes could not get enough of this wonderful creature—this tall, slim, beautiful creature in chain-mail and dark hose who stood before him.

“The bastard tried to enchant you,” shouted the little girl. “Can you believe it? The sleazy fungus. The manure pile.” She kicked at him. He fended off her foot absent-mindedly as he continued to stare at the beautiful woman.

“I knew he’d try something. That’s why I put a warding on you, Yani. I never trusted him. And I was right, just like I told you. Ha. But I got you, didn’t I, Mr. Nosy Face? Now he’s caught in his own web. Now he’s enchanted *by you?*”

She kicked at Ezratah again. Ezratah flinched but it was automatic. Yani. So beautiful. Yani. Oh Yani.

A look of horror came over Yani’s face. “Marigoth! What have you done?!”

“I knew he would try something when he saw you bathing. I knew it!” cried the little girl.

“And how was it that he woke up and saw me anyway?” asked Yani hotly. “I thought you were holding him asleep.”

The little girl’s face took on a self-righteous look. “I can’t think of everything.”

“You set this up, didn’t you Mari?”

“He would have been a problem anyway. He’s up to something and you know it. You heard him all day yesterday. All that awful stuff he said about women. Revolting Mirayan. It made me sick.”

“Mari, he’s just one sort of man. There are plenty of Dani just like him. And Seagani and Mori. Maybe even Tari.”

She turned and looked down at Ezratah, who smiled beatifically up at her. She looked distinctly embarrassed. “Now he knows I’m a woman, we’ll have to wipe his memory.”

“There’s no need,” said the little girl. “He’s your faithful slave now. He’ll keep any secret with his life. Won’t you, Ezratah?” She nudged him with her foot yet again.

He nodded enthusiastically, still staring up at Yani. Oh, Yani!

“Oh yes,” gloated the little girl. “I’m going to enjoy this. All that stuff he said about women being foolish and illogical. Smug, superior toad.”

“No, Marigoth. This is wrong... We can’t enslave him. You know it’s wrong.”

The little girl’s face dropped. “It serves him right,” she muttered defensively. “Baser passions indeed!”

She turned to Yani and put her hands on her hips. “I just made the spell he was trying to cast on you backfire on him, you know.”

“Really,” said Yani looking at her with a raised eyebrow. “So what was that green fire effect I saw at the end, hmm?”

“So I strengthened it... But it’s still *his* spell, I promise you. A spell to make you love him, from the look of it. If he hadn’t used it on you it wouldn’t be affecting him now.”

“Well, I think you should release him and wipe his mind.”

“No,” said the little girl. “I’m not going to.”

“No!” cried Ezratah, jumping up anxiously. He came over to kneel at Yani’s feet. “Lady, please don’t release me. I only want to be near you. To serve you. To be allowed to love you. That’s all.”

“Oh no!” groaned Yani. She put her face in her hands. Ezratah reached out to her, unsure, daring to touch her.

In the background the little girl chortled gleefully. “Isn’t he sappy? And you know the best part. The spell is fed entirely by his power. He’s actually enslaving himself. What a joke.”

“Marigoth! You free him! Immediately!”

“He knows you’re a woman. He’s a danger to you!”

“Oh no,” protested Ezratah. “I would never harm Yani.”

“Rubbish,” snapped Yani. “You could wipe his mind.”

“I’d rather not. It’s a very dangerous operation wiping minds. You can never tell what other bits you’re going to wipe as well. He wouldn’t thank us for making that decision. I think it’s much better like this.”

“Yes, yes,” cried Ezratah. “This is the best.”

“Marigoth!”

“He could be very useful to us, Yani. You said so yourself. We’ve already learned a lot from him. He can speak Mirayan. He knows how they think.”

“Yes,” said Ezratah, giving into the temptation to paw Yani’s hand. “Let me help you. Please, Yani.”

“Shut up!” snapped Yani at Ezratah, who shrank back apologetically.

“He’ll do anything you ask. Like a dog and never ask any questions. He’s your complete slave.”

“And you shut up too!” Yani shouted. She took a deep breath.

“I don’t want a slave, Marigoth. It’s wrong.”

“It’s your only protection. If you tell him to keep your secret, he’ll do it even if they pull his tongue out.”

“Are you going to release him?”

“He deserves what he got Yani. You’re too soft.”

“ARE YOU GOING TO RELEASE HIM?!”

“No,” said the little girl.

Chapter 7

By the end of the day, Yani had stopped trying to convince Marigoth, whose stubbornness had always been legendary, to free Ezratah. Her honor still prickled her, but Ezratah’s temporary enslavement was a small matter compared to Alyx and Elena’s freedom.

The mage himself seemed to be taking very little harm from it, especially after Yani took control of him herself in order to stop Marigoth from bullying and scolding him. He pattered along happily at Yani’s side, hanging upon her every word and smiling in a way certain to give to her an impossibly high opinion of herself if she took it seriously. He hummed and laughed and seemed astonishingly contented.

It was a pleasant change from the sharp, ambitious man he had been. Even Marigoth admitted he was quite likeable.

“He has forgotten all the worry of making his fortune,” she said. “Now the only care he has in the world is how to make you smile, Yani. And you’re such a softie, you give him as many smiles as he wants. You’ll spoil him. You should be meaner to him—it’s what he deserves.”

Ezratah’s fawning manner did irritate Yani, but she knew he couldn’t help it. She was not about to give in to her irritation or to confide it to Marigoth, so she simply retorted, “If we all got what we deserve you’d probably wind up chained to some freezing rock in the northern sea with nothing to eat but rotten herrings. So you should be glad life doesn’t work like that.”

“If that’s how you feel, Lady Self-righteous, then I shall remove the putrescence of my presence,” said Marigoth sarcastically. “Though, if it bothers you so much, I’m surprised you make so much use of our slave.”

Unfortunately she had been right to think that an enslaved Mirayan would be immensely useful. For instance, it was Ezratah who told them to disguise him. Mirayans would find it very suspicious for a native to have a Mirayan mage for a servant, he explained. He had helped them hide his staff and mage’s robes in an abandoned womba hole, and had happily dressed himself in native garb with a Seagani servant’s copper neck tore. Although his features were very Mirayan and he had no tattoos, he told them that he could pass for a half-breed. Mirayans apparently disliked half-Mirayans and rarely looked at them closely.

“Then why do they carry on making so many?” har-rumphed Marigoth.

Ezratah was extremely good at remembering to treat Yani as a man, and only occasionally caused

difficulties by doing things like kneeling to serve her food—utterly inappropriate behavior for a Seagani servant.

He interpreted for them and explained things, not in his old arrogant, hectoring way, but patiently so that you could come some way toward understanding what was meant. As far as anyone could understand Mirayans.

For instance, Marigoth had asked Ezratah what had happened to the sacred groves of Nezhrus, the groves of mimosa and mangiri “that covered the hills with winter gold,” as a poem said. Without blinking an eye, with no second thought, Ezratah told them that High Chief Alexis Scarvan had banned such earth worship as wrong and had had all the sacred groves burned down. The sisters were dumbstruck with horror! How could the worship of the element of earth in the shape of the goddess Nezhrus be wrong!

Unfortunately Marigoth wasn't dumbstruck for long.

More unfortunate, though, was that Ezratah, with due respect, responded to her. He defended the high chief's actions by saying all kinds of bizarre things about priests being concerned about damned souls and the Mirayan religion being the only true one. The discussion quickly turned into a screaming match.

Marigoth became so furious that Yani had to physically prevent her from beating up the unfortunate mage and had to watch her the rest of the day. Ezratah would have come off very badly had Yani not held Marigoth back, for he not only refused to strike women but he seemed to have very little magic left now that he was caught up in a tangle of enchantment.

To Yani the idea of there being one superior way of worshiping the great Circle of Life seemed terribly wrong and an outrage against all ideas of harmony, but when she told Ezratah this, he became so upset that Yani took pity on him and asked him to teach her some Mirayan songs to take his mind off it.

Honestly! Traveling with the two of them, she began to feel more like a nursemaid than a warrior. She found herself thinking admiring thoughts of redoubtable women who cared for children.

Marigoth was walking openly with them now. She still appeared as a little girl, but her hair was dark and she had darkened her skin with walnut juice. She was still taking care to watch for any signs of other Tari, but they seemed mercifully absent. Either they hadn't noticed their use of the Circle of Power or they no longer cared.

On the second day they came to the Wanderelle river and followed it down through the hills toward the great coastal plain on which Olbia stood. The valley that the Wanderelle had carved out in its journey from the dry highlands to the more fertile coastal plain was the best farmland in the region and traditionally the Southern Sea-gani had grown great fields of wheat there.

In the highlands the untidy looking collections of thatch and wood houses surrounded by shady mangiri trees where whole Seagani clans lived together with their servants were everywhere, but there was no sign of them in Wanderelle valley. Here the land was completely given over to claustrophobic little Mirayan farms surrounded by high walls and groves of stunted fruit trees whose life spirit struggled to grow in the unsuitable dry earth. This was the traditional Mirayan style of building, Ezratah told them. These small buildings were easy to keep warm during the long cold Mirayan winters. To the Taris they looked stifling, especially in the late summer heat.

Big shaggy mangiri trees that must surely have once grown here were gone, except for the occasional tree standing on the very bank of the river. Consequently in many places the riverbank was beginning to erode from the lack of soil binding roots. It was a hot day and shade would have been welcome, but instead there were only neat little stone buildings, the tiny little fields of yellow wheat and the high hills beyond shimmering in the sun.

Plenty of Seaganis were hard at work, hoeing the weeds out of the wheatfields on either side of the

road. It was work that shamans traditionally did, bewitching the plants to move themselves to the roadside and waste areas where no one minded them. But of course in Southern Seagan the shamans had been outlawed when the sacred groves had been outlawed, and so this back-breaking work had to be done by hand.

Many of the workers stopped and stared at Yani going past, but as they were mostly men, few asked for blessings or even spoke to her. Twice a Mirayan called angrily from across the field and they returned to work. The local Seagani were easily recognizable by the spiral whorl of Nezhus that was tattooed in blue on their left cheek, but there were also those wearing the horse tattoos of the north and the three scars of the west. Instead of the copper tores by which they showed their tribal membership, they wore dull iron slave rings around their necks. They were captives from the several big rebellions against the high chief in the last twenty-three years.

“Where are the Seagani who used to own these fields?” asked Yani, deeply troubled by the situation. Ezratah told her that they had been among the first to rebel and be enslaved.

All Mirayan farming appeared done by slaves, though in Miraya they were called serfs and were born into the state of slavery. The very thought of so many powerless people made Yani’s flesh shrink. It was not as if she had not seen slavery before. The Danians and the Mori enslaved people who were captured in war until they were ransomed or gave service for some kind of blood debt. Mostly however families worked their own land or employed laborers who gave service for food and shelter. All of them were usually blood relations, members of the same clan. Slavery on this scale...

Even Marigoth, who normally cared for no one, was horrified. “What kind of people are these Mirayans?” she cried.

“Aye,” replied Yani, striding along. “It is an evil way of living.”

Her face was grim. Queen Sharma had talked with a worried face of the Mirayans. Their well-organized and well-armored armies with their tremendous control of magical fire were rumored to be invincible. In her time at the Dani court, Yani had given little thought to these larger issues, concentrating instead on perfecting her swing and improving her skill with the bow and arrow. Now she could see why the queen had been so worried. She saw too how all her skill could be put to use. If ever there was a justified reason for force, surely this was it. She felt the dark shadow of the Raven watching the situation and judging it. A clear, righteous anger filled her. She wanted to overthrow the situation, smash against things and break them open, organize the fields full of slaves into an immediate rebellion. For a moment these feelings were so strong they pushed all other thoughts out of her mind, except the one shining goal she had been navigating by ever since she had left Dania.

“What is important is Alyx and Elena,” she said. “We must not lose sight of that. All other things must come after that.”

“Of course,” said Marigoth, who had never had much patience with other people and their silly problems. She was much more distressed about the state of the land—denuded as it was of trees and forced into the artificial order of Mirayan fields. A sense of its life spirit was bound up in her magical powers and she could feel how it was warped by Mirayan settlement.

Down near the place where the Wanderelle valley ended and the river flowed out onto the coastal plain, she and Ezratah had another violent argument—this time over the filthy effluent of the upstream woolworks, which emptied into the river. The “stupid Mirayan” insisted on going on about wealth and progress and trade when anyone could see that the river’s life force was choking under the greasy filth. These Mirayans were like blind worms, poking clumsily around unable to see what was before their very eyes. Marigoth hoped they would be able to get Elena quickly away before the Mirayans choked themselves on their own filth.

At last they reached Olbia. The city was overshadowed by a huge stone fortress that the Mirayans

had rebuilt on the remaining headland. You could still see pieces of the old fortress that lay just barely under the churning waters closer to shore. Otherwise there was little sign of the destruction of the tower and the death of the last native-born chief, Gorice, twenty-four years ago.

The Mirayan fortress was a magnificent towering structure, rumored to be impenetrable. Huge red dragon banners flew from all its towers. Yani could tell from the way Marigoth grumped about how ugly it was that even she was a little impressed. She hoped that Elena was not being held captive there, for it looked a very curse to get into.

The city of Olbia was new. A monster wave had hit the old town when the headland collapsed into the sea and afterward what remained had been ravaged by the minions of the death mage, who had been left masterless by his death. The new town looked like a big field of mushrooms huddled at the side of the fortress. Like Mirayan fields, it was also surrounded by a high stone wall. Mi-rayans appeared to like things to be contained, though Yani could not really understand why. The life spirit flowed through everything and mere walls could not contain it.

The fortress had been built on one side of the headland overlooking a big harbor, which was full of the same kind of tall Mirayan ships that had been in Lamartaine. Yani could not help admiring the defensive qualities of the town and fortress. The Mirayans certainly knew how to build for war.

As the road dropped down to the crossing of the Wan-derelle river, it became busier and busier. Here the river was wide and shallow and a continuous stream of people and heavy carts were fording it or passing up and down the road on the other side. It was easy to guess this was the road to the woolworks because most of the carts carried untreated fleeces or new bolts of cloth. Many carts were pulled by Seagani slaves instead of horses, their backs and limbs badly scarred. Ezratah explained that this was from floggings. Only the roughest and most difficult slaves pulled carts and they needed a lot of discipline. Yani hid her grimace of distaste.

As well as people carrying baskets, packs of produce and the wool carts, there were a number of carriages on wheels pulled by Seagani slaves and hung with heavy cloth hangings that made it impossible to see inside. They were the carriages of wealthy free-born Mirayan women, explained Ezratah. The cloth protected their modesty from prying eyes.

“Why do they have to protect themselves from eyes ‘prying’?” asked Yani mystified.

“A decent woman is modest and does not flaunt herself before men who are not in her family,” said Ezratah. “It is not proper to have strange men lusting after her; it besmirches what is pure and godly.”

“Is lust so bad?” asked Marigoth. “Don’t you need it to make babies?”

“Yes,” said Ezratah blushing slightly at this question. “But between husband and wife, where it is proper. Anything else... well it is destructive and bad for civilization. Women cause fighting, disorderliness... and... and crime among men. You know how it is. They are the uncontrolled element in the world. Anyway, I’m pleased to say that many Seagani are now adopting our ways,” he said, quickly changing the subject. “Our rule has brought peace and prosperity for which they thank us.”

But there was little sign of prosperity amongst the Seagani they saw as they climbed the hill up to the city gate. The area outside the walls of Olbia was dotted with scruffy little huts—clearly Seagani homes. A number of drunken Seagani were sitting in the dust outside the huts. Others were working hard in little vegetable gardens beside them. The women here seemed very heavily clothed for such a white-hot afternoon. Both their arms and their legs were fully covered by their gowns and cloths were bound around their heads, covering their necks. This way of dressing must be Mirayan innovation.

What was this obsession with keeping women covered and out of sight? Did they dislike them so much? And why?

Yani’s passage caused a stir. People stopped and stared in slack-mouthed astonishment, but no one

approached and asked her for a blessing, which given Olbia's history was not surprising. Luckily no one attacked them either.

* * *

While Yani, Marigoth and Ezratah were walking toward the front gate of Olbia, Duke Wolf Madraga's ship could be seen riding at anchor in Olbia harbor. The duke was ashore, walking along the wall of the harbor with his brother Lev.

Lev Madraga was a good fifteen years younger than his brother, an extremely handsome man with curling golden hair and unusually deep blue eyes. He had still been in his mother's womb when they had fled, along with Prince Scarvan's other followers, from a great defeat in the civil war in Miraya. His father had died of his wounds on the ship, and Lev had been born in Ishtak. His mother had been terrified to find herself on a foreign shore with no adult male relative to protect her. Lev probably owed his life to a clever native midwife who had driven the will to survive into his mother. Luckily Prince Scarvan had stood by Duchess Madraga, as he always stood by Mirayans of her order, by taking her teenaged son, Wolf, into his own household and getting the Ishtaki ruler to find her a fine new husband. It had not been difficult for there had been few high-class Mirayan women in Ishtak. Prince Pirus had chosen wisely for her, and so Lev Madraga had grown up in a comfort and security that his older brother, reared in war-torn Miraya, had never known. When Lev began to show the gift of magery, his stepfather had been able to pay for his training, and when it became clear just how powerful Lev was—a mage of the highest golden order—had even sent him to the southern Mirayan city of Dasharl to study for two years and to gain a little Mirayan polish. Now Lev was a junior court mage for Prince Scarvan.

A cool afternoon breeze was blowing off the sea making the harbor wall a pleasant place to be. The sea below them was a deep afternoon green and flocks of gulls pattered about on the jettied rocks busily looking for scraps.

The Madraga brothers had not seen each other for some months and as they walked, they talked of ordinary matters. Neither knew quite how to broach the subject that really concerned them, that of Wolf's current estrangement from their liege lord.

At the end they turned to retrace their steps along the wall. Wolf stopped and looked up to the fortress.

"That your tower?" he asked, pointing to the two towers sticking out from the cliff-top wall of the fortress. The cliff dropped sheer into the boiling sea beneath.

"Yes, that's the mage's hole," said Lev. "Nice and safe. Away from the main fortress in case there are any nasty explosions."

"And the other one? Scarvan got any special prisoners in there at the moment?"

"Yeah," said Lev grinning luridly. "His mistress, that Mori woman. They say he visits her every night, and that has wife, Princess Druscilla—"

He stopped at the sound of an indrawn breath and suddenly remembered who he was speaking to. There was a bitterly angry look on his brother's face. He looked around quickly. This end of the harbor wall had been cleared of the usual fisherfolk and beggars so there were no unsafe listeners within earshot.

"Here, you're not still mad about that, are you?" he said uneasily. "I thought you came here to make things up. It's only a woman after all."

"But mine by right," snapped Wolf. "To the commander belongs the captives."

"A ruler has the right to take any captive he likes," said Lev. He had never stood on the usual Mirayan formality with his older brother and had no hesitation about speaking his mind now. "You know that is true. Honestly, brother. How can you let such a coolness grow up between you and our lord over

such a trivial matter? And not even a Mirayan woman.”

Wolf shook his head. “Such a woman,” he murmured. Then his face changed and he turned to Lev with a sudden look of concern.

“Have you taken any ill from our coolness, brother?”

“I’m not sure,” said Lev. “Before Fleurforet there was talk of how I would be made full court mage at St. Stefan’s and now... not a word. I have wondered if this coolness... What do you mean by falling out with our liege over a woman? Has he not been a good liege?”

“Perhaps you should go back to our mother’s in Ishtak. It is in my mind to take Paulus home when I leave here this time. I don’t want my son being used against me.”

“What? Great Mir, Wolf! You don’t mean this is going to get worse. I can’t believe it. Are you mad?”

“When Scarvan took Elena Starchild from me it was a beginning. Since then he has criticized my every move in my own lands and now he forces his religious edict on me, an edict which he has never insisted upon before. He interferes and criticizes, and I no longer feel he trusts me.”

“Well, if you said half the things that they say you said at Fleurforet, I’m not surprised he doesn’t trust you anymore. Taking Paulus home can only confirm it. Can you not at least try to make it up with him? Surely you cannot throw away twenty-six years of good service like this. Over a quarrel about a woman. See sense, man!”

“I do see sense,” said Wolf. “Things were said then and have been said since that are also hard for me to forgive. The bond between liege and vassal works both ways, Lev. It must do so, otherwise it cannot work. Can you not see that? He was a good liege because he trusted his vassals to follow their own judgment, but now he grows old and tetchy and suspicious of younger men. And this religious business is madness, the madness of an old man who is afraid of dying. He doesn’t seem to know how much damage it is doing to the country, how restless it is making the natives.”

This was not the first time Wolf had discussed the outlawing of religion with his brother. Lev fully agreed with him on the subject, though more because as a mage he instinctively disliked priests than because he cared much about the anger of some weak Seagani natives. But Wolf had never talked of breaking with the prince before, and some of his argument had the ring of self-justification.

“But is confrontation the best way?” Lev asked now. “Could you not just burn down a few sacred groves? Pretend to knuckle down? He’s old as you say, and you must outlive him in the way of things. And his son is no fool for all his sickliness. We owe Scarvan a great deal.”

“And he has had very good service in return. Yet for all that they tell me he talks of humiliating me publicly for my failing to carry out his orders and even of taking the rulership of Eastern Seagan away from me. Eastern Sea-gan, which I won with my own hands and which I have a right to pass on to Paulus.”

“All this talk would surely stop if you made peace with him over Fleurforet. Surely Lamartaine is worth a few insincere apologies.”

“You do not understand. It is a matter of honor,” said Wolf.

“No I suppose I don’t, then,” said his brother.

A woman, he thought. All this over a woman. What kind of woman can have this effect on two sensible men? Perhaps if she became ugly. Or even died. Maybe that would sort things out. I must see what I can do.

A long way above them, too far up to be detected by those who might recognize her magic,

Jindabyne circled on the warm updrafts of air in the shape of a sea hawk.

With a hawk's sight but with human understanding, she watched the world beneath. She saw the two men walking on the sea wall. She saw High Chief Scarvan welcoming guests in the courtyard before his fortress and Yard and Marigoth approaching the city gates. Her quick, beady eyes even picked up faint movements through one of the slit windows of the tower, which showed that someone within was looking out over the shining sea.

Chapter 8

By the time Yani and Ezratah reached the city gate, Marigoth was no longer with them, having made herself invisible again. The soldiers guarding the gate searched Yard's pack and for a moment she thought they were going to search her too. She handed her sword into their keeping without argument, for Ezratah had told her that was how it had to be. Despite this they seemed worried by her unusual appearance and called their captain.

"Where are you from, fellow?" he demanded in a tone which made Yani bristle.

"I'm from Dania," she replied with restraint. "I am here for the tournament of St. Stefan."

"Right, well keep out of trouble," said the captain. "We Mirayans don't put up with brawling or vendettas. St. Stefan is a saint of peace."

"I will do as you wish," said Yani, bowing her head politely.

The captain had seemed to be waiting for something and after they were out of hearing of the guard post, Ezratah reminded her she should have addressed him as Highness. Yani sighed. He had not seemed worthy of such great respect.

Rather than letting them into the city, the captain of the guard had directed Yani around the outside of the wall, away from the harbor. The city was built against the two sides of the fortress that faced toward the harbor. They followed the outside of the city wall along the top of a huge ditch and suddenly the wall turned back hard toward the fortress, and before them was a large field of green grass. The field was thick with tents and pavilions. In an area toward the center, a wooden grandstand was being set up.

Several of the tents were large and made of gaily-colored silk, and a couple flew the red dragon flag. The rest were the more humble-looking canvas or felt tents common among the Seagani. Above the sound of nails being driven into wood, Yard's practiced ears could hear the sounds of steel against steel, a sound which filled her with exhilaration.

The wall of the fortress looked like a great frowning cliff casting its shadow darkly over the field beneath. Only a deep ditch stood between it and the field. Yani had seen fortresses before but never one as big. An unusual feature caught her eye.

"What is that iron grille up there in the wall of the keep?" she asked. "Is it not a weakness?"

"Ah, yes," said Ezratah. "But it can be sealed with stone and magic during a battle. The grille is where the women's quarters are. You do not see such grilles often on Mirayan castles anymore, for warfare is so constant and unpredictable there that they have all been closed over. But here Scarvan need have no real fear of enemies, and so we can give our women the light and air they need to be strong mothers without having to expose them to the humiliation of outside eyes. And it gives them an opportunity to see tournaments such as this. I know my sisters used to enjoy them. Strange, in such gentle creatures. But

then women are always so contradictory. Ah!" He waved his hand toward the grandstand ahead of them.

"And here is the field of St. Stefan."

A large grandstand decorated with blue and gold was being erected around an area of amazingly lush green grass. It would make a disconcertingly yielding surface to fight on, thought Yani.

"They are using magic to keep it fresh," whispered Marigoth in her ear.

Unerringly, Ezratah guided them to the large blue-and-gold tent of the Master of Lists where Yani needed to register in order to be included in the competition. The tent was open at one side and within it sat a prissy little man dressed in a long robe. He did not look up when Yani approached and asked to register. The guards behind him and at the entrance of the tents more than made up for the Master's lack of staring however.

"Name?"

"Yani Tari."

"What tribe?"

"Tari... Highness. I come from Dania."

This made the master look up for the first time. He had cold eyes and though he stared hard at Yani, she could not fathom his emotions.

"Queen Sharma send you?"

"No, I come of my own wish. Highness."

"Right. Who do you wish to have freed?"

"My sister Elena of the Mori who was taken prisoner at the sacking of Fleurforet. She has a daughter called Alyx with her. Highness."

"You're wasting your time, fellow. Duke Wolf holds all available prisoners from Fleurforet in Lamartaine."

"I was told she had been brought here, Highness."

"Well, she ain't here."

"Couldn't you inquire, Highness?" Yani smiled politely. The Master glared icily back at her.

"What did you say!"

"What he means, Highness, is that perhaps she has been missed from the lists or something," said Ezratah quickly. "Are you certain she's not here?"

"Listen, fellow. I make the lists of prisoners here and she's not on them. This is Olbia, not one of your barbaric little native states."

"Yes, Highness," said Yani. Was the man lying or did he really not know? What if he was telling the truth? Pray it was not so.

"So who are you going to fight for?" asked the Master.

"My sister Elena, Highness," said Yani.

"Are you deaf or just stupid? I already told you she isn't here. Pick someone else."

"I don't want anyone else. Highness."

"What he means, Highness, is that if he can't fight for his sister, he will fight in her honor and for the honor of all Dania," said Ezratah.

“Very well,” said the Master of Lists in the voice of someone who had suffered fools too long. “Now piss off and stop wasting my time.” He bent back to his page muttering none too quietly, “Arsewipe natives.”

Yani turned quickly on her heel and strode out of the tent, firmly reigning in her anger. In Dania she would have challenged him to a duel for such churlish behavior. But here he was just a stepping stone to a greater goal. It didn't matter how he spoke to her! It didn't matter, dammit!

A moment or so later one of the soldiers standing at the entrance of the tent said, “Natives out front, sir.”

The Master looked up and saw a large group of native men confronting the annoying pair of characters who had just left. He grinned to himself. Ha! He'd known the natives wouldn't like this fighting for someone's honor when they had so many people to free. Looked like that impertinent Dani was going to be taught... What the hell!

Outside the Seagani men all went down on their knees, heads bowed and resting on their clenched hands in a gesture of supplication.

“Lord,” said one of them, a little short fat man with a graying crop of hair that stood up like a bird's crest. “As chieftain of my tribe, I do most humbly beg forgiveness of the Guardians for the great wrong our High Chief Gorice, may his name be forever cursed, did them.”

Once again Yani could not help marveling at the love the Archipelagans felt for the Tari. There were about thirty Southern Seagani in the group—all of them warriors, men who humbled themselves reluctantly. It hurt Yani not to be able to reward them as they deserved.

“Good men of Seagan,” she said. “I myself happily forgive you for something which was done by others many years ago. But I am here without any authority from my people and cannot speak for them. All I can offer is to convey your apologies back. I must ask your forgiveness for this.”

Surprise, frustration, anger and disappointment played across the faces of the kneeling men. The chieftain's face fell and for a moment he looked very tired.

Then he got to his feet and straightened his shoulders with visible effort. He was short even for a Seagani, but he looked at her with polite dignity and said, “May I ask why you have come here, lord?”

“I have a sword. I intend to fight in the lists. Naturally this is without the blessing of my people, who do not like such violence.”

“Do you fight for anyone?”

“I fight for the freedom of my sister Elena, widow of Eldene of the Mori and for her child Alyx.”

Amazement flickered across the faces of the surrounding men.

“Do the Mirayans have one of your folk captive, lord?” cried the chieftain, shocked.

“They say they do not, though she was taken by them at Fleurforet.”

There was a murmuring among the gathered men. Looks of anger and unease were cast at the Mirayan tent. Yani was surprised to see what looked like amusement in the chieftain's eyes.

Then suddenly his face was serious again as he peered behind her. She turned and saw the guards and the Master of Lists watching them with narrowed eyes. A number of Mirayan men-at-arms seemed to be walking toward them from other parts of the field. The chieftain turned and motioned for his followers to disperse. Soon only two men remained at his side. He began to move away from the Master of Lists' tent, politely motioning Yani to follow him.

“I am Brek,” he said. “Might I offer you the hospitality of our tents?”

“I am Yani. I thank you. I will come.” She turned to Ezratah. “Will you find us a place to stay?”

“We would be honored if you would use one of our tents. We have a number unused,” said Brek.

It seemed incredibly rude to refuse the man’s hospitality, especially when she had just refused his apology to the Guardians. But if she accepted, what else was she agreeing to?

“I thank you again,” she said at last. “I am in your debt, good chieftain.”

It was only the proper formal reply, but nonetheless a worrying look of hope flickered across Brek’s face as he ushered Yani from the field.

The Mirayans inside the Master of Lists’ tent only spoke the Seagani pidgin that you used with servants and whores and thus had only the sketchiest idea of what had passed. Still it was enough to make the Master call one of his clerks to replace him.

Bluntly telling the clerk not to make a pig’s breakfast of it, he went off to seek an audience with the prince.

After he had gone, one of the other clerks in attendance surreptitiously took a scrap of parchment out of his waist pouch, wrote on it and sent a small boy running it to Duke Wolf’s ship in the harbor.

The Seagani chieftain’s tent was a large wooden frame with a creamy woollen felt cloth spread over it. It consisted of a closed inner room in front of which was a canopy that shaded folding chairs and a table from the sun. Brek, Tusk, a grizzled warrior covered in scars and tattoos who was Brek’s second-in-command, and Yani sat upon the chairs and one of Brek’s retainers brought them ale.

The rest of Brek’s followers made a pretense of going about their business, but Yani was well aware of their watchful eyes. After all she had seen on the journey, her sympathy went out to the Southern Seagani, but this did not alter the fact that she was here to free Elena before anything else and that must be made clear. How to do so diplomatically? Elena would have known. Diplomacy had always been her strong point.

“The one who wins at the feast of St. Stefan may ask for a prisoner to be freed,” said Brek in answer to a question from Yani. “But natives never win. Those of us under Mirayan rule are forbidden weapons the rest of the year and the rest... Well, it is all the Mirayan sword and shield. Are you familiar with these weapons?”

“I am. Queen Sharma has all her troops training in them now. And in Mirayan battle drill too.”

“I had heard she was a clever woman,” said Brek admiringly. “So you may show well in the lists after all. It’s not actually necessary for you to win outright. Scarvan often rewards the winning Archipelagan equally to the winning Mirayan.” His tone changed to one of heavy sarcasm. “He *very generously* does not expect us to come up to Mirayan standards.”

Tusk snorted derisively.

“Indeed. I have seen so many instances of Mirayan ‘generosity’ in my journey here,” said Yani wryly. “A heavy burden to bear. But it is hardly worth my fighting if I do not win my sister. Have you heard no rumor of her?”

“It is very hard to say who Scarvan has and does not have. He does not admit to all his prisoners. We locals are rarely let into the fortress and the Mirayans here are too loyal to gossip to such as we. Look at the Horse Seagani. For five years they have been asking for the return of their chief priest Killon taken at Cesane. And for five years Scarvan has denied having him prisoner. Now this year he admits to having him, though he gives no explanation of why.”

“He’s probably dead,” grunted Tusk.

“That is not very honorable of Scarvan,” said Yani.

“The Mirayans have no honor,” said Tusk.

“They have no honor toward us,” corrected Brek. “And why should they? They have us by the balls and know it.” He leaned forward intently. “But nonetheless, lord, I urge you to fight. It may bring you notice from someone who might know the truth.”

Yani regarded the man thoughtfully. No doubt he had reasons of his own for urging Yani to fight, but his argument made sense. And Yani had always loved the challenge of such contests.

“And who do you fight for?” she asked Brek to change the subject.

“So many of our people are enslaved that I let the champions fight for whom they please. This year most of them are fighting for relatives who work in the wool factories. We have several promising young fighters.”

“The fighting skills of the Seagani are legendary,” said Yani. “I would be grateful for the opportunity to train with your fellows before the combat begins.”

“We would be honored, lord. We are ever at the Guardians’ service.”

“I thank you,” said Yani. “But please, there is no need to call me lord. One who sheds blood, even honorably, cannot be accounted a lord among the Tari.”

“I will try not to, though it goes much against my grain and I do not think I will be able to rule my people in this. May I ask, are the Tari in any mind to leave Ermora and come among us again? They... We... It is to my mind that we Seagani would be very grateful for their skills of negotiation at this time. In the bargain we have made with the Mirayans, our portion dwindles by the day.”

“I do not think they are of a mind to change,” said Yani, hoping that it did not show that she had no knowledge of what the other Tari thought. She could see the guilt of this lie before these needy people was going to be by far the most difficult part of this quest.

“And you yourself, can you not see your way to helping us?” asked Tusk suddenly. “If your sister is not in Ol-bia, would you consent to fight for one of our prisoners?” Brek shot him an angry look, but the burly Tusk was not looking.

“If my sister is truly not in Olbia, my companions and I will be leaving. We have vowed to free Elena and will do so to the top of our power. I must once again beg your forgiveness gentlemen, but her freedom is my only goal.” She rose to go. “And now I must return to my companions.”

She bowed to the two men.

“Companions,” said Tusk. “I saw only the dark fellow. Are there others of your kind?”

“I have come without authority, but I have not come alone,” smiled Yani. “If Elena Tari is in Olbia even if she is in the deepest dungeon, my companions will find her.”

She turned to go, but the pricking of her conscience overcame her and she turned back. “Gentlemen, if I may be of service to you without compromising my task I would be most willing. But I must see my sister and her child freed. And now I must thank you for your hospitality and bid you farewell for the moment. If you will kindly direct me to my tent.”

“One of my men will take you,” said Brek. He stood for some time smiling to himself as he watched the Tari walk away.

Normally the chieftain of the Southern Seagani had little reason to smile. The High Chieftanship of Seagan included all four tribes of the Seagani, but the Southern Seagani were the only ones Prince Scarvan ruled directly. The Western Seagani he ruled through his vassal Wolf Madraga and so far the Horse Seagani and the Red Seagani simply paid the prince a money tribute without being ruled directly.

Since the other tribes all had their own tribal chieftains, about ten years previously, the Mirayans had

decided that in the interest of stability they should appoint one for the southerners as well. There were several capable women who would have been acceptable to the Seagani, but a female chieftain was out of the question for the Mirayans, who did not think women had either the mental or the moral fiber for rule. Scarvan had chosen Brek because he was one of the few male members of the chiefly house still alive, and he deemed him to be too insignificant to have any real authority. Even then Brek was forced to live far from Olbia and to accept the constant interference by a Mirayan magistrate in those few tribal duties left to him. Those of his people who had not been enslaved still looked to him for leadership, but their everyday lives were now ruled directly by Mirayan lords who had somehow, it was not always clear how, come to own the lands they fanned.

But in Brek, the Mirayans had underestimated their man. Always short and an indifferent warrior, he had learned early on the very valuable lesson that he could not win anything by going at it directly. He had become cunning and, unlike a true Seagani warrior, he was not ashamed to dishonor himself for the greater goal. He had no illusions that the Seagani had any chance of throwing off Mirayan rule, but he was determined to do as much as he could to make it possible for some later leader to do so and to ensure the survival of his tribe's beliefs and way of life in the meantime. Now, for the first time, he saw something to smile about in the terrible hand fate had dealt his people. If he could get the Tari involved in his cause... What a rallying point he could be against the Mirayans!

"Bastard!" Tusk said bitterly. "They will do nothing to help us. They would not even take our apology."

For a moment Brek was stunned. Then he turned and said, "Did he not say he would help us if he could?"

"Fine words fatten no geese," replied Tusk.

Brek rolled his eyes. "Did you not see how that young ram sympathized with us? You really are a fool, Tusk. Charging in like that—I am surprised his companions did not fry you where you stood."

Tusk glowered at him, yet he knew his chieftain to be a crafty fellow.

"You must play softly if you are to play men's heartstrings," said Brek. "You mark my words. Even if he did not mean to help us, if the Mirayans have indeed got a Tari woman captive... It will be very bad for them."

Tusk looked at him blankly.

"Half-wit! What is bad for the Mirayans can only be good for us. And we must make sure things get as bad as possible for them, yes? I want you to tell the men that they are to help this Tari in every way they can. And I want you to send several of them into the town to spread the news that Scarvan has a Tari woman in captivity. That'll stir people up."

"As you wish," said Tusk, who was used to being sent to carry out orders he did not fully understand. He was utterly loyal to Brek, if for no other reason than the fact that he was next in line to become chieftain and had no wish to hold a position with so much worry and so little chance of fighting or feasting.

"So you have a plan, then?" he asked admiringly.

"It's forming," said Brek, not entirely truthfully. "It's forming very nicely."

Ezratah had been led to a wool tent that was a smaller version of Brek's, even down to the cream-colored canopy before it. Marigoth lurked around behind the surrounding tents until Ezratah's guide left. Then she rejoined him and began carefully examining the tent's walls for gaps and holes. She was pleased with it. It was large and luxurious for a native tent with room inside it for several people to

stand upright. After setting Ezratah to sewing up the only hole she could find, she went off for supplies, returning a little later with her arms full of plant matter—leafy branches and carrots with their tops still attached. A small group of curious Seagani warriors who had gathered at Ezratah's back, but had not yet got up the courage to speak to him, hurried quickly away on seeing her. They could already sense something dangerous in this strange little girl. Marigoth scarcely noticed them. She sat down and cut a small rune sign into each of the carrots. Then she planted all fourteen of them around the outside of the tent and told Ezratah to water them carefully every day unless he wanted her to pinch him awake every night.

“What do they do?” asked Ezratah, torn between fascination and amusement.

“It is a spell of protection,” said Marigoth. “Root vegetables make good conduits for the earth's power.” She saw Ezratah's look and stuck out her tongue at him. “Have you finished your sewing? Well then, go and find a pole, Sir Clever. You don't want our Yani to be disappointed, do you?”

Ezratah borrowed a pole from a nearby tent dweller who insisted on giving him a table and two chairs as well. By the time he had returned with the pole and a small retinue of curious warriors, Marigoth had woven the leafy branches into a circle. She tied the wreath onto the top of the pole with a green silk ribbon and instructed Ezratah to set the pole and wreath up like a banner in front of the tent. She gave the warriors a look which made them withdraw with more speed than was quite dignified.

Then telling Ezratah that Yani would be furious if he talked to anyone about their business here, she went off to take a look around.

Ezratah knew he could believe most of what this nasty little girl said to him about her sister. He settled down to arranging the tent as comfortably as possible and replied to a number of hopeful passing remarks with discouraging grunts.

Marigoth set off into the city to see what kind of magical defenses she was up against. In Lamartaine she had formed a suspicion about Mirayan cities that she wanted to test out. To her dismay she found that the worst was true. The minute she passed through the city gates she felt lightheaded and dizzy, just as she had when she had entered that horrible Lamartaine place. By now she had worked out what it was. Her connection to the life spirit, a connection that she had had all her life, had dropped away. The elements of air, water and fire were weaker here and the element of earth was almost silent, covered by the dead quarried stone that had been used to make the streets and walls of this city. Only the element of life was overwhelmingly present in the animals and people that crowded the streets.

Her foster father, Timmic, had taught her as best he could, but, being only half-Tari Timmic was not particularly sensitive to the Circle of Life and preferred to use his innate magical abilities to power his magic, as the other Archipelagans did. Marigoth had taught herself how to manipulate the life spirit in Tari style from her grandmother's books. But in this place where the life spirits were so disturbed and out of balance, her magical powers were disrupted and not much stronger than those of the Archipelagans. With the imbalance came a horrible feeling of lethargy.

Marigoth felt a momentary sense of regret. She remembered Yard telling her that if she had been older—a grown woman—she would have come into her full powers and would have been able to deal with the imbalance better. Was Yani right? No ! Never! The lives of adults were so restricted and... Marigoth was not really sure why she had not grown up, but she was damned glad she hadn't. She could still remember how people treated Elena once she started to become a woman. Men and boys always hanging around the lane leading to their farm. People crowding around her and touching her. Then there had been the horrible time that a man had jumped off a cart and chased them into the woods. Marigoth had used her magic to hide them and they had watched as he wandered around among the trees calling, “Little girl, little girl!”—with his breeches undone! And his thing jutting out like some pink rubbery

weapon. Ugh! If that was being grown up, forget it!

Leaving the island, getting captured, having to do things for people—where was the joy in that! No one noticed little girls and if they did, they didn't expect anything of them. They let them have their own way. And one day grandmother would come back and then everything would be all right. Then Marigoth might worry about growing up. But first things first.

Until then, she was still better than some poxy Mirayan mage. Look at how weak and stupid that Ezratah was. She knocked over a Mirayan fruit stall just to see if she could do magic in here. She could—which meant that she must be able to draw on some of the life spirit despite everything. In the resulting confusion, she stole a couple of particularly juicy apples to eat and tried not to think about *how much* effort it had taken to knock over the stall.

She walked on through the crowded town streets, pinching her nose disdainfully at the smell of the dirty gutters. Look at all these stupid people so crowded together with no access to the spirits of life. What a mangy lot they were. They could have all done with an introduction to the element of water. So Ezratah called this the peak of civilization, did he? What a fool!

When she got to the fortress wall, however, her bravado disappeared. It was extremely well guarded by great webs of blue magic which spread all over the walls and shone like a cage in the air above. She made herself invisible and tried to walk through the wall in her customary manner. She tried three times, once even dropping the glamor that made her look Seagani so as to have more power to draw on. Every time, she bounced off the stone. The protection was especially strong over the gate, so there was no question of walking invisibly though that. Yet non-magical people were passing openly back and forth through that gate the whole time she was there. Curse it. This web of magic was targeted only at those using magic and it seemed to work against her even though her magic was different. If only she was stronger!

By the time she had made her third attempt, she was too tired to be angry about the situation. She crawled behind a pile of baskets and sat there until the stall keeper noticed her and chased her away. How slowly her power came back! She dragged herself back to the front gate and it was only out in the vegetable gardens that surrounded the city that she started to feel normal again.

It was here that it suddenly occurred to her to try the walls of the fortress that were not contiguous with the city. After hanging around in the market gardens eating stolen peaches until it was dark, she went over to the wall behind the fighters' camp and had several tries at getting through it.

Poxy, poxy Mirayan magic. Damn! Damn! Damn it! It was just too strong! She was so upset she actually sat down and shed a few tears. Curse those Mirayans! Why did she have to do this? She began to feel afraid that she was no better at magic than the mangy Mirayans.

“Try the wool settlement first,” suggested Yani later, back at the tent, when she found Marigoth curled up on her blankets sulking. “After all, Elena was a good craftswoman. Or try getting into the fortress in some other guise.”

Neither of these remarks were much of a comfort. She relieved her feelings by going off and telling Ezratah how hopeless his armor polishing was and how hopeless everything else about him and all Mirayans in general was. It was only when Ezratah let slip that twenty mages working in concert had put together the defenses of the fortress that she began to feel a bit better. After all, even a full-grown Tari mage might have trouble against twenty.

Meanwhile, up in the fortress, Prince Alexis Scarvan had taken the radical step of talking to one of the Seagani, Jacques, a wool merchant. He dressed as a Mirayan and spoke the language as if it were his mother tongue. Only the spiral tattoo on his cheek marked him as a Seagani. He was one of a number of

merchants whose families had traded with the Mirayans well before they had settled in Seagan and who had benefited enormously from Mirayan rule. He lived in a Mirayan-style house in the good section of Olbia, and kept a host of house slaves (mostly captive Mori). His wife traveled everywhere in a silken litter and his son, whom he had refused to tattoo with tribal marks, was even now in Ishtak at the Mirayan University. Yet for all his Mirayanness, at this point in time Jacques felt very anxious about the activities of his rulers. Unlike his nominal chieftain, Brek, Jacques had heard the not very unusual rumor that Prince Alexis had a new mistress. It was only when he had heard the rumors flying around the marketplace about the Tari warrior and his captive sister that afternoon that he had begun to worry about who she might be. Now here was Prince Alexis calling him to the fortress and leaving his own feast to ask him questions about the Tari. Jacques badly wanted to know for sure if the rumor about Eldene Mori's widow were true, but he'd dealt with the Mirayans long enough to know that Archipelagans got nothing out of them directly. Patiently he told the prince everything he knew about the Tari and their ways and their rift with the rest of the Seagani. It might have struck other people as odd that the Mirayans had not heard of the Tari before, but Jacques knew that the Mirayans scoffed at all other cultures as inferior and rarely bothered to pay attention to natives.

Even now as he spoke, Prince Alexis snorted, expressed every kind of disbelief and muttered about superstitious natives. This was his usual response, and yet quite often Jacques would find he had taken his advice. One had to be patient with rulers, especially rulers as capable as the Mirayans.

This time, however, Prince Alexis's response was perfectly understandable. To such a direct and warlike people as the Mirayans, it must be unimaginable that an immensely powerful race of mages would choose not to rule all the lands they could. Even though as a boy Jacques had seen Tari mages do astonishing things, he had a more cynical attitude about them than most Sea-gani. He doubted that the Tari were all-wise, all-powerful and all-good the way ignorant people thought them. Probably some of their power came from sleight of hand and clever opportunism. Nonetheless he trembled to think that Scarvan might have imprisoned and even raped a Tari woman. He had seen Olbia after its destruction.

"Well, I don't see them threatening us," said Scarvan finally. "One warrior is hardly a strong response."

"Response, Highness? What are they responding to, Highness?"

"Nothing," said Prince Alexis defensively. "Anyway I see no need to fear mere legends. Pure superstition."

"Indeed, Highness, I feel sure you are right," said Jacques insincerely. "But consider, Highness. Most of my ignorant countrymen have great respect for the Tari. There would be great outrage among them if they thought a Tari woman was being misused. Or held unwillingly."

"Then it is well that it is not happening," snapped Scarvan. "You will say nothing of this meeting Jacques or I'll serve your roasted testicles up to my guests. We want no unrest during this holy time."

"I am your Highness's most discreet servant," cooed Jacques, bowing. He had heard this threat a thousand times before.

He felt very troubled in his mind and on arriving took the un-Mirayan, but not unusual, step of listening to his wife, who suggested most strenuously that she take the children and a good portion of the treasure and leave Olbia for their country estate. Sometimes she was unsatisfactorily Seagani about things. Against his express wish she still insisted on doing her own marketing instead of sending slaves to do it, and so she had heard the same rumors in the market as he had.

A superstitious woman, his wife, as women tended to be, and yet the following morning, Jacques did indeed pack his family and some of his treasure off to the country with a strong escort of trustworthy servants and slaves. He still remembered clearly the day when the Tari mages had first come to Olbia all those years ago and how his father, guessing the train of events that would follow, had put his family and

his wealth on to a ship for Ishtak—and thus saved them from what followed. He was almost certain he had managed to impress upon Prince Alexis the dangers of offending a Tari, but just in case...

Jacques' actions did not go unnoticed. In the next couple of days a number of the other Seagani merchants sent their families away too.

Chapter 9

Marigoth set out for the wool settlement very early the next morning. Only a few slaves and a couple of very late drinkers were out and no one paid any attention to a little girl with hair dyed dark, which was just how Marigoth liked it. She cut through the green market gardens surrounding the city and followed the river back up the valley to where a smelly little stream entered it. The farther she got from Olbia the less she felt that horrible muted feeling that came from the severe disharmony of the elements. She began to feel cheerfully confident that they would find Elena among the woolworkers and be able to leave this horrible place quickly.

The woolworkers lived and worked in a couple of big compounds surrounded by a high palisade of pointed wooden stakes. The first compound was quite obviously a place where wool and skins were washed. It was full of men and Marigoth was glad not to have to go into it, for it smelled thoroughly noxious.

The second compound was much bigger and appeared to contain mostly women. Mirayan soldiers patrolled a walkway along the top of the palisade, but it was an easy matter for Marigoth to make herself invisible by folding the element of air over her and slipping through the open gates. There were no magical defenses, and when she got inside she realized why. All the slaves wore iron neck manacles, so that anyone with magic powers was unable to use them. She wondered how many were mages. She knew that among non-Tari races only one in ten people had magical abilities.

At one side of the compound was a cluster of empty huts which were full of mats and blankets. All the women, scores of them, were sitting and spinning with hand spindles around several big sheds in the middle of the compound. Little girls ran among them collecting the wool in baskets. They carried them to an area by the stream where women worked huge dye vats. Skeins of colored wool hung on racks nearby.

People were moving among the spinners, obviously overseeing their work. Apart from a pair of Mirayans, who were sitting at a table looking at skeins of wool, the overseers were mostly local Seagani. The slaves were a mixture of Seagani and Mori, with the Mori dominating. Marigoth was surprised at how few people it took to keep all these women under control. She'd always thought the Mori were a spirited bunch.

She peered into the sheds. The closest were empty. This must be where the women worked when it was raining. In the others, looms had been set up and women sat pushing the shuttle back and forth across the strands. They looked thin and pale.

There was no sign of Elena anywhere. Marigoth decided to make herself visible and ask somebody. At last she found a secluded little place at the back of the fifth shed where five Mori women were weaving particularly fine wool into patterned cloth. Choosing a moment when there were no overseers about, she made herself visible. Remembering Yani's experiences, she let herself appear as a Tari with her hair its usual color.

The effect was very gratifying. A couple of the women let out screams and one dropped her shuttle. Another, more quick-witted than the rest, pulled Marigoth behind her loom just as a man poked his head around the partition and demanded to know what they thought they were doing.

The quick-witted one told him it was nothing—silly Jona had thought she'd seen a mouse, that was all. The man grunted and went away.

The women gathered round Marigoth.

“Lady, have you come to set us free?” cried one.

“Well, no,” said Marigoth bluntly. “I’ve come to find my sister Elena and her daughter.”

They looked so disappointed she was almost sorry to have said it. However there was no point stopping and explaining or apologizing. There was nothing she could do for them.

The women were helpful enough, but none of them had seen Elena, though several of them had come to Ol-bia on the same ship.

“She is not in this compound,” said the quick-witted one, whose name was Reecah. “But there are all kinds of other places she could be. This is Prince Scarvan’s compound. Some of our number went to be slaves for private merchants. To work their fields and make cloth for them.”

“Do none of you know?” asked Marigoth, cast down by this news.

They looked at each other.

“None of us have heard of her among the slaves,” said Reecah. “My guess is that she and the child are held in the fortress. She was so beautiful. And royal too.”

“Aye,” said another women. “She and the others of the queen’s family were separated from us immediately after we surrendered. Too good to be screwed through by the common soldiers.”

“Jona!” said Reecah, warningly.

“Well it’s true, isn’t it?” said Jona angrily. “I bet she didn’t have to suffer what we did that night.”

“Don’t speak of it,” hissed a third woman. “At least we are alive.”

“Well, thank you,” said Marigoth politely, seeing that some kind of argument was about to start. Most of the women simply turned back to their looms in silent anger or sadness, but Jona turned on Marigoth.

“So that’s it, is it?” she snarled. “That’s all you’re going to do for us.”

What has got into her, thought Marigoth. This isn’t how people treat Yard.

“I always knew you precious Guardians were shit and this proves it. Hah! I hope your precious Elena is working in the brothels servicing twenty filthy Mirayans a night.”

“The brothels?” asked Marigoth, not exactly sure what these were but misliking the sound of them.

“Jona!” hissed Reecah. “Don’t.”

“We thought she would be protection for us. A bond between us and the Guardians,” snarled Jona. She was almost whispering, but the effect was more angry than if she had shouted. “But you have no thought for us, do you? You never intended to come and rescue us.”

“Well, I’m sorry,” said Marigoth. The woman made her feel unpleasantly guilty, and really, why should she? Couldn’t they see she was only a little girl? She shouldn’t have to concern herself with these things. “But there are only two of us at the moment. And we had no idea that you needed rescuing. Anyway, why can’t you do it for yourselves? There are lots of you and only a few of these Mirayans guarding you. I really don’t see why you need rescuing in the first place.”

With that she stalked away, turning herself invisible in the process.

Just as she came to the door of the shed she heard screams. The door in front of her was flung open and a woman burst in dragging a girl by the hair. She threw the girl down on the floor before her and shouted something that Marigoth didn't understand. The women at the looms stopped and stared. The girl was weeping and her face was covered in blood. The shouting woman reached down and grabbed her hair again, pulling the girl to her feet. The girl screamed, clawing uselessly at her captor's hands, as the woman bashed her around the face and shoulders with a heavy stick. For a moment Marigoth was too horrified by the violence to move, but then she ran at them casting out a sleep spell.

The woman's eyes closed immediately and she slumped to the floor. The now unconscious girl fell down on top of her.

The room was filled with running figures as women raced from the looms to help the fallen girl. A couple of them kicked the sleeping woman. Marigoth understood their point of view entirely and did not stop them.

Reecah's face was frightened.

"Is she dead?" she cried. "The Lady has done this. Lady, Lady show yourself."

"Why?" said Marigoth, letting herself become visible. What a curious reaction. Why did she care so much for the brutal woman? "What do you want from me now?"

Those who had not seen Marigoth before let out the most gratifying gasps of fear.

"Lady, if you have harmed this woman we shall all be beaten, maybe even killed," cried Reecah.

"The Tari do not do harm," said Marigoth. "She shall wake when it pleases me. You should be more worried about your friend."

"We can take care of her as we have all the others," said Reecah.

"You mean this creature makes a habit of beating people in such a way? That's terrible."

"That is the sort of people our masters are," said Reecah. "That's why we dream of escape."

"Yes, you should certainly all do something about escaping. Oh, let me look at that poor creature," said Marigoth impatiently, seeing one of the women rather inexpertly examining the beaten girl. "Can't you go and get some water? Look, you foolish creatures. She has a broken shoulder. Let me." She pressed healing power into the girl's shoulder so that the bones began to knit together. She softened some of the poor creature's bruises too.

Reecah helped, but her face was glum and tears ran from her eyes.

"You are the most unappreciative person I have ever met," said Marigoth. "First you criticize me for stopping the beating and now you don't seem very happy that I have healed this girl."

"I beg pardon, lady. I am grateful. We are all grateful. I weep for our situation. When Katzan wakes up she will still remember her anger at poor Cloeda. I fear she will undo all your good work."

"Oh!" said Marigoth. How complicated it all was. She looked at the two unconscious women for a moment. "Well, how about if I remove some of this Katzan woman's memory so that she doesn't remember who she was mad at? She will probably forget quite a bit extra too. It's not easy to control how much you remove. But after all, you don't owe her any favors."

"Ha," said one of the others. "Then we can put her outside with a flagon of ale in her hand for the guards to find. She can see how she likes a taste of her own medicine then."

"Will the healer be able to see that she has had magic used on her?" asked Reecah.

"I doubt it. These Mirayans seem to have no skill at detecting Tari magic."

"Then we thank you," said Reecah. "Please do it."

This was more like it. Quickly and not very carefully, Marigoth destroyed the most recent portion of Katzan's memory. There. Now she must get going or she was going to get nothing else done.

"Perhaps you will tell me where these brothels are," she asked Reecah.

"I would not bother looking there," replied Reecah. "From what I saw when they unloaded your sister, she was being treated as a respected prisoner. They will have her somewhere in the fortress. I am certain of it... Lady, will you do *nothing* to help us?"

Marigoth was too amazed at the woman's cheek to be angry. It seemed like she had already done quite a bit and here she was asking for more.

"Like what?" she said. "I'm very busy trying to find Elena, you know."

Reecah touched the iron necklet around her neck.

"I am a mage," she said. "If you could release me, I could help people to escape. If you could just undo the lock."

This was such a simple matter that in the end Marigoth unlocked the necklets of everybody in the room.

"There," she said. "I hope you'll be able to do something for yourselves now. Don't let these Mirayans push you round. They're stupid people and you outnumber them enormously."

She accepted their thanks with what she thought was very becoming graciousness and making herself invisible again, set off across the compound and back through the walls. In her heart she was annoyed at herself for being so soft. She had a suspicion that she had used herself up helping those women and that she would now have to take a long rest before she entered the dead area around the fortress.

Yani had slept badly her first night in Olbia. Elena's possible fate haunted her. She had few illusions about the fate of women captives, but in her heart of hearts she hoped that Elena had somehow escaped rape. Surely people would respond to her beauty with kindness. In the morning her mind was full of the raven—violent thoughts beat against her skull like dark angry wings. She went down to the training ground to work away her anxieties. There was little else she could do till Marigoth discovered where Elena was being held.

For half an hour she practiced with the wooden sword and pell. She hacked and whacked at the battered wooden stake until she had built up a good sweat. Controlled movement, movement that challenged both mind and body, filled her with pleasure.

"Hey, lord," shouted a voice. "Are you angry at that pell?"

A group of fighters had gathered nearby.

Yard grinned at them. "Why? Is it a special friend of yours?"

"Oh yes," said one of them, a broad-shouldered young man with a horse tattooed on his cheekbone. "He and I are old opponents."

One of the men standing beside him dug him in the ribs.

"So who usually wins, Montek?"

There was hearty laughter. Montek cuffed him playfully.

"Want a bout, then?" asked Yani.

Montek hesitated only for a moment.

“My pleasure,” he said. “What weapons?”

“You choose.”

“Mirayan bastard sword, then.”

Mirayan bastard swords and shields were set out in a rack beside the training ground. The shields were well enough, but the swords were old, badly balanced, loose at the hilt or nicked on the blade. She thought longingly of her fine sword, Slice, handed over to the gate guard. These swords were not just the practice weapons, but the weapons the Mirayans had given the Seagani for the tournament. How shabby to give your competitors such second-rate weapons. Was this what the Mirayans called honor?

She turned and faced Montek. A nice-looking young fellow.

He was a little hesitant to engage at first, and his initial attacks were tentative. Suddenly daunted by fighting a Tari, she guessed. She'd seen it before. She attacked him firmly but not too aggressively, and he quickly picked up his pace.

The shield was new to most Seagani warriors, for the traditional Seagani weapon was either the two-handed sword or the glorified knife that horseback warriors used when their spears were lost. The bastard sword was a more subtle weapon than the two-handed Seagani sword. It lent itself better to tricks and stratagems and did not necessarily reward the stronger fighter.

It was difficult for warriors, used to two-handed weapons, to get the hang of using sword and shield together, but Montek had obviously practiced long and hard and he was quick and clever with the weapon. He was simply inexperienced in combat. It did not take long before she knocked the sword out of his hand.

“Curse it,” he said. He laughed very good-naturedly for a man who had been beaten. They shook hands.

“I told you he would be too strong for you, Montek,” said a voice from nearby. Yani looked over and, with a tingle of self-consciousness, saw Duprey, the Horse Seagani she had met on the way to Olbia. He was leaning casually against the weapons' rack. It took Yani a moment to register that he was referring to her as a man. He was going to keep her secret, then. She nodded at him and he smiled inscrutably back at her.

Yes indeed an attractive man. Keep your mind on the task at hand Yani!

Brek and Tusk stood beside him.

“A fine bout,” smiled Brek, coming over to speak with them.

“I think I have just lost to the new champion of St. Stefan's,” said Montek happily. “By Sheval, lord, you will show those Mirayans a thing or two.”

Yani looked around the field.

“I see there are men from all over Seagan,” she said.

“This tournament has replaced the old tribal gathering as a place for Seagani to meet and exchange news. They would be honored to meet you.”

“All except the Easterners,” said Tusk vindictively. “Those Gibadgee-lovers took part in the sacking of Fleurforet. They must be shitting themselves at the sight of you, lord.”

“Tusk!” snapped Brek.

“It is not normally the Tari way to exact vengeance,” said Yani carefully. “I wish no harm to the Eastern Seagani. I wish only to take my sister home.”

Duprey looked at her with approval and indeed she was quite pleased with herself to have made such

a diplomatic answer. Perhaps diplomacy was not as hard as she had feared.

On the other hand, perhaps it was not all that easy. When Brek took her over to meet the Eastern Seagani fighters, they were cool to her. She found that she liked it so. They had helped in the sacking of Fleurforet and despite her Tari beliefs, her heart felt hard against them. She watched Brek being polite in the face of their coolness and wondered how he did it. How did he square it with his own sense of honor? Part of her was uneasy with lack of self-respect and part of her recognized that here was someone who was as clever and subtle as Queen Sharma. He managed to be on good terms with all the Seagani on the field, and since the four tribes of the Seagani were legendary for their quarrelsomeness she knew that must be quite a feat. She would have been glad to have been able to trust him to advise her on how to deal best with the Mirayans, but his goals were very different from hers and she knew she must not.

As for the other Seagani, the Southern, Horse and Red Seagani, they gathered around all delighted to shake her hand. So did the men from the neighboring Mirayan-conquered islands of Domass and Ishtak.

Only a handful of Archipelogans dressed in Mirayan garb hung back.

“They are from the western island kingdoms of Bor-gon, Gallia and Tyrona,” explained Brek. Yani had heard of them. These three kingdoms still had their own rulers. When the Mirayans had first started coming to the Archipelago over a century ago, they had come as merchants not conquerors, and they had dealt with these western kingdoms with more equality. They had huge trading enclaves there, and much influence on their rulers, but they did not rule directly as they did in Southern Seagan.

When Brek took Yani over to introduce her to these people their attitude was one of haughty surprise.

“Most of the elite people of the western kingdoms have adopted the Mirayan religion,” explained Brek. “They scorn the old beliefs of their people, including, so it seems, reverence for the Tari.”

“They are lap dogs to the Gibadgee,” muttered Tusk acidly. “Fawning on them and licking their bums.”

“Plenty of our own people admire the Mirayans,” said Brek. “They have many clever ways which we would be happy to take if it were not that we have to take Scarvan and his lordlings as part of the package. These soft-bred westerners have always regarded us as savages. They see the kingdom of Prince Alexis Scarvan as a wonderful opportunity for the Seagani to be beaten into a civilized shape.”

He laughed. “It amuses me that when they come here they are treated as natives just like the rest of us and banned from wearing weapons outside St. Stefan’s field. Only a few are willing to bear that humiliation twice.”

“Does it also amuse you that they always beat the other Archipelagans in this contest?” asked Tusk bluntly. “In the western kingdoms there is no ban on weapons and they are used to fighting like Mirayans.”

“Then it will be interesting to test my training against theirs,” said Yani. She found it comforting to be back on a training ground. She knew she had far more important matters to attend to, but she couldn’t help looking forward to the tournament. The smell of dust and sweat, the jarring down your arm as your sword met another, resistance and release, the thrill of uncertainty, the feeling of pushing yourself to the limit and the high-headed feeling of your blood awoken and rushing through every part of your body: this was truly living. And so many new opponents!

A thought struck her. “Where are the Mirayans? Don’t they train here?”

“Not them,” said Brek. “They have their own training ground. Their grass is watered every night and is always green and smooth. We can go and watch them if you wish.”

“Would not the Lord stay and show us some of the tricks of the Mirayan sword?” said a young Southern Seagani.

“If you have time later, Chieftain, I would like to see the opposition,” said Yani. “Now I am all armored up and would welcome another bout or two. Will you fight me then, sir?” she asked the young man.

“I will, Lord,” said the young fighter, bowing. “And I hope you will instruct me. This is the only chance we have to use weapons. Our own weapons are always being confiscated by soldiers.”

“Then let us take it now,” said Yani, leading the way onto the field.

While Yani fought those who wished to have a bout in turn and showed them some useful tricks, the rest drilled with each other. Though all were enthusiastic and able, their lack of experience was sadly obvious. The morning passed and Yani, completely focused on fighting, was not aware of how many people she had engaged with until she recognized her next opponent as Monteak.

“You again!” she cried.

“You’ve fought everyone else once,” said Monteak.

Yani pulled off her helmet, aware of being hot and sweaty.

“Well then,” she said. “I think I’ll have a drink.”

Monteak laughed and waved to a boy who was carrying a bucket of water and a mug. The two of them shared the mug of water.

“Well, look at that,” said Monteak, waving at a figure at the side of the field. “Old Duprey’s still standing there watching. He’s usually off gathering information for my uncle.”

“Does he fight at all?”

“Oh yes,” said Monteak. “He’s a fine man on horseback. Just not very fast on his pins. An old injury inflicted by the Gibadgee.” His tone became bitter. “His father was a Mirayan merchant and my aunt was his second wife. A scandal. Mirayans don’t usually lower themselves to marry natives, even highborn ones like my aunt. When Duprey’s father died, the Gibadgee sons of the first wife accused Duprey of theft so that he couldn’t inherit his share of the property. The court ordered his left leg tendons cut. That’s what they do to thieves, the Gibadgee dogs. Ruined him as a fighter. Mind you, he’s a clever fellow. Knows how to handle people.”

Yani looked over at Duprey with interest. Their eyes met for a moment. They shared a secret, her secret. It gave her a pleasurable feeling. Would he use the secret to get closer to her? Now, there was an interesting thought!

“I met up with him on my way here,” she said.

“You’ve met Duprey before?”

“He didn’t say?”

Monteak grinned. “No, but come to think of it he’s been very pleased about something the last couple of days. The old devil. He likes to have secrets. So now, may we fight, or have we finally exhausted you?”

Yani fought until midday, when Brek brought another man over to meet her.

This was Anscom, a tall straight-backed old warrior who was the father of Monteak and brother of Chieftain Rayner of the Northern, or Horse, Seagani. Because Scarvan was High Chief of the Seagani, the Horse Seagani owed him allegiance. So far they had been forced to accept a Mirayan ambassador and pay tribute, but otherwise they were still independent.

Duprey came with them. It seemed Duprey was also related to the Horse Seagani chief, the son of his sister. This made him Anscom's nephew and Montek's cousin. He was obviously an important person in the tribe.

They stood for some time talking and discussing the young fighters. The Southern Seagani were quite obviously the weakest with the Mirayan sword. They and the Horse Seagani trained together. The Eastern Seagani always kept aloof from everybody at this tournament.

"Gibadgee-lovers," snorted Tusk.

"Hush," said Brek. "Be careful, Tusk. The Mirayans are over there watching us. We don't want them to decide that we need a lesson in respect."

"No doubt they are here to see how we natives shape up," said Anscom. "Look there's Duke Wolf."

The swine who had led the raid on Fleurforet! A rush of anger filled Yani. She was almost unwilling to look at him lest her anger cause her to lunge uncontrollably at him. But he was so small and ordinary—a compact soldierly man without any outward sign of evil. She heard the singing of the life spirit in her head. He is just being of the spirit like you it said. Such thoughts always made it hard for her to truly hate people.

He was staring at her. Did he see some resemblance to Elena? Could this be a problem?

At that moment a movement in the sky above caught her eye.

A sea hawk was flying low over the field. Her eyes were so drawn to it that, though she had little ability to sense magic, she was certain it must be magical. Mari-goth, with any luck!

She was just about to make her excuses to leave when Tusk said, "Here comes trouble."

A Southern Seagani man dressed in Mirayan clothes came swaggering across the field toward them. Behind him were several other Seagani, some of them without tattoos, dressed in the same manner. The men all around her tensed.

"Dooat, the slimy rogue," muttered Brek under his breath. He stepped forward and held out his hands in greeting.

"Dear cousin," he said. "How goes it?"

"Well indeed, chieftain," said the swaggering Seagani. The whole group of them bowed very sketchily to Brek. "Your interests in Olbia flourish under my hands, as I am of course, devoted in my duty to you."

"I have been in Olbia this three days, cousin," said Brek gently. "And always my ear is at your service."

"I come on behalf of the high chief, my master," said Dooat, ignoring the reproach. "Much to my willingness, for I am most anxious to kneel before our fine Tari visitor."

"I have no wish to be knelt to," said Yani quickly. She shook hands politely with Dooat.

"My master, the high chief, wishes to have speech with you," said Dooat.

Elena's captor! Now, here was luck!

"I would be very honored," said Yani. "I shall return to my tent, put off my armor and wash in readiness."

"My master cannot brook such a delay. He is a busy man and wishes to see you immediately."

"In all my dirt? Then I am at his service," said Yani.

Brek made to come with them, but Dooat waved him back.

"Not you, chieftain. My master said the Tari only."

The rudeness in his tone shocked Yani. Tusk gripped the hilt of his sword angrily, but Brek's face remained expressionless.

As Yani followed Doocat and his entourage away, she noticed that both Duprey and Tusk had fallen in behind the group.

She was led to the tent that yesterday had been occupied by the Master of Lists. Today, however, it was decorated with gold lacing and swathes of blue silk. A large gilded chair with carved designs stood on a dais in its center. Behind it hung a huge banner embroidered with a red dragon.

On it sat the high chief, Prince Alexis Scarvan. He was flanked by four impassive guards, two of whom wore robes and no armor. These must be the famous fighting mages of Miraya. Several other Mirayan noblemen stood nearby. Aquiline noses, fair hair and pale blue eyes predominated. The Mirayans were all tall.

Prince Alexis Scarvan was a big, broad-shouldered bull of a man who had probably once been a capable warrior, but whose body had now run to fat through age and good living. There was a splash of something brown on one of his sleeves and a faint scent of old sweat and dirt came off him. Imagine having him up close, thought Yani. She had a sudden, unwelcome vision of a big red penis smelling of stale urine and suppressed it savagely.

Despite her revulsion she managed a good court bow.

Scarvan's manner was hearty—almost avuncular—yet his eyes were cold.

“Greetings, Yani Tari. You're one of these mysterious people I have heard so much about. They told me you were all mages.”

“Many of us are, Highness,” said Yani. “Those with no skill at magecraft must follow other arts.”

“And very bravely too, so I hear.” The group of men standing around him all nodded and smiled, though their eyes were as cold as his. “I am well pleased that we are drawing such fine young fighters from among the natives. It gives great honor to St. Stefan. I hope you will carry our greetings home with you when you go. However, my Master of Lists tells me you insist upon fighting for one that we do not hold captive. This concerns me. If we do not hold your sister prisoner, she cannot be released at St. Stefan.”

“I was told she was in Olbia, Highness. Do you have no idea where she is? My people are wealthy and would pay well for her release.”

“I have never seen her,” said Scarvan.

“That is suprising. I had heard you were at Fleurforet when she was captured, Highness.”

The high chief flushed. “Are you questioning my word, Tari?”

“Oh no, Highness,” she bowed again. “Forgive me, please. That was never my intention. I long only to find my sister.”

“Well, she is not in Olbia.”

“Then if it does not displease your Highness, it is my wish to fight in her honor anyway. Perhaps someone in the crowd will know of her whereabouts and come forward.”

“I honor your family feeling of course, but I fear you are wasting your time, Tari. Would you not be better helping the others fight for their own prisoners? Is it not the way of the Tari to help the Seagani? Is that not why they call you lord?”

“They call me lord because they wisely fear the power of my people. But we have withdrawn from the other Arch-ipelagans since the incident of the three mages and have no intention to change, Highness. Indeed we have never concerned ourselves with the politics of outsiders. The only reason I have come

here is to find my sister. When I do, we shall return to our homeland and will no longer have any interest in what goes on outside its borders.”

By this time many of the Mirayans in the tent were looking outraged, but High Chief Scarvan simply said,

“Then I wish you the best for your task, though I doubt you will accomplish it here. You may go.”

Yani bowed from his presence and found herself outside the tent among more angry looking Mirayans. She was shaken by the strength of her revulsion, but she managed to smile blandly at them. Queen Sharma had said that the one with the power always smiles.

Tusk was loitering nearby. When Yani reached him, he clapped her shoulder heartily.

“I did not hear what you said, but, by Nezhrus, you have annoyed the Mirayans,” he said. “Does my heart good to see it. But watch your back. They are longing to give you a beating.”

Duprey suddenly appeared from around the back of the tent.

“You go and tell Brek that Yani is safe,” he told Tusk. “I’ll walk with him back to his tent.”

Tusk nodded and went off toward the Archipelagan training ground.

“No native has refused Scarvan so bluntly for many a year,” said Duprey.

“If he does not hold Elena captive, why should that worry me?” said Yani.

“Well, there is a small matter of Mirayan prestige,” said Duprey dryly. “Tusk is right. You should watch your back now. You know it wonders me,” he continued, “that your people have not sent a large force looking for Elena Tari.”

Yani had long schooled herself to answer this question, but now she found it hard to meet Duprey’s eyes. He was too clever!

“They do not want to cause too much disturbance.”

“Or is it that when Elena Mori married an outsider they cut themselves off from her?”

It was exactly the excuse she was going to make when pressed. She was relieved he had lit upon it himself. Did he believe the excuse? She must act as if it were true.

“I will tell you no more of my secrets,” she said quickly, keeping her eyes down. “You know enough of them already. I would be grateful to you for keeping them to yourself.”

He nodded briefly, then asked, “Is it true what you said to Scarvan? That you will go home and turn your back on us again when you have Elena?”

“Those were words for the Mirayans, yet it is true that I must see my sister safe before I do anything else,” said Yani.

“I too would not leave someone I loved in captivity any longer than necessary. I understand,” said Duprey, and Yani saw that he did.

“But I do not think I can go back to Dania and forget all I have seen here. The Mirayans have no business ruling with such a hard hand.”

“They came to the farm after you left that morning and burned down the barn to repay the family for sheltering you.”

“What!”

“Aye. They would have raped the little daughter as well, but your Mirayan friend stepped in and stopped them. Very decent of him I thought.”

“Oh, curse their miserable hides! The bastards! I begin to hate every Mirayan I see.”

“There is much to hate.”

Yani stood still for a moment and breathed in deeply.

“There must be decent Mirayans who act with honor,” she said. “It is the law of the life spirit. But where are they?”

“I wish you were right but I think there are none. At least none who act with honor toward us. There can be little honor between mortal enemies.”

“I cannot believe you are right,” said Yani. “A true warrior cares for justice.”

Duprey gave a wry smile. “I wish I believed that possible. Did the mage catch up with you in the end?”

“I owe you an apology about him,” said Yani. “I never expected him to be a man of honor, but he was even worse... He acted in much the way you had warned. I should have taken your warning seriously.”

Duprey dropped his voice. “Did you have to kill him?”

Yani grinned. “Oh no. My sister has enslaved him.”

“Your sister?”

“Do not be too curious, Seagani. The mage was curious and you will see how he is served. If he has finished washing my clothes, he will draw me a bath and bring us food. I do not ask him to do these things. He insists and is as grateful as a dog that I allow him to serve me.”

Duprey grinned and his whole body relaxed. “Poor haughty fellow.”

Yani smiled at him but there was no laughter in her eyes. After a moment she said, “I am deeply shamed that I brought such trouble down on those people and was not there to protect them.”

The grin had softened Duprey’s whole manner.

“Do not be troubled,” he said consolingly. “It was better that you were not there. Even if you had won against the six of them, the family would have had to go into exile. The farmer lost his hay crop, but no one else was hurt. When Montek came we took the girls to relatives, a day’s walk away, that they might be safe, in case the lord’s bully boys had got a yen for their flesh. Sometimes it is best to just lie still and take the kicking so you can still rise up on the morrow. I know Marten the farmer will work even harder against his Mirayan lord after this.”

Yani looked at him with interest. “I am not sure I could follow such a path, but I can see there is courage in it.”

“You are the first warrior I ever met who admitted that much,” said Duprey.

“Warriors are not subtle creatures.”

“I think you subtle enough, Yani Tari,” said Duprey. “You play your role well. Everyone is convinced by it. Yet it amazes me that no one else has guessed your secret, for to me you are far too fair to be a man.”

The look in his eyes when he said this sent a tingle down Yani’s spine. Be careful, she told herself.

Yet she could not help turning away with a swing of her hips and saying, with a glance back over her shoulder, “Come along, then!” in a tone of voice that made Duprey stare most satisfactorily.

That afternoon was cool and overcast, cool enough for many Mirayans to be on the training field. Yani, Brek, Tusk and Anscom watched the Mirayans training, commenting learnedly on the skills of the

warriors. Duprey kept himself a little aloof. Yani was not sure why but she was glad of it. She was tempted to flirt with him and that temptation must be squashed.

Perhaps he'd been disturbed by the sight of the enslaved Ezratah who had served them food and drink when they had reached her tent. Yani yearned to tell him it had not been her choice. She didn't know why she should care but she did. Actually it seemed a good idea for him to be a little afraid of what could be done. He might be a fascinating man, but now was not the time to get entangled.

She concentrated on being manly and warrior-like.

"Monteak is better than these fellows," she commented as one particularly weak pair of Mirayan fighters traded blows on the field before them.

"Yes, he beat all the other Archipelagans last year," said Anscom. "It did him no good. We do not fight the Mirayans until the very end, when the champion of the Archipelagans fights the champion of the Mirayans. They do not wish to see native scum beat one of their mighty selves."

"They act like a people who do not feel entirely safe," said Yani.

"As well they should," said Anscom. "Upland away from Olbia there is always trouble. Ever since the Shaman Edict there have been small rebellions all over upland Sea-gan. The rebels and the shamans usually find safety across the border in Northern Seagan. It is not a good thing for we northerners."

"Are you not under Mirayan overlordship?" asked Yani.

"Not yet," said Anscom bitterly. "We merely have to give the high chief ever more sheep as tribute. Apparently the worth of sheep goes down every year. We fear it will not be long before we come under direct rule. Already Lord Serranus, Scarvan's man on our border, has strolled into our territory several times without even a by-your-leave. 'To rid us of rebels.'"

"So he says," said Brek.

"That is Serranus over there," said Anscom. "The little short fellow. They say he is cruel because he is short like an Archipelagan and fears to be taken for one of us." The others laughed while looking carefully over their shoulders. "The sprig beside him is Georgi Serranus. Butcher of Cesane. They say he has tried to kill his father. We hope he doesn't succeed. The father is a hound, but the son is a mad dog."

"And that long tall stick beside him is Lord Appius," said Brek. "Not cruel, but greedy. You'd think a man who had gobbled up so much of our lands and flocks would be fatter."

"Who is that blond giant near him?" asked Yani, her eye drawn to a strikingly handsome man on the other side of the field.

"He is Prince Stefan Krysantium He's the Mirayan champion and cousin of our Hierarch." said Duprey, who seemed to know everything. "The Hierarch is the Mirayan religious leader."

"Mirayan champion?" cried Anscom. "But why? Monteak was not that good last year." He shook his head. "That's the Mirayans for you. Use a sledge hammer to kill a flea."

"He's a big man," said Brek. "He probably relies too much on his strength. I bet you could take him, lord."

"I hope I get the chance to try," said Yani, her eyes shining. To beat the Mirayan champion! Now that would be something. And she was certain it would be a challenging fight. No one became champion by relying on strength alone.

She was right. When the big man had his practice bout, he was impressively light on his feet. Within five minutes he had disarmed his opponent with breathtaking skill. There was clapping and cheering all around the field.

A Mirayan servant came up to the fence before Yani's group and bowed politely.

“Prince Krysantium wonders if any of you gentlemen would be interested in a bout with him.”

“Far too polite. Obviously new in the country.” muttered Duprey. But Yani wasn’t listening.

“I would,” she cried.

“No!” cried the others. But it was too late. Yani had vaulted over the fence and was striding over to the prince.

“Sweet Nezhrus,” moaned Brek. “How are we ever going to keep this fellow alive long enough to fight?”

“He’ll beat him easily,” gloated Tusk.

“That’s what we’re afraid of, you bonehead,” said Brek, exasperated. “Then what will the Mirayans do?”

On the other side of the field Stefan Krysantium held out his big hand to Yani.

“You honor me,” he said in trade talk as he shook it. It was obviously some kind of ritual greeting, but at the same time he looked like he genuinely meant it. When they went over to the weapons rack he was genuinely concerned that they find her the best sword, and since she did not have her own sword with her, he decided to fight with a practice weapon as well. Here was a true war-rior-someone, like her, who lived for the joy of the fight. A man of honor too—one to whom acting rightly was more important than selfish and practical considerations. It was like a ray of light through the dark morass of politics that she was living in.

The weapons in the Mirayan rack were good. As she took a little time to admire the blades, there was a flurry of movement behind them, and a couple of priests seized Stefan Krysantium’s arm and began speaking to him quickly in Mirayan. Annoyance clouded the big man’s face. For a moment he argued. Then he put down his weapon.

“The rules of St. Stefan forbid natives and Mirayans fighting outside the contest,” said one of the priests brusquely to Yani in trade talk. “Get back to your place.”

The rudeness of his tone made both Yani and the big champion flush. However, there was nothing to it but to return to her place at the sidelines.

“As if their church has any say over us,” said Tusk angrily when she told the others what had happened.

“Let’s go,” said Brek, taking Yani’s arm. “If you will forgive me, lord, that was not the wisest thing you’ve done. If you were to beat their champion they would probably have you killed tonight. If you ever do beat him, leave Olbia immediately.”

“If you say so,” said Yani. “But the champion seemed like an honorable man. I would have liked to test his mettle.”

“Then you had best win your bouts, lord. In a more public show there may be more safety.”

“If Elena is here I will find her,” thought Marigoth, gritting her teeth and facing the daunting web of blue magic. She had lain in Yani’s tent all afternoon in a meditative trance, supposedly to marshal her strength, but really because she was afraid of the horrible weakness that came within the city. When it had gotten dark she set out for the fortress, only to discover that carts were no longer going in and out of it. Perhaps she should go back to the tent and try again in the morning.

No. She was putting it off and while she did so, poor Elena suffered from not knowing that they were near. She hung around by the gate and was finally rewarded when a cart of dancing girls and acrobats

came up. They made a perfect disguise for a little girl. She was able to slip invisibly onto the back of their cart, unfold the air and make herself visible as they passed through the magical protection barrier.

There seemed to be mercifully little magical protection within the fortress walls. Marigoth couldn't help being impressed by the size of the place. Where to start looking?

Ezratah had said that the dungeon would be somewhere under the fortress, so Marigoth wandered around invisibly and peered through cellar grilles and doors. There were wooden stables all around the inside of the walls, and twice she almost bumped into horse handlers.

After a while she began to feel as if she were walking upstream in a shallow river. As with everything else here, the elements of the life spirit were completely out of harmony and hard to draw on. She was getting tired just maintaining her invisibility.

Looking for a hidden place in which to rest, she went through an open door that led to the kitchens. Inside, it was boiling hot and filled with people running madly here and there as they labored to serve courses of a considerable feast. She swiped several apple tarts and some fruit from one of the side tables, then went down a corridor and found a couple of locked doors. She used a little spell to unlock one. Her night vision was quite good and she found herself in a storage room among piles of potatoes and sacks of flour. She made herself visible, sat down on one of the flour sacks and ate her food. The food cheered her up, but she still felt discouraged and worn out, and no closer to finding the dungeons. At this rate it was going to be a very slow search. She'd only been invisible an hour or so.

She curled up on a pile of old sacks and went to sleep. When she woke she felt better. The clatter and bustle of the nearby kitchen had gone now. It was probably around midnight. If she was careful she might be able to walk around without being invisible. That was the beauty of being a little girl. No one noticed you; or if they did, they didn't worry about you, so you could do anything you liked.

Her good night vision came in handy again as she made her way down the black corridor to the kitchen. Even so, she narrowly missed treading on a sleeping scullion. The kitchen fire was now a red glow of banked embers. She picked her way through the sleeping bodies lying around the room. The kitchen door was not magically protected, so she was able to walk through it, but she felt the effort.

Beyond was a dark corridor. At the end of that a wooden stairway led up to the second floor of the fortress. Fortunately the door here was open. She pushed aside the hanging and came into a huge hall. The fire was banked up in here too. In its light she could make out the sleeping forms of people and dogs huddled all over the floor and benches. Didn't these people have beds to go to? The floor itself seemed to be strewn with some kind of plant matter. A faint rank odor came up from it.

Dirty Mirayan beasts, thought Marigoth with satisfaction. Ignoring the occasional sleepy mumble, she picked her way around the wall until she found a door. She walked through it and, to her great delight, found a spiral of stone stairs that led both up and down.

The stairwell was well lit, and going down it she heard the sound of talking in a room below. Peering in, she saw three soldiers sitting at their ease at a table, chatting and drinking some kind of steaming drink. She wondered for a moment if the dungeons were in the room beyond them—but Ezratah had said dungeons were likely to be under a fortress, so she slipped down past them.

Soon enough she smelled a nasty animal-like odor of damp earth soaked with stale urine. The prison Yani had been locked in at Lamartaine had had a similar stench. She hurried down and peered carefully around the bottom of the stairs. By the light of a candle she could see a skinny man, sitting with his feet up on the table and his eyes closed. He could not have been doing more than just dozing in that position. Beyond him was a dark corridor lit with torches. She sat down, rested for a while. She was damp and shaking. Ridiculous to be afraid of a bunch of stupid Mirayans, she scolded herself. It must be the excitement of finding the place that was making her shiver. Yes, that was it. It was the excitement.

Taking a deep and quickly regretted breath of that foul air, she folded the air around herself, became

invisible again and walked down the corridor. There must have been about twenty cells in all. She peered through the grille on each door. It was so dark in the cells, she had to use magic to see. There were people lying asleep in most of them. None were women.

She became more and more tired and again her spirits fell. The deadness of the great stone walls pressed heavily on her. It began to seem impossible that she would ever find Elena.

At the end of the corridor were a couple of cells with windows. An old man was lying on a wooden bench in one of these. An oil lamp burned on a stool beside him. Marigoth could hear the sound of his rasping breathing even outside the door. He did not sound long for this world. Curiously she pushed herself through the door and into the cell. The old man's eyes were closed. His face was the pale color of parchment, with blue veins showing through and a blue horse tattoo on his cheek. A Horse Seagani and one with magical powers too.

"Old man," said Marigoth softly. "Old man."

The old man opened his eyes. He shivered a little.

"Have you come to take me?" he rasped. His breath held the scent of rotting lungs.

Marigoth was mystified. "No," she said. "I just wanted to know something. Is Elena Tari, widow of Eldene Mori, here in this fortress?"

The old man stared at her till she almost feared he might have died.

At last he said, "There are no women in this place. I would have heard the guards making merry with them if there were. Why have you come here, Guardian?"

"I told you. To find my sister," said Marigoth testily.

The old man grimaced and suddenly began to cough thunderously, shuddering all over. It almost seemed as if his lungs would explode and he would suffocate and die as she watched.

She put her hands on his chest and looked within. It was a mess. Disease had turned his lungs into masses of scars and the remaining lung flesh was sore and inflamed. Marigoth could see traces of blue magic within. Had they been trying to heal him or trying to make him sick? She was inclined to believe healing, but if that was it, they hadn't done a very good job. She let a little healing magic flow out of her to soothe the inflamed places. The old man stopped gasping for air and lay back.

"I remember..." he said.

"Yes?" said Marigoth eagerly.

"I remember Tari healing. How soft and good it is." He closed his eyes as if exhausted. "How could you abandon us?" he murmured. "It was not our crime. And now the Mirayans..." Tears leaked from behind his eyelids. "They will destroy us."

"Do you know where my sister is?" demanded Marigoth, irritated by this display. She was tired and her knees shook from the effort of healing the old man. Was he going to be just like the women in the wool factory and want more and more? Did none of them notice that she was just a child?

"No," said the old man, continuing to weep. "Are the gods dead or have they just turned away? I no longer feel them here."

Suddenly Marigoth felt sorry for the poor old fellow.

He would die and return to the Circle of Life soon, and these must be hard thoughts to have at such a moment.

"The life force is weak in this place," she said. "That is all. Your gods are well and wait to welcome you to a better place." She continued in this vein for a while, but tears continued to trickle out from under

his lids. Marigoth was inclined to run away and leave this difficult situation. Surely no one could blame a little girl for acting so. She could not bring herself to do it, however. Instead she thought up a way to help. It involved her using up her magic on him. Of course!

“Feel the life spirit in me,” she said, putting her hand on his brow and letting the life spirit flow through her into him. This seemed to relieve his mind and he stopped crying. “Rest now,” she said softly. “Sleep.”

When he fell asleep, she was so exhausted she crawled into a corner of the cell and fell asleep on the dirty straw. She only woke a few hours later at the sound of someone opening the door. Luckily the guard was too intent on the old man to notice Marigoth in the shadows. She folded the air around herself and watched with sleepy eyes as he felt the old man’s pulse.

He swore, muttered something in his own language and threw the old man’s wrist down in obvious disgust. He stomped away, closing the door behind him.

She went over. The old man was clearly dead. She was disturbed and saddened by the sight of this last great mystery. After dying in this place, had his soul rejoined the great Circle of Life? How sad and alone his death had been. Did all non-Tari die like that?

But gray light was leaking in the window and she still had a lot of the fortress to explore.

Still invisible she pushed open the door and went out, causing the jailer to drop the basket of bread he was carrying and say a fearful prayer.

Chapter 10

It was the morning of the tournament. Yani rarrthrough the fighter’s camp. The sweat on her skin and the flowing of blood through her veins unclogged muscles tightened by troubled night thoughts. It was very early. Few people were stirring. The grass was slippery with dew. The morning air was cold, but clear sky over the hills promised a hot day.

She reached St. Stefan’s field and jogged round it. In the center of the field she stopped and looked up at the fortress.

Elena, she thought. Elena I am here and soon you will be free. Today I will fight my best for you.

By the time she’d run back to her tent, the warrior’s camp was beginning to wake up. Ezratah was waiting. He’d drawn water for her to wash in, and when she had finished washing and had dressed, he presented her with breakfast, delicious egg-pancakes that he had brought from the tavern. Ezratah was not much of a cook. He had begged her with tears in his eyes to teach him, but there was just no time, so he had to be content with buying the food. The evidence that he was trying to learn cooking touched her. Perhaps when he was freed again, he’d thank them for new skills learned, but somehow she doubted it.

She sensed Ezratah tensing and looked up. Duprey was leaning against a tent pole nearby watching them. She felt a tingle of reckless excitement.

Cool down, Yani, she told herself as she beckoned him over. You shouldn’t trust any of these men. They want something from you and you mustn’t give it to them.

This made things hard; she felt for the Seagani. There was no doubt that the Mirayans treated them unjustly. Her commitment to Elena meant that she could not get involved in Seagani problems, but her sense of honor drew her to their cause.

Take last night. The tavern had been full of women and children seeking the Tari's life blessing. And it had seemed so innocently right to agree when Brek asked her to make herself available in the town later today as well, to bless more people. She saw unease in Duprey's eyes when she agreed. Why? There had been no chance to ask him last night. She was glad of the opportunity now.

"I wondered last night if it was a good idea," he explained. "If we have a meeting in the town for you to give people blessings, the Mirayans may decide you are a religious leader. On the other hand our womenfolk are annoying the city watch by trying to get onto St. Stefan's field to see you, and a meeting will certainly alleviate that situation."

"I have a thing to ask you too," he continued. "You seemed disturbed last night when the bard played that song of Murrawayee of the fatal beauty. Did it make you think of your sister? Does she have this fatal beauty?"

Yani looked at him in astonishment. How well he had guessed it. The thought that he understood her was oddly exhilarating, like meeting a good opponent.

"I cannot really say if it is fatal beauty," she said at last. "She's my sister. Her face is so familiar. But she is very beautiful. Men have always followed her around. Only Eldene had a chance to know her without being distracted by her looks. He was a good man." She sighed.

"And where exactly did they meet?" asked Duprey casually. She looked up and saw a smile in his eyes. Yani could not help grinning. "He met her where he met her."

Duprey laughed good-humoredly at her evasion.

Ezratah must have heard him laugh, for suddenly he came bustling out of the tent.

"Time to be putting on your armor, lord," he said. His jealousy was palpable.

"Fair enough," said Yani. "Will you wait, Duprey?"

"Indeed I will. I have a gift for you from the women of Seagan," he said.

"What is it?" asked Yani.

"When you have put your armor on," said Duprey.

"I don't like that man," muttered Ezratah as Yani came into the tent. "I'm sure he means you ill, lord."

"Well, I like him. I'd be upset if any harm came to him by any action or inaction of yours, Ezratah."

Ezratah's scowl showed her that she had been right to speak. More politics. Why was everything so complicated?

Ezratah helped her strap on her armor. Then she called Duprey into the tent and he brought out his gift, a length of dark green silk hemmed so that it could be draped around her as a cloak.

"It's magnificent!" cried Yani. "But how can I take such a costly gift?"

"Four merchant women made it for you," he said. "They wanted you to look well on the field of St. Stefan. If you come to the tavern tonight, I will introduce you to them and you may thank them yourself with a blessing."

"I am not worthy of such attentions. Warriors are despised among the Tari!"

"*They* do not see things so—they want to show their love for the Tari. They hope you will show the gift to the rest of your people so that their hearts might be softened."

Yani turned her face away in shame. This was so hard. She must try and do something for these people.

"Are their hearts so cold to us?" asked Duprey.

“I have little hope,” she said softly. Then she straightened her back. “But I will do what I can.”

A horn sounded nearby.

“There is the first call to arms,” said Duprey.

He shook out the silk and arranged it artistically over her shoulders. His touch and the feel of the silk on her neck was delightful. She smiled up at him and he looked down at her, his eyes wide. The air between them became charged with meaning.

“Lord,” said Ezratah, suddenly thrusting his hand dangerously into Duprey’s face so that he pulled away. “Here is a brooch. Let me fix it for you.”

Somehow he got the corners of the silk away from Duprey, pushed himself in between the two of them and fastened the brooch, frowning ferociously all the time.

“Thank you, Ezratah,” said Yani, gently touching his hand. The mage flushed bright red. “Will you get my circlet?”

“Yes, lord!”

Ezratah scurried away, leaving Yani and Duprey to swap amused glances.

“Don’t laugh,” said Yani. “It’s cruel.”

“Aye,” said Duprey. “Tell me. How protective is this other sister of yours?”

“Ezratah tried to put an enchantment on me and she made it backfire onto him. But I can’t imagine why you ask,” she continued, eyes twinkling.

“Just curious,” said Duprey coolly.

Ezratah returned and handed Yani a circlet of fresh green leaves, which she placed on her head. Marigoth had put a little charm on it so that they stayed fresh always.

Ezratah and Duprey stood back to survey her. Her garb beneath the armor was dark and beneath it she wore a plain chain mail tunic. Yet the green silk and the fresh green circlet around her helmet contrasted strikingly with her pale hair and skin and made her glow with unearthly magnificence.

“You look like the Queen of Battles,” murmured Duprey. “Like Marguerre, Goddess of War, incarnate.”

Yani threw back her head and laughed.

“What a smooth tongue you have, Duprey,” she said. She shouldn’t flirt with the man, but somehow it was impossible to resist. It added to the excitement of the day.

“Honored to please you, lord,” said Duprey. Suddenly he put out his hand and touched her cheek lightly with his fingertips. “I bid you good fighting today.”

Then he turned and went quickly away through the door.

The tournament of St. Stefan began with a glittering parade. Over fifty warriors, in armor and weapons polished to their highest shine, marched out onto the field before the grandstands. All saluted the high chief. The Mirayans’ mail shirts and plate helmets were bright and magnificent, and they wore silk or fine linen surcoats embroidered with their family emblems. The Eastern Archipelagan fighters also looked very grand, though the shabby borrowed weapons belted at their waists looked odd against their finery. The Seagani fighters could not compete with such splendor, but they had decorated themselves with their best copper jewelery and braided their flowing hair with colored threads. Yani gleamed in her emerald green cloak, like an unearthly jewel in an iron brooch. She drew many uneasy glances from the

Mirayans, who believed green was unlucky, the color of evil magic.

The warriors bowed to High Chief Scarvan and assembled proudly into neat ranks in the middle of the field. Then a group of mages came onto the field and locked iron neck manacles around the warriors' necks to keep them from using illicit magic during the combat. While it was unlikely that any mage could have used magic wearing chain mail, because of their experience of civil war and death magic in Miraya, the Mirayans were immensely cautious. The neck manacles were much thinner and lighter than slave manacles and were locked onto both Mirayans and Archipelagans.

After the mages had filed off, a group of Mirayan clergy in black-and-white robes led by a priest in gold and white came out and blessed field by sprinkling water from a bowl at each of its four corners. The chief priest led a brief prayer in Mirayan, and everyone on the field bowed their heads. Out of politeness Yani joined them.

In the first draw she had been matched against one of the strongest of the Archipelagan fighters, a man from the Tyronic Kingdoms with flaming red hair and expensive armor. The Tyroni might be very Mirayanized, but they knew who the Guardians were.

The man came up to a page standing near her and said loudly. "Can it be safe to fight one of the Guardians?"

The Mirayan page looked confused by this question, but Yani knew from experience that people were sometimes afraid of Tari vengeance if she was hurt. "No one protects me but my own sword, sir," she said. "That is my true word as one of the Guardians. Pray, do not hold back lest you dishonor me."

The man nodded and went away, looking relieved. The Mirayan page looked more confused than ever.

At the beginning of each bout the two opponents marched onto the field together, bowed to the high chief and announced whom they fought for. First two Mirayan warriors fought and then two Archipelagan ones and so on.

The cool of the morning was the easiest time to fight, but Yani's session was one of the last. She sat quietly and watched. There were a couple of fighters against whom she would have liked to pit her blade, but unfortunately most of them were Mirayans.

Stefan Krysantium fought in the second bout. He fought magnificently and won his fight easily, though his opponent was very good. Once his bout was over he strolled back to the competitors' enclosure and sat on the bench near Yani. Mirayans and Archipelagans kept very separate, and his coming unbalanced this pattern. He struck up a conversation with Yani which pleased her. She could not help enjoying the proximity of this big man. It was more than just the physicality of two athletes together. He made her feel small, an unusual and slightly titillating experience for Yani, who was always stronger than everybody else. The two of them talked about armor, training and the ongoing bouts.

As they talked Yani could feel disapproval radiating from the Seagani around them. It was a pity. Krysantium was obviously interested in breaking down the barriers between the Seagani and the Mirayans. She was pleased to see that at least some Mirayans were capable of acting well.

In the middle of the morning there was a break in the contest.

The high chief called Anscom to his side.

"You'd best tell your Gibadgee friend to go back to his side of the square," hissed Montek in Yani's ear. "This may be trouble." Yani glared at Montek. His words seemed petty.

Krysantium did not need telling. Tension was thick in the competitor's square and when Anscom returned the news was bad. Killon, the chief shaman for whom all the Horse Seagani were fighting, had died during the night. Anscom, discouraged, sat with his head in his hands.

“They have killed him,” cried Monteak angrily. “They have killed him so that the Holy Line of Sheval will be broken and the sacred bowl lost forever.”

“Quiet, lad!” said Anscorn, sitting bolt upright and speaking sternly. “Prison was no place for a son of the Great Stallion and now he has escaped it. The Mirayans can do what they like but they will never break the Holy Line. They have offered us the body for burial so I doubt they have killed him. Five years in one of their prisons doubtless accomplished that.”

Anscorn told the other Horse Seagani that they should not withdraw from the contest, but should continue to fight in Killon’s honor. Apart from two young men who were close kindred of Killon and insisted on accompanying his body home, it was a popular suggestion.

“We will show the Mirayans that they have not broken the spirit of the Northern Horsemen,” cried Monteak.

Brek went to ask the high chief if there could be a break in the tournament for all the Seagani to show honor to the shaman, as was proper. The high chief would not hear of it.

“Your fighters must fight today or not at all,” he said sternly. “This is no longer a country of shamans.”

It was a scorching bright day with no wind to stir the canopy over the stifling grandstands. For Duke Wolf Madraga this first morning of St. Stefan’s was a test of endurance. Time spent in earshot of Hierarch Jeromsh always made him want to punch something and this day he was unlucky enough to be sitting in the stands right in front of him.

“What a marvelous turnout,” burred the hierarch yet again, fanning himself vigorously with his little wooden fan. “It looks like every Seagani male in the town has come. A triumph. I really think we are finally getting somewhere with these heathens.”

Wolf Madraga groaned inwardly. What a fool! How could someone so out of touch with ordinary people hope to minister to their spiritual needs? Did he not realize that you couldn’t force people to change their religion; that even though you destroyed a people’s places of worship and forced them to attend your churches, it didn’t actually mean they had truly become Mirites? How could Scarvan let such a man dictate policy?

Of course he knew the reason. Scarvan despised the title of high chief. He wanted recognition for his kingdom from the Patriarch in Miraya. Only Mir could truly bestow crowns and only a good report from the hierarch, who also happened to be the patriarch’s cousin (for how else could such a foolish man have gained such high office?) could cause the Mirayan patriarch to announce that Alexis Scarvan was to be called King of Seagan by God’s will. Patriarchal recognition would make his son’s succession easier and give his rule legitimacy back in Miraya. Personally Wolf would have done without the legitimacy. A king needed subjects more than he needed patriarchs, and there were still a lot more Seagani in Seagan than there were Mirayans.

Just at that moment the real reason that all these Seagani spectators had come out for the St. Stefan’s contest strode onto the field to the sound of wild cheers. Yani Tari.

He stood before Scarvan, held up his sword and announced he wished to fight in honor of his missing sister, Elena Tari, widow of Eldene Mori.

“My, my,” burred the hierarch to his silent secretary. (Silent, no doubt, because listening to the Hierarch everyday had rotted his brain.) “An impressive-looking fellow, isn’t he? But fighting for the honor of his sister? Oh-no-no! He has completely mistook the reason for this competition. We shall have to send priests to have a little talk with him.”

Idiot, thought Wolf. Could the hierarch not see how dangerous this all was? Yani Tari had been in

Olbia two days, and already he was providing the Seagani with a focus for rebellion. Both previous Horse Seagani warriors had proclaimed that they were fighting in honor of their dead shaman Killon, but Wolf knew from his spies that the idea had originated with Yani. Very worrying. Although Wolf knew that none of his own Eastern Seagani vassals were part of the Tari circle, unrest in Southern Seagan might easily spread to his own fiefdom. The Eastern Seagani still loved the Tari too.

From his vantage point Wolf could see that at least Prince Scarvan understood the danger. Even though he knew how serious the situation could become, the sight still filled Wolf with pleasure. Let him suffer! The stupid bully! It astonished him how much he could hate the man for enjoying Elena Mori's favors and how hard it was to hide.

He turned his attention to the field. Mir! This brother of Elena's was a dazzling fighter. His Tyroni opponent was good and knew well how to use a bastard sword, but the Tari was as quick and neat as sunlight on waves. He danced easily out of the way of some thrusts and those he parried, he parried with devastating effect. He was very young and not very muscular-looking, but he must be very strong. Wolf might have suspected him of using magic had it not been for the iron ring round his neck. Soon he began to suspect that the Tari was prolonging the bout. His thrusts were quick and clever but not pursued to their fullest. Then finally, with a quick twist of the wrist and a clang of steel on steel, the Tari dashed the sword from his opponent's hand.

Sweating heavily, both fighters pulled off their helmets, bowed at the high chief and thanked each other for the bout as was prescribed in the rules of St. Stefan. The Tyroni seemed dazed. Yani's eyes were full of happy enjoyment. He does not fear us at all, thought Wolf suddenly. He thinks he is immune.

Logically this meant the Tari was a fool, but the thought disturbed him. The Lady of Birds also seemed to think herself immune. In fact Wolf sometimes wondered if the Lady of Birds was indeed immune. Look at how she slipped in and out of his carefully warded castle at will. At other times he was almost certain she was just a clever illusionist, no more dangerous than any other mage.

Early that very morning he'd been standing alone at the prow of his ship, unable to sleep for thinking of Elena Mori, when he'd seen something flying toward him. It was the Lady of Birds dressed in green, but instead of arms she had wings. She circled above the ship for a time, her long robes and golden hair streaming out behind her, swooping and turning so gracefully that he was transfixed. It was only after she had landed softly on the deck beside him that he had thought to warn her to be careful.

She had replied smilingly, "What makes you think anyone else can see me?" and he had turned and seen that the watchman was quite oblivious.

Was that power or clever illusion? If the Tari really were as powerful as the legends said why weren't they ruling Yarmar instead of the Mirayans?

He shot a glance at Scarvan. The prince was talking heatedly to his Seagani dirty-tricks boy, Doocat. Wolf knew exactly what was being said. Scarvan's answer to situations like this was almost always assassination. A few months ago the Duke would have hurried down to Scarvan's side (actually he would have been sitting at Scarvan's side) to prevent anything too hasty being planned. No longer! Let the stupid bastard make such mistakes and wind up frying in his own juices.

It was taking Marigoth all morning to look around the rest of the fortress for she had to keep stopping and resting every hour or so. On her travels she took a good look at the way Mirayans lived and found it to be predictably, satisfyingly stupid.

That morning, when she returned to the great hall from the dungeons she stumbled upon some kind of religious ceremony. Priests in their black-and-white robes were blessing the men and women who knelt on the rushes. At the front of the hall was a little litter with the wooden statues of two people with

sunbursts above their heads. Invisible in her fold of air, she went up and touched the cheeks of each statue, but there was no power in them. With a kind of wonder she looked down at the people kneeling with their hands clasped in supplication. What strange people to worship such inanimate bits of wood.

After wandering away through several floors and corridors, she found her way to the women's quarters, where she hoped to find Elena. Getting in was not easy. This part of the fortress was totally walled off from the rest, and only one heavily barred and magically warded door led into it.

Why have such quarters? Were Mirayan men really so impossibly lustful? Ezratah hadn't seemed as dangerous as all that. After all there were serving women moving freely about all over the castle. If the sight of women filled Mirayan men with uncontrollable desire, it seemed pointless to let some of them roam about and not others. It was obviously too ridiculous a reason to bother understanding. She waited until the door to the women's quarters was unbolted for a serving woman to enter, created a diversion by knocking over a candlestick farther down the hall and then, making herself visible very briefly, slipped in the door before the servant turned around again.

Most of the fortress was grand, but the women's quarters on the top floor of the fortress were truly amazing. Wonderfully carved wooden divans were strewn with bright silken cushions and the walls were hung with gay hangings. The boards of the floor were polished to a warm brown gloss. Despite herself, Marigoth was impressed by this way of living, though the rooms were terribly hot and stuffy with an overpowering smell of perfume.

Almost all of the women here were richly dressed Mi-rayans. A group of young women sat in the first of the rooms, their hair covered with white linen scarves and sewing in their laps. They were not working, however, but whispering and giggling to each other. Every now and then they darted quick glances at a door standing ajar at the other end of the room. Marigoth went up to that door. There was just enough space to slip through it. The smell of perfume was even stronger here. Inside a large group of older women, even more colorfully and richly dressed and with elaborate embroidered head scarves, was seated before a series of openings in the wall. The openings were covered with a dense lattice of iron which made it quite shady in the room. The women were seated on divans and cushions and watching something outside, through the grate.

Elena was not among the women. Having ascertained this, Marigoth became curious about what was happening outside the window. She could not push in among the women without them noticing her, but she was able to see by flying up onto the top of a big cupboard by the door.

Directly below was the tournament field with the fighters all lined up and a priest doing something. She could even see Yani dressed in a lovely dark green cloak. Marigoth was tired again, so she reclined there comfortably for some time and even watched the first fight, which was revolting. The women below appeared to find it exciting, laughing and chattering among themselves in their strange, hissy sounding language. Stupid creatures.

Growing bored, Marigoth jumped down from the cupboard, stole a handful of sweetmeats and wandered away through the rest of the rooms. No sign of Elena anywhere. Marigoth found a big curtained bed made of scented sandalwood in one of the rooms and, drawing the curtains, climbed onto it and let herself rest awhile. By then it was a little before midday. She managed to slip out of the women's quarters while servants were bringing in trays of food. It did not take her long to search the rest of the fortress and to find herself, very dissatisfied, standing on the battlements which ran around the sloping lead roof. Above her the huge red dragon flag flapped lazily in the breeze.

Damn, she thought. Don't tell me that pig was telling Yani the truth after all. She had felt certain he was a liar. What did Mirayans know about the truth? But where could Elena be? In one of the houses in the city? She looked out over the town and her heart sank. There were so many houses!

She wandered irritably along the battlements, peering into the yards beneath to see if she'd missed

any likely place. There were a lot of wooden buildings, stables, a brew house, but nothing that looked very secure. Maybe in the gate house? It didn't look big enough, but she would check it on her way out of the fortress.

Guards paced past her, their heavy armor shining in the midday sun and their faces red with sweat. Stupid Mi-rayans would get heatstroke dressed like that. She tripped a couple of them up for good measure and ran away before she started laughing aloud at their pathetic attempts to find the cause of their falls. That was when she saw another hope and let out a yell of delight, which confused the unfortunate guards even more.

On the side of the fortress that faced the sea two matching stone towers had been built into the wall. What a perfect place to keep secret captives!

Chapter 11

"One of the other Guardians has been to the wool settlement," said Brek to Anscom and Duprey. "Tusk says she undid the slave rings on some of their necks,"

It was the middle of the afternoon. The contest was over for the day and the three of them stood together beside Anscom's tent. Within the open tent, Killon's body had been laid out on a bier. Fighters of all the Seagani tribes were filing past it to pay their respects and gathering nearby to wait until the rituals to prepare the body for its journey home were finished.

Anscom shot Brek a startled look. "Do you think they are planning to help the Mori? One of their kind married the Mori war leader."

"Bad for Wolf Madraga and the Easterners if they do," said Brek. "But the slaves said the Guardian was looking for her sister there."

"She'd do better to look in Scarvan's bed," grunted Anscom.

"True. Yet if she'd planned to release the Mori, surely they would be gone by now."

"Mages are odd creatures," said Anscom thoughtfully. "Tari mages must be surpassingly strange. It could just have been a whim."

"Exactly," said Brek. "All we can know is that her actions have benefited us. She undid the slave ring of a young Mori mage, who has now released most of the other mages in the compound. Several Seagani of our tribe and one or two of yours."

"Do they have plans to escape?"

Brek shrugged. "If they can." He had decided not to mention to Anscom that he already had men out collecting weapons for a potential slave breakout. The fewer people who knew, the better.

"Here he comes," said Duprey, who had been standing watchfully beside them.

Yani had bathed and changed. Anscom called out as he came up.

"Lord Yani. We hoped that you might bless Killon's body that he may go peacefully into the other world."

"It would be an honor," said the Tari solemnly. "Tell me, what do your people say about the state of the body? Did he die of natural causes?"

“Yes,” said Anscom. “Lung disease. There is even some sign that they tried to heal him. Though they would have done better to feed and clothe him properly.”

“Yes, I have seen Mirayan jails,” said Yani. “The spirits of disease live happily there. I am at your service, then.”

Anscom took Yani to the head of Killon’s bier. Yani laid her hands on the dead shaman’s forehead and wished him a safe journey through the spirit world into the great Circle of Life. Then she concentrated on the life spirit, letting it flow from her into the wreath of leaves that decorated his bier. Several of the wreaths burst into flower. The air was filled with the sweet perfume of spring blossoms. There was a cry of pleasure from among the watchers. Surely after such a Tari blessing, the shaman’s soul would reach its proper destination.

At a motion from Anscom, the bearers lifted up Killon’s bier, brought it out of the tent and put it on the cart. The cart had been decorated with sheaves of wheat and the field flowers of late summer had been twined into the horses’ manes. A pottery horse was placed on Killon’s chest.

A procession formed around the cart. At the head of the procession were the two shamans Anscom had brought with him from Northern Seagan to attend to Killon had they won his release. Their presence was fortunate because religious edicts had eliminated local shamans who would have performed the kinds of rituals necessary for Killon’s spirit journey and for magically preserving his body for the long trip home.

One of the Shamans carried a wide shallow drum which he beat steadily in time, and the other carried the two pieces of a broken bowl symbolizing the death of a shaman. Behind the cart the warriors and their followers formed a procession. In time with the beats of the drum, they began singing a dirge for the dead. All Seagani, no matter what their tribe, knew this funeral dirge. Although each of the four tribal groups regarded different gods as paramount, the pantheon of gods they believed in and many other aspects of their religion were the same. Like many of the other tribes in the Archipelago they shared a belief in the Great Circle of Life with the Tari.

Anscom came to Brek’s side. “When we get to the Holy Spring at Callospie...”

“There is no holy spring at Callospie anymore,” said Brek bitterly. “The Gibadgee destroyed it.”

“There is still water there. We will stop to drink there and I will send the warriors back. Duprey is to stay too. He is clever and knows the Gibadgee. Trust his advice. I have made them vow loyalty to the Tari. We must not allow him to be hurt.”

“I have an escape boat ready. As yet I think the Mi-rayans are too confused to know to hate him.”

“Time will change that,” said Anscom. He looked back to where the Tari was still standing outside the funeral tent. “Do you think this is a sign that things will improve?”

“I do not know,” said Brek. “The man himself is an honorable, merciful being. I will do my best to protect him from the Gibadgee.”

“We are both Seagani against the Gibadgee,” said Anscom. “Fight well, chieftain Brek.”

He gave the sign and the procession began to move.

Had Brek been free to do so he would have walked with the procession. But that very morning—well before they had had news of Killon’s death—he had sent messages around the town that Yani would be on the harbor beach at Olbia when the big Mirayan church rang five bells.

He was trying to head off trouble. The previous night Caelian, the captain of the city watch, had come complaining that women were trying to get onto St. Stefan’s field in order to see the Tari. He demanded something be done to stop them. Brek was not fool enough to try and stop the women from doing what they wanted. A man might as well try to stem the tide. If he gave them another chance to get their

blessings, they would gladly keep away from St. Stefan's field.

The harbor beach had seemed like a good place to have such a gathering. Seagani slaves who had difficulty traveling freely outside the city walls were usually allowed to go down onto the beach to barter with fishermen and other traders. Still with a mind to avoiding trouble, he sent four of his warriors ahead with Yani and organized the rest of them to follow behind in small groups so that the Mirayans would not be alarmed by any show of force.

When they came around the edge of the city and saw the harbor beach, however, Brek realized that all his efforts at subtlety had been wasted. The beach was packed with people.

Could they all be here to see the Tari?

Brek had not thought so many of the Seagani in Olbia still followed the old ways. Most of the free Seagani now attended Mirayan church services. Yet those people, both men and women, were here along with the slaves. Even the richly dressed and veiled women from the great merchant families had come. Perhaps they had not changed so very much after all.

"What the hell is this?" snarled Duprey in his ear. "Couldn't you have picked a place more away from Mi-ryan eyes, you fool?"

"If you can tell me where such a place exists I would be glad to move there," retorted Brek.

He was half inclined to call the Tari back, but it was too late.

Yani had already moved into the crowd and the lads accompanying him, bless them, had begun organizing people so that they could file past him one by one. He began to understand where he had gone wrong.

He had underestimated the despair of his people.

From his own experience Brek knew how hard life was for Seagani under Mirayan rule. Even the wealthy merchant families had difficulties with the Gibadgee. They monopolized the best trade and treated even the most Mirayanized Seagani with contempt. For ordinary Seagani it was daily becoming harder and harder to make a living. Taxes were constantly higher. There were always mysterious reasons for Seagani land to be confiscated, or for a Seagani harvest to go to the Mirayan lord, or for why Gibadgee bully boys could not be stopped from stealing Seagani crops. Who were they to appeal to in these matters? Everyone knew the Mirayan judges always awarded the cases to Mirayans. Brek knew of a number of farmers who had simply sold themselves and their families into slavery with a decent master, and who now tilled their old lands as serfs because the struggle to stay independent had become too hard. It was better than having to sell yourself to the highest bidder in a moment of crisis.

Even those who were not slaves seemed suddenly to have lost the right to travel where they wanted and to make the choices they used to make.

And the greatest outrage of all, the shamans whom they had gone to for healing and solace had been driven away or burned at the stake. The worship of Nezhrus was forbidden. Her sacred places had been horribly defiled. Soon her anger would surely be visited upon them. Perhaps it had already come. Children went unblest, the dead unshriven. The only blessers and shrivers were the fearsome Gibadgee priests, who believed in swords and painted wooden statues, and who turned their back on the life force. How could you tell a celibate Mirayan priest about your problems with your wife or mother-in-law?

Yet what could you do about the Gibadgee but placate them and hope they would stay nice? As several rebellions had proved, they were so much stronger than you.

Now here was a Tari walking among them again. In the old days when the Tari had traveled the land, they had always brought goodness with them. They had been able to heal seemingly untreatable illnesses,

to drive away plagues, to bring peace when there was warfare. They never interfered with people's beliefs. They were a holy people in themselves—a bridge between this world and the world of the spirit. Nezhnus and the other gods had showed their special love for them by giving them great powers over the elements. Some of the most powerful Tari could even grant speech with the gods. The presence of one here, even in so strange a garb as that of a warrior, was a sign of hope that Seagani hands grabbed hungrily for.

Brek was caught between dismay at how huge the crowd was and the natural elation of a leader who suddenly finds there are people to be led.

Meanwhile Duprey kept cursing in his ear. He pointed to the members of the ever-vigilant city watch, who were already collected at the city gate.

“You fool,” he hissed angrily. “You’ll get her killed.”

Brek’s eyes widened. Her?

Duprey stopped cursing Brek and cursed himself.

“And if I find you have made use of that piece of knowledge, I’ll gut you with a blunt knife,” he hissed.

“Be calm Duprey,” said Brek. “I have no intention... Can you not see that popularity is its own protection? I have shown the Mirayans Yard’s popularity. Now they will not dare to harm her, er, him. They do not want rioting during St. Stefan’s.”

He was not sure how much he believed his own argument, but there was little to be done now. He sent some of his warriors to urge the people who had already been blessed to go home. He was sure that the Mirayans would not allow people to gather in such large numbers.

There was nothing else to do but let things unfold. He looked down at Yani. A woman, hey! Well, that was perfectly believable now that he knew it.

My, my, he thought, smiling sweetly to himself. Think how mortified the Gibadgee would be if they found out that the mighty fighter on their beloved St. Stefan’s field was a woman. This just gets better and better.

Sure enough, before Yani had blessed half the crowd on the beach, the captain of the city watch came through the gate. With him was Hierarch Jeromsh himself. Brek’s heart came into his mouth at the sight. Captain Caelian was a reasonable man but the hierarch... There is no man more dangerous than a powerful fool.

Brek moved to intercept them. Duprey followed him like a shadow, still furious and muttering threats of death.

“Oh, shut up!” hissed Brek finally. “This is a time to be sticking together. Kill me when the worst has happened. I won’t care then.”

“Brek!” said Caelian as they came up to him. “I might have known you were behind this. Who gave you permission to have a religious gathering? This is illegal and you know it.”

“I beg pardon, Highnesses,” said Brek, bowing as humbly as possible. How he wanted to kick himself when he spoke like this. But it worked with the Mirayans even though they despised him for it. “It’s not a religious gathering. It’s for the women—they think it’s lucky to be touched by a Tari.”

“Rubbish,” cried the hierarch. “You are talking rubbish. This is an insult to Our Lord Mir. I demand you break this up, captain.”

“Worshipfulness, it’s mostly women and children. They were trying to get onto St. Stefan’s field and bothering the guards, so I thought this would be a good idea. They were determined to get the blessing.

You know how women are. They mean no harm really.”

“Mirayan women do as they are told,” snapped the priest. “Their obedience is the glory of our civilization.”

Much you’d know about women, celibate bastard, thought Brek.

“We’re going to have to put a stop to this,” said Caelian. “The hierarch is right. It can’t be allowed. Are you going to break this up or do I have to? Don’t think I won’t.”

“I will do as you wish,” said Brek sadly. He turned to push his way to Yani’s side.

But Duprey had already set out and had just reached Yani. Brek, Caelian and the hierarch watched him speak into Yani’s ear.

The Tari turned a shocked and reproachful face to the Mirayans by the city gate. Then she addressed the crowd, telling them that the Mirayans forbade the blessings and that they must now go home quietly.

The crowd gave a muffled groan of disappointment. Many turned to stare angrily at the Mirayans, but there was fear in their eyes too. The many women with children clutched them and began to move quickly back toward the gate. People still remembered last year’s riot over the destruction of the holy spring of Callospie when the city watch had fired crossbows and bolts of magical fire into the crowd.

“Good Seagani, let us go in harmony,” said Yani.

“May the blessings of the life force be with all of you.” She turned and climbed up the the seawall steps and walked back toward St. Stefan’s field. The four warriors still walked behind her, good lads that they were. Duprey limped off after them.

As she passed the hierarch and city watch captain Caelian, Yani gave a look of blatant disapproval... As Brek expected, the hierarch resented the assumption of equality in that look. “Why didn’t you arrest him?” cried the hierarch angrily at Caelian. “They will surely continue their pagan worship elsewhere.”

He spoke in Mirayan. Brek was always careful to pretend not to understand.

“They dispersed quietly,” said Caelian. “I’m not sure they would have if I’d arrested him. There were many children and valuable slave women in that crowd. And if I arrest him, I run the risk of making him a focus or even a martyr.”

“I order you to arrest him,” shouted the hierarch.

“I take my orders from Prince Alexis,” said Caelian. It seemed Caelian had no better opinion of the hierarch’s sense than anyone else. “If I receive orders from him to arrest this Tari I will gladly do so. But I will advise him not to order it, unless you want your precious St. Stefan’s disrupted by rioting.”

“I wonder about your soul, captain,” said the Hierarch bitterly.

The late afternoon light had changed to the soft light of evening. A red sun was slipping beneath the horizon.

A white sea hawk which had been preening on a wooden post behind them suddenly took off, letting out a screech, startling everybody.

Marigoth ran quickly down through the fortress, though not too quickly to miss the opportunity to trip over a servant carrying a tray of bread and fruits or to steal some of the food. She got easily out of the door of the kitchens, raced around to the side of the fortress and then across the cobblestones to the towers.

The blue runes shining on the door of the nearest tower brought her up short. It was very heavily

warded. This annoying fact filled Marigoth with hope—an important royal prisoner with a child was certain to be highly protected. She went over to the door of the other tower. Blue runes there as well. She would just have to hang about until someone came out or in.

Just then the door of the first tower opened. She half-sprinted, half-flew back to it as a mage came out. Fortunately for her he had forgotten something and ducked back into the tower just as she came up. She instantly made herself visible to slip through the warding and managed to make herself invisible again before the mage noticed. By the time he had gone out the door again, Marigoth was already up the stairs and running excitedly around the tower, peering into room after room on each level. She was certain Elena would be there, but she found only store rooms and a couple of bedrooms. Then suddenly she was in a big room at the top of the tower.

Oh, no! Where was Elena?

She sat down on a great carved chair with a sound of disgust. Elena will be in the *other* tower, she told herself, though once again hope was wavering.

This room was obviously a laboratory for mages. Shelves of big glass jars full of dried things lined the walls, and a small pile of crystals lay on the table beside a large flat bowl of water and an oversized book full of writing. She curiously flipped over a few of the pages, peering at the pictures. They were interesting but she could make out nothing of the words. She touched them tentatively with the tip of her finger. Much as she hated to admit such a thing about the Mirayans, there was power in those words. Not power she could understand, however.

There were other things here that made her curious. Several structures built of wood and string and pieces of metal lay on one of the tables. What were they for? Why was there a big looking glass? She touched its cool surface. Then her eye fell on a pile of cards beside the mirror. They looked just like playing cards but... what were those funny red shapes on them? Sorting through them she saw that they bore only a passing resemblance to the cards she knew.

“Little one, what are you doing?” scraped a voice in her ear. She jumped, saw a pair of yellow eyes peering into hers, squeaked with fright and dropped the cards all over the floor.

The yellow eyes stared out of the mirror—out of the face of a big black hairy thing with the face of a goat and fangs of a cat.

Suddenly all her senses were screaming with horror. Life Sucker! Unbeing of the Abyss.

“Demon!” she shrieked in terror. It lunged forward at her, pressing squashy two-fingered hands and a corpse-white belly covered with lumps against the glass.

“Come!” it hissed urgently. “Come here.”

Each word was like a tug on a rope. The thing drew her. Mindless with terror, Marigoth was pulled toward it. A demon. The true predator of all life force.

Suddenly Timmic’s training snapped into play. She found the words of power, words of dispelling. The first magical words her foster father had ever taught her.

She spoke them.

There was a hiss and the mirror was empty.

What next? What next? Her mind found the well-learned path. With trembling hands, she pulled chalk out of her pouch and drew runes of hiding on her chest.

As she did so she heard a door close below.

Terrified again she looked around the room for a hiding place, saw that the cards were all over the floor, stopped in panic-stricken indecision, heard footsteps in the stairwell and dived for a long curtain.

The moment she was behind it she realized that whoever entered would not be able to see her anyway. She'd been so terrified she'd forgotten that she was still invisible to humans. You stupid thing, she scolded herself. Somehow the words made her feel strong again. It was too late to pick up the cards. She would just have to hope this mess did not stand out.

The door opened and a young Mirayan man in mage robes entered. He was very handsome for a Mirayan, with golden hair and beautiful deep blue eyes. "Anyone here?" he called, peering around the room.

Reassured by the silence he went over to the mirror. He noticed the cards but merely kicked them out of his way. He put his hand on the mirror.

"Shub! Shub!"

In an instant, the demon was there in the mirror. Marigoth jumped back involuntarily.

The demon let out a loud scraping yowl and banged on the mirror's surface. It was horrible and she could still feel its hunger. As its yellow goat eyes searched the room, she felt certain that the runes of hiding concealed her.

"Where is the life mage?" it growled, chewing its teeth.

It rubbed its lumpy white belly obscenely against the glass. Now Marigoth could see that those lumps were dozens of lurid pink nipples interspersed with big black tufts of hair.

"Where is the life mage?" it demanded again, in a sound that combined thunder and the scraping of a finger on glass.

"What are you talking about?" asked the mage irritably.

The demon closed its mouth with an audible snap and disappeared. The mage looked annoyed and tapped on the empty mirror.

"Shub? Come back here."

The mage was coaxing the demon back as if they were old friends. Was he a complete fool? Didn't he feel the pull of the Abyss? Was this a part of Mirayan magic—talking to demons as if they were cats? Maybe he was a death mage. Terrifying thought! But Ezratah had said Mi-rayans hated that kind of magic. The demon slid back into the mirror, looking like a sulky child. But it clearly wasn't one. Marigoth felt the power of its emptiness pulling at her. It was like a sink hole into which the whole world could easily have been sucked. How could the mage act as if it were nothing?

"What?" it pouted, sniffing the air and peering around the room again. "What do you want, Lev Madraga?"

"Show me the woman again, Shub," he begged urgently. "Show her to me."

Elena! He knew where she was!

"Why?" said the demon grumpily. "What have you ever done for me?"

"Shub, Shub don't be like this."

"I'm hungry," said Shub.

Lev Madraga glared at it. He almost seemed surprised by its request. "Oh, so that's your game, is it? Well, take yourself off, then. You'll get nothing from me."

The mirror emptied again.

"Shit!" muttered Lev. "To hell with you, then." He didn't seem to see how ironic his words were. He began to move around the room restlessly.

He picked up all the cards and tossed them on the table. Then he made a spell over the bowl of water, which he peered into. But he was not concentrating—his eyes were full of inner sight. Suddenly he let out a snort of frustration and started back toward the mirror.

Halfway over he stopped. His eyes had fallen on the pile of crystals. He picked up a couple of them and stood there for a moment weighing them thoughtfully in his hands.

“Yes,” he said softly. “Yes.” Then he said something in Mirayan.

He went quickly back over to the big open book, flipped over to a back page and checked the writing. “Yes!” he breathed again.

Then he turned both crystals in his hands and spoke a few words to them. Marigoth was impressed with the amount of blue light he produced. It was much more than Ezratah made when he did spells.

The crystals began to glow blue. With a look of satisfaction he shoved them in his pocket and strode out of the door.

Quickly Marigoth followed.

Chapter 12

As he slipped through the front door of the tower, Lev Madraga suddenly disappeared. Guessing his direction Marigoth scampered over to the door of the West tower. She stared at where he should be and soon she could make out his blurry outline. His invisibility spell must work differently from hers.

Lev had stuck a small piece of resin on each crystal. Now he put them carefully over certain points in the warding on either side of the door. He held his wrist in his other hand to keep it from shaking and when the final crystal was stuck into place, he heaved a sigh of relief. The web of blue magic had now disappeared from over the tower door. He must be very powerful to be able to do something like this.

Then Lev cast a misdirection illusion as he went into the tower; the two big burly women sitting at a table drinking wine out of a jug did not notice the door opening. The mage crept lightly up the stairs until he was out of earshot of the women. Then he sprinted softly up the last couple of levels, Marigoth hard on his heels.

The door at the top was locked and barred, but Lev opened a covered peephole in the wall and peered through it.

Marigoth wanted to push him aside and take a look herself. She toyed with the idea of going through the door and looking, but she was nervous about the mage being so close. She decided to wait till he stepped away. Surely Elena was behind *this* door.

“Oh, yes! *Yes!*” he was saying softly. His face flushed and took on a horribly drooly expression. Marigoth could not help feeling that these were good signs. Men tended to look at Elena like this, the horrible beasts.

Suddenly Lev stood back. He stared into space for a moment, biting his lip and then seemed to come to a decision. After looking around carefully he unlocked the door with a flash of blue magic and opened it.

He went in so quickly that Marigoth was unable to slip in with him. Cursing, she looked into the peephole.

Elena was there! Hooray!

She was sitting at the window, combing her hair. Her arms seemed to be all dirty.

When she saw the mage, she jumped up.

Marigoth couldn't hear anything clearly, but Elena had obviously never seen him before. She seemed to be demanding to know who he was.

Lev ignored her words and simply went toward her. Elena cried out and backed away, obviously frightened.

Marigoth felt sick with panic. What should she do now?

The mage was making calming movements with his hands, but he kept going toward her. Elena kept backing off. She was holding the comb like a weapon and looking for other better weapons. But there was only a bed in the room. Marigoth didn't want to reveal herself, but...

Lev lunged at Elena.

Marigoth pressed through the door, passing slowly through its thick substance. As she came out on the other side, she saw the mage had Elena on the floor and was on top of her. As Marigoth darted toward them, Elena hissed in a voice full of loathing,

"What? Will you rape me too? Then get it over with. Don't waste my time."

It was as if she had hit him. Lev pulled back with a look of shock on his face and Elena scrambled away just as Marigoth, who had lunged at them, missed them both and fell flat against the hard floor.

"No!" said the mage, eyes big and horrified. "That's not... It's not..."

Marigoth struggled to her feet and staggered with rage toward the mage, but there was no need. He was up off the floor now, one hand on his mouth. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I'm sorry." He made other confused noises and raced out the door.

He was not so upset that he forgot to turn the lock behind him, however. Elena ran after him and tried it anyway. When she was certain it was locked, she sank down on the floor, put her head in her hands and wept.

Marigoth ran over to comfort her.

Elena started up with a cry and Marigoth realized that she was still invisible. She made herself visible and threw her arms around her weeping sister.

"Mari!" cried Elena. "Oh, Mari. Is it really you? Oh, Mari, help me!"

She buried her face in Marigoth's shoulder and wept even harder. Marigoth saw that what she thought was dirt on her sister's arms were bruises. Big purple and blue bruises. She found that she was weeping too.

It was almost dark when Yani returned to her tent. She worried that Marigoth was not back yet, but there was nothing she could do. She accepted the hot food Ezratah offered her and asked him if he would mind preparing her a bath. Of course he was delighted to. She was glad that the task kept him too busy to hover over her, for she had had enough of people for the day. She had blessed and spoken comfortingly to what seemed like hundreds of them. She ached all over as if she had fought all day. How did shamans do this stuff all the time? Was this the real reason the Tari had cut themselves off?

She in time managed to stop Ezratah adding scented oil to the bath. "I don't want to smell like a girl going courting," she told him, as she shooed him out of the tent.

“Now you keep watch. I don’t want to see anyone but Marigoth.”

She undressed and got into the bath. To one used to washing in a bucket of cold water, this was almost shamefully luxurious. She lay back in the warm water and relaxed.

Suddenly the the tent flap flew open. Marigoth burst in, dragging Ezratah by the hair, and threw him on the floor.

“Come on!” she screamed. “Get up, you worthless Pig.”

She dragged him up off the ground by his hair and pulled him toward the bath. “Yani’s feet need licking clean. Get over there and do it, slave.”

Ezratah was happy to come closer. He was naked, but for a loin cloth. He knelt beside the bath, almost trembling with eagerness, put out his tongue and bent toward Yani’s feet.

“Stop it!” screamed Yani, pushing his head away.

“What’s wrong with him?” shouted Marigoth. “Why should you sleep alone, Yani? Why not use him the way Scarvan uses our sister? He’s young and capable.” Then she kicked him in the groin so hard that he fell over and lay writhing on the ground.

“Stop it, Marigoth!” shouted Yani, leaping out of the bath. She grabbed a towel and draped it over her, throwing herself between Marigoth and the curled-up body of the groaning mage. Her mind was full of sharp raven thoughts. She pushed Marigoth away from him.

“Leave him alone. He’s done you no harm.”

“Scarvan keeps her locked up and he comes in and uses her whenever he feels like it. And another man tried to too, while I was there. They make her into a thing. Filthy bastard Mirayans! She’s covered in bruises from them. Well I’m going to get my revenge, I’m going to make this mage...”

“No, you will not!” shouted Yani. She grabbed Mari-goth’s arm and said, “We are Tari. We do not lower ourselves to this level. This mage—this particular man—has done nothing to you and you will do nothing to him. If you want revenge, take it on Scarvan.”

“He would have... he would have used you just so. He’s a Mirayan.”

“We don’t know that. And don’t fool yourself. It’s not just Mirayans. This is what happens to women captives.”

But Marigoth was not listening.

“Bitch,” she screeched. “How can you not care? She said she lies there like a rag doll hoping he will tire of her, but he doesn’t. She used to struggle and rage, but she realized that he liked it. What kind of person likes that? He won’t even let her have proper clothes.”

Yani shook Marigoth, furious.

“How dare you? Of course I care. But I expected this. Why should our sister be different because she is our sister? And how does this behavior help release her?”

Suddenly Marigoth put her face in her hands and burst into tears.

“Get out of here,” Yani called to Ezratah.

Ezratah somehow managed to get up on his hands and knees and crawl out through the tent flap. Yani put her arms round her sister.

“We can do nothing about the past,” she said, quietly rubbing Marigoth’s back. “Later there will be time for grieving, but now we must get Elena away.”

“She would not come,” sobbed Marigoth. “Oh, Yani! I had to leave her there after everything she

told me. It's Alyx. That man has hidden Alyx. He will kill her if Elena escapes. He has even had her beaten to make Elena obedient."

"Curse him. May his soul be eaten by demons," shouted Yani. Inside her head the raven was shrieking for vengeance. She struck the wooden bath with her fist so hard that a slat broke and water ran out all over the floor. A terrible anger roiled inside Yani, but at last she got it under control. She took a deep breath.

"Well then, how do we find Alyx?"

After many hours of talking and weeping, Marigoth was finally calm enough to sink into a heavy, exhausted slumber. She was still very much a twelve-year-old for all that she had lived for twenty-three years. Looking at Marigoth, Yani wondered if she would ever grow up now. She had always responded badly to the way people treated Elena. Elena had even worried that some of her own experiences had fueled Marigoth's determination to stay a child. Now this... It would make anyone frightened of becoming a woman.

Yani wished she could sleep too, but her head was filled with unwelcome images of what it must be like for Elena. How loathsome this violation was. How the abused senses must harden simply to bear the experience. Did the senses ever soften again? Surely the act of love must be tainted ever after.

And little Alyx. The very thought of her being beaten... Yani clenched her fists. Hot angry tears leaked from between her squeezed eyelids. She would kill that Scarvan.

For everyone's sake she must hide these feelings, especially from Marigoth. Someone needed to be the calm voice of reason in her furious ear. Otherwise Marigoth's anger and shock might lead her into all kinds of destructive acts.

Yani forced herself to think clearly. Elena had been allowed to see Alyx after both the beatings. The little girl had talked of living in a house full of black and white Mirayan ladies. Yani tried desperately to think what on earth this meant. It was only when dawn broke and she went outside into the gray morning light to wash her face in cold water that it occurred to her that their tame Mirayan might know.

When she woke Ezratah to ask him, he was his usual anxious-to-please self, which considering the events of last night was disturbing.

"She means nuns," he said immediately. "They are women who live chastely together, dedicating their lives to Mir. It is the obvious place to lodge a child. She'll be in a convent. I'll stake my life on it."

"You are," muttered a voice. Marigoth was standing behind them. Yani cast her a quelling look.

"There cannot be many nunneries in a new settlement like this," continued Ezratah, shooting a nervous glance at Marigoth. "I'm sure we could find it. I shall make inquiries." He leapt out of his blankets, happy as a dog on a trail, but he gave Marigoth a wide berth.

"I want you to be discreet about it," said Yani. "I don't want our interest known."

"I shall not disappoint you, lord," he said, pulling on his shirt as he bustled happily away.

Yani turned to her sister.

"It is in my mind that Ezratah should go with you to search these convents. But I am afraid you may harm him."

"You care too much about that Mirayan shit," said Marigoth. "He would have raped you had I let him."

"Maybe. Maybe not. But we are Tari..."

“Yes, yes. And we do not lower ourselves to his level,” snapped Marigoth nastily. “Don’t preach at me.”

Yani was within an inch of slapping her snide little face, but she held herself back.

“Ezratah speaks Mirayan and knows how to make discreet inquiries. We do not want to alarm Scarvan or he may move Alyx somewhere else. Do you understand?”

“Don’t worry,” sneered Marigoth. “I won’t harm your little dog.”

“With any luck we can have Alyx tonight and maybe Elena too. After I have fought today I will see about getting us a boat. I think escape by sea is our best chance, don’t you?”

“I suppose so,” said Marigoth grudgingly.

Down in the warrior’s enclosure, Yani spoke to no one. She worked out on the pell for a while, hoping to work off her feelings, but if anything it made them worse. She saw Scarvan’s face under every stroke she made. The raven’s sharp claws dug into her soul. Its shadow made her thoughts dark and vicious.

There was no prolonging the bouts for the pleasure of the fight today. The moment she lifted her sword, she fought with all her fury and within six exchanges had given her Ishtaki opponent such a savage blow that she broke his collarbone.

At this she felt the life spirit crying out in outrage. The raven turned away in disgust. Her anger left her and she was deeply ashamed. To relieve her shame by apologizing, however, would only have humiliated the Ishtaki even further. She bowed and thanked him, ignored with difficulty the loud remarks about barbarity from one of the Mirayans sitting near Scarvan, and strode from the field. She was careful not to even look at the high chief lest she be overwhelmed with rage again.

She had almost reached her tent when she heard Duprey calling her.

“Why so angry this morning?” he said as he limped up to her.

“What’s it to you?” snapped Yani. She turned to glare in his face and was brought up short by the kindly look in his eyes. Suddenly she wanted to burst into tears. She looked away quickly.

“Come on,” said Duprey. He pushed the small of her back and she went into the tent before him. Her eyes were wet. She kept her back to Duprey so that he could not see her weakness.

It was quiet inside the felt walls. Ezratah must still be away with Marigoth. It was such a relief.

After a moment Duprey took her gently by the shoulder, pushed her down on a stool and poured her a glass of wine.

Then he knelt before her and waited till she had mastered herself.

“What’s happened? Your sister?”

Yani nodded. She wiped the tears from her face with her fingers. It didn’t occur to her not to tell him. “They found her. It’s pretty bad.”

“But she’s alive?” said Duprey.

“Yes,” said Yani. “I guess we should be happy about that. But Scarvan beats my little niece to make Elena cooperate.” She pulled off her helm and threw it hard on the floor.

Duprey knelt there silently.

“I’m sorry.” He took her hand in his.

“Thanks.”

“You know not all men are like that,” he said.

Yani looked at him in surprise. “Of course.” It was such a ridiculous thing to say she couldn’t help grinning. “Do you think I’m silly? Or are you just afraid I’ll murder you all in your beds?”

Duprey smiled up at her. “It did cross my mind when I saw you fight today.”

His words wiped the grin from Yani’s face. “I am ashamed of how I acted this morning. I have wronged the life spirit.”

He squeezed her hand.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. I cannot help thinking that as a woman you must feel Elena’s pain more deeply.”

Yani shrugged. “Maybe,” she said. “I just wish I had that Scarvan here. I would gut him, and damn what came afterward.” Her hand closed around the hilt of her sword. “I wish I could make him pay.”

“You know I share your hatred,” said Duprey. “If there is anything I can do...”

Warmth filled Yani. It was such a relief to have someone to share this burden with. She squeezed Duprey’s hand and smiled into his eyes.

“Thank you!” she said.

Duprey’s smile gave Yani a melting feeling in the pit of her stomach. She felt very close and very open to him. She leant toward him and he reached up and cupped her cheek with his hand.

“You know...”

“Lord!” cried a voice outside. “Lord! Are you well?”

The moment was broken. With a surge of guilt, Yani remembered Elena. What was she doing? This was not the time to be kissing men. Even nice-looking ones like Duprey. Especially ones like Duprey. She pulled back.

“It’s Brek,” said Duprey, looking annoyed. “You stay here. I will deal with him.”

“What ails the Tari?” asked Brek when Duprey came out of the tent.

“The sister,” said Duprey, pulling him farther away so that Yani could not overhear them. “Scarvan does have her here.”

“Ah!” said Brek. “That’s convenient, then.”

“I’m not sure Yani would find that remark sympathetic,” rebuked Duprey.

“Don’t get all righteous with me. You want to see Scarvan fall as much as I do. If the Tari is angry at him, that can only be good.”

“The Tari puts her sister first,” said Duprey coldly. “Before any considerations of ours.”

“Is that so?” snapped Brek, annoyed at the man’s hypocrisy. “If that’s the best you can do, you’re not the man I took you for, Duprey.”

Duprey flushed. There was something guilty in his face. Brek, regretting his words, judged it wise to walk away before Duprey could make a reply. After all, if he was gaining influence over Yani, it would be wise to stay on his good side.

* * *

Yani could not hear what the two men were saying but it did not matter. By the time Duprey came back into the tent she was the disciplined warrior again, focused on the task at hand.

Yet as she unbuckled her armor she smiled at Duprey.

“Thank you,” she said. “I was glad to have you here.”

Duprey hovered at the tent entrance, obviously unsure of how to deal with the distance he now felt. “I was glad to be of service to you. You know I want to help you.”

“You have!” she said. “I am strengthened by our talk.”

Duprey still hovered.

“Lady... Yani I want—I wish...”

She went over to him. “All I can think about at the moment is my sister. It cannot be otherwise,” she said. “Whatever my own wishes might be.”

“Of course,” he said lowering his eyes. That tantalizing inscrutable look came onto his face again. “I understand. If you need help, I hope you will come to me.”

He pressed her hand.

“Thank you,” she said. Duprey probably knew all about obtaining boats, but it would be best not to trust him. He wanted her to help the Seagani and that wouldn’t help Elena.

Circling up in the sky in the shape of a sea hawk, Jin-dabyne, the Lady of Birds, was pleased. Mathinna’s granddaughters were a disgrace to their people. One of them had actually fought with a sword. (A Tari *warrior!* How repulsive!) And the little mage did not know how to draw on the life spirit of inharmonious places. Well, ha!

Now they had found the beauty, they were quite naturally looking for the child. Little knowing that she, Jin-dabyne, had already put an end to any chance of that. Ah, Uncle, she thought triumphantly. How pleased you will be! See how I confound the impious ones.

She laughed and the laughter came out as a shriek from her sea hawk’s body. The Tari warrior coming out of her tent glanced up momentarily before turning to walk away.

Yes! thought Jindabyne. Soon the path of fate will be cleared and I will be back in Ermora with you, none the wiser. She flicked her wings and flew down to the duke’s ship, where a small half-Tari child called Alyx slept an enchanted sleep.

Chapter 13

Yani washed and changed and walked down to the harbor.

She was being followed. Perhaps she should lead those followers somewhere quiet and see who harmed whom. It was an unworthy thought for a Tari but very tempting to an angry warrior.

From the harbor front she could just see the western tower where Elena was being held captive, jutting over the fortress walls. As casually as she could, Yani went along the seawall to where she could see the tower better and tried to calculate how much rope they would need to get Elena down. Marigoth had said she thought she could put the guards to sleep and get Elena out of her cell and onto the battlements. From there they could probably get down a rope to a boat. Yani thought she could shoot a

rope attached to an arrow onto the battlements, though it was a long way and might require some kind of magic help.

The jagged brown cliffs beneath the fortress fell sheer into a sea that boiled white on the fallen rocks at the bottom. Fishing boats were passing quite close to the cliff showing that despite its churned appearance, the water was deep enough to be safe there. The thought of trying to get someone over the battlements and into a boat in that water even with magic was daunting.

Now for a boat, thought Yani. On the beach below the harbor many small sailing boats were drawn up on the sand. Fisherfolk sat round mending nets. She would have liked to hire one of these little boats. The fisherfolk looked poor; no doubt their boats were their only wealth. Since she was being watched, however, she knew it would be best if she stole a boat and so she checked which were the easiest boats to steal and found out what kind of watch was kept at night by chatting to the fisherfolk.

They were extremely polite, offering Yani a seat and a rather salty hot drink. Shortly after she sat down, women with children began appearing on the beach and asking her for blessings and for her opinions of their unborn babies. They seemed to have an enormous number of children for such poor people. Apparently the Mirayans had outlawed the herb birth-bane. It was now very expensive to control the size of your family.

Though they asked her for healing, they did not seem surprised when she said she had none. Several of them had old, badly healed injuries. Now that the shamans were gone the only people they could go to in sickness were “clever folk” who knew about healing herbs but had no magic. Mirayan healing mages charged far more than most Seagani earned.

Yani seethed inside. What business was it of Scar-van’s what these people believed anyway? How could he dare to replace a decent life honoring religion with silly fripperies concerning swords and wooden statues? And why did his healers charge so much for healing? What was the logic of that?

Maliciously she told the fisherfolk that the Tari were angered because High Chief Scarvan was keeping her sister Elena locked up in one of his towers. How could her people believe they were safe among the Seagani when such things happened?

“Let us help you rescue her,” said one of the men angrily. There was a chorus of approval all round. Yani was touched but determined to keep outsiders out of the business.

“I thank you,” she said. “But the skein of life must unwind as it will. If anyone comes along later, asking after me, perhaps you would be so kind as not to talk of my affairs.”

“You may count on us, lord,” said their leader. “Scar-van’s lackeys will get nothing but gutting knives from us.”

Yani excused herself and went down to the water’s edge. She walked down the beach toward the next headland. A fine cool mist of spray blew on her face. The hard thump of the waves as they broke on the steeply shelving beach matched her mood. She was not sure what to do now. The temptation to lure those following her into an ambush and attack them still lingered, but when she thought of it she could see the raven turning its face away in disgust and she knew that it was wrong.

She had not gone far when a commotion arose behind her. As she turned to look, a group of ragged children came running toward her. “Lord! Lord!”

She turned and ran back to see if she could help. A mass of fisherfolk was seething around behind one of the boats. Three men were struggling in their midst.

One of the women caught her arm excitedly.

“We caught these fellows following you, lord. I’m sure they mean you harm.”

“Stop!” cried Yani without even thinking. It was the life spirit in her who spoke, not the warrior who a

few minutes before had been toying with setting up an ambush. She waded into the mill of men and women savagely pummeling their captives and called to them to stop. They fell silent around her.

She recognized one of the three battered men as a follower of Doocat.

“Why are you following me?” Yani asked him sternly.

“We were not!” mumbled the man out of his bloodied mouth.

“They were,” cried a voice as Duprey came limping up. Getting over the sand with only one good leg was not easy. “They’ve been following you since the fighters’ camp.”

“What are you doing here?” snapped Yani.

“I’ve been following these men,” said Duprey. “Someone has to look out for you.”

The crowd of fisherfolk muttered and moved at Duprey.

“No,” cried Yani. “This man is a friend of mine.”

“If these men injured you or even got you in a fight you could be disqualified from the tournament,” said Duprey. He had not flinched from the angry crowd. He was brave, you had to give him that.

Yani looked down at the men on the ground. One was unconscious and the eye of another was swelling shut. They were all bleeding from noses or lips. “Get up. Take your friend with you. I think these good people would willingly do you real harm, but I would not have them soil themselves with violence. The life spirit does not wish such a thing. Go, and remember to whom you owe your escape.”

The fisherfolk let out no more than a mutter of protest as the two men struggled off, carrying the third with them.

When they had gone Yani thanked the fisherfolk for their care and went along the beach again. Duprey followed behind her.

“Why did you come here?” he demanded.

How dare he demand anything, thought Yani.

“I can go anywhere I want to,” she snapped.

“It is dangerous for you to be outside the fighters’ camp. That is his real concern, thought Yani bitterly. Just like all the other Seagani. She had been right to pull away from him earlier, though at the time she had regretted it.

“You see how the fisherfolk tried to protect me,” she said. “And even if they didn’t, I can take care of myself.”

Duprey’s tone changed. “You came down here to get a boat, didn’t you?”

Yani tensed. Where would this lead? Surely the Seagani wouldn’t try to stop her?

“I wanted some peace,” she snapped.

“Did you buy one?” asked Duprey. “Did you? Scarvan is certain to find out if you did.”

“What are you talking about? Leave me alone.”

“There is no need for you to find a boat. Brek already has one readied for you in case you need to escape. You might as well use it for your sister. I can show you where it is.”

Yani turned and looked hard at Duprey. There was silence but for the thudding waves and the cry of a single lonely seagull.

“What are you up to?” she said at last. “I thought you Seagani wanted me to win this tournament for you. I can’t do that if I take my sister away.”

“There are priorities,” said Duprey. “Your sister must come first here. Do you think we are inhuman? You must not leave her in Scarvan’s hands one moment longer than necessary.”

Yani felt joy rushing through her. She smiled at Duprey.

Duprey smiled back.

“I can put my hands on some rope too,” he said. “Do you want some extra men?”

“I would be glad of the rope but the extra men can wait for the moment. I do not feel confident of Chieftain Brek’s reaction to my leaving so soon.”

“You do him wrong,” said Duprey. “Any reasonable man must see the importance of what you are doing.” Then he pulled a wry face. “But perhaps you are wise not to put it to the test. The Mirayans make even the best of men unreasonable.”

But when Marigoth and Ezratah returned from their search of the nunneries, their news was bad. Early that very morning Alyx had been taken away from the convent where she had been held. The nuns could not say where she had been taken.

“Curse that man,” shouted Marigoth. “Where can he have put her? I’ll mindsearch him. I’ll make him think his head is splitting open.”

“Can you do it?” cried Yani.

“Do you think paltry Mirayan magic will stop me?” shouted Marigoth. She stormed off into the gathering dusk.

“Be careful!” shouted Yani and Ezratah, racing after her. But Marigoth had already disappeared and did not answer their cries.

That evening Yani stayed in her tent. She did her best to disguise her disappointment. Brek, Tusk, Monteak and Duprey came, bringing wine and food for dinner. The Seagani all knew she had been down on the beach that day, although it did not seem as if they knew why. They were all strong in their urgings that she stay in the fighters’ camp until the tournament had finished. Yani agreed with them. Now she was no longer close to rescuing Elena, she must be careful to stay out of trouble.

As they sat before her tent drinking a jug of good Mirayan red wine, for though the Seagani hated the Mi-rayans they could not deny that they made good wine, a small group of men carrying torches approached the tent.

To everyone’s astonishment it was the Mirayan champion Stefan Krysantium, accompanied by a smaller man whose name was Marius. Two pages carrying torches lit their way.

“Are we never to be free of Gibadgee?” muttered Tusk in Seagani.

Yani politely invited Krysantium and Marius to join them, and even the Seagani shook hands with the two Mi-rayans, though their manners were cold. Brek and Tusk excused themselves shortly afterward. This did not bother Krysantium, who was only interested in Yani. Both he and Marius were fulsome in their praises of Yani’s fighting skills and for a while the talk was all of battles and weapons. Yani told them that she served the Queen of Dania, but not as one of her bodyguards.

“Great Mir!” said Marius. “Do you mean the queen has better fighters than you?”

“The queen’s bodyguard are all women,” said Duprey coolly.

The two Mirayans laughed at this and only stopped when they realized Duprey and Yani were serious.

“What a place this Archipelago is!” said Marius. “I could never fight a woman. I would be dishonored.”

“I would be afraid of harming the poor creature,” said Stefan.

From the way they talked the Mirayans were reassuringly unaware of Yard’s true gender.

“Then we must hope you never have cause to, for the bodyguard of Queen Sharma will probably carve you to pieces,” said Duprey.

“Oh, really,” said Marius in disbelief.

Duprey shot a warning look at Yani, but Yani was in no danger of revealing her sex. She had heard such ignorant scoffings before. Plenty of Archipelagans did not take women warriors seriously until they actually saw them in combat. Stefan Krysantium would learn soon enough and if he never did, that was his loss, not hers.

As the conversation progressed she became more and more surprised. It seemed Stefan’s leige lord in Miraya, Prince Lucius Albinus, was looking for capable warriors. They had already recruited a number of men from the northern islands at this tournament. Would Yani be interested in traveling to Aramaya to aid Prince Lucius in bringing order to their homeland?

Yani almost laughed aloud, but Duprey’s eyes were a warning. How could this Stefan be so dense as to expect a native of Yarmar to support him? Did he not see how things were between the local people and the Mirayans? But he was quite serious. When Yani politely declined, Prince Stefan said, “When your sister has no more need of you, I pray that you will consider my offer again.”

Yani saw he loved fighting for the art of it and was inclined to leave the base business of politics to others. A sense of fellow-feeling gripped her. But had she ever been as unaware as this? It was a lesson to her to pay more attention in the future.

“Will you be so willing when Yani beats you on the final day?” Duprey was asking.

“There is no dishonor in being defeated by a worthy opponent,” said Krysantium. He was obviously looking forward to having a bout as much she was.

When it came time to leave, the two men discovered that their pages had already returned to the fortress. Yani offered to walk with them to the town gate, for they did not know their way around the camp and she did not trust the Seagani to give them any help. Duprey and Montek insisted on coming with them.

“This man is either very stupid or very naive,” muttered Duprey in Seagani as they walked to the entrance of the fighters’ camp with the two men.

“How could he expect me to go?” said Yani.

“There are plenty of Gibadgee-lovers here who would be honored by his request,” said Montek.

“He believes he is fighting for a just cause,” said Duprey.

“That is true,” said Yani, wondering why she did not admire him more. To struggle against death magic was a very fine cause. But things were more complicated than that.

They had just reached the entrance of the camp and were bidding each other farewell when three drunken men came lurching out from between the tents.

One of them ran smack into Krysantium.

“Look out friend,” said the big Mirayan pleasantly.

The man staggered back, blurry eyes focusing pugnaciously on Krysantium. Then he caught sight of Yani.

“Hey, it’s the Greenie,” he said in Seagani. “The Greenie walking with the Gibadgee. That’d be right. Hey, Greenie, how come you people don’t come and help us with the Gibadgee. Hey? They too tough

for you?"

"Greenie" was an extremely disrespectful pun on the slang word for snot. Monteak bridled and reached for his sword, which fortunately was not there. Duprey reached out to stop him. Yard simply turned away and began to bid the two Mirayans farewell.

The drunk wasn't having any of that and neither were his friends. They turned and came at Yani with voices full of jeers and grievance. One of them kept asking where the Greenies had been when the Mirayans had burned his village. When Yani didn't answer, he grabbed her shoulder and tried to pull her around to face him. She shrugged off his clutch quite gently, but that was enough to make him swing a punch at her. Suddenly several more men appeared from between the tents and rushed at Yani. In a moment they were all on top of her, swinging punches and cudgels. Duprey, Monteak and Krysantium leapt into the fray, trying to pull the men away.

"Guards! Guards!" shouted Marius.

Yani gave a good account of herself. She punched and kicked windmill style. A mighty heave of her shoulders sent one man slamming against a wall and a steely punch threw another into Monteak's arms, while a third collapsed in a heap at her feet. In fact she and the other three (Marius had unaccountably disappeared) might well have succeeded in driving the men off had not the Olbia City Watch come around the corner.

At first Yani thought help had come, but the Mirayans did not seem to make any distinction between Yarmari-ans. They hit everyone with equal savagery, sparing only the Mirayans.

"Stop!" cried Stefan Krsantium. He threw himself between Yani and a guard who was just about to stab her with his sword.

"What's going on here?" shouted other voices. A group of men came out of the nearby Wheat Sheaf Tavern. By then Duprey had pulled Yani down onto the ground beside him. Monteak was already sitting there, hands on his head. Yani copied him. Evidently this was the proper pose for being arrested by the city watch, for they immediately stopped beating them and turned their attention to the drunks.

A heated conversation was going on among the patrol leader, Krysantium, and the group of men who had come out of the tavern. It did no good. The patrol tied the hands of Yani, Monteak, Duprey and three of their attackers and dragged them all away to the city watch-house.

Duprey and Monteak were terrified. Yarmarians were sometimes beaten up in the watchhouse cells. They stayed close to Yani, fearing that her assailants might try to attack her again. However, the other Seagani, who now seemed suspiciously sober, had lost interest in pursuing the fight.

As well they might, for at the very least Yani would now be disqualified from fighting in the tournament for breaking the St. Stefan's peace.

When one of the city watch unlocked the door of their cell and beckoned Yani, Duprey and Monteak went forward with her. To their surprise, instead of pushing them roughly back, the watchman said,

"These your companions?" and when Yani nodded, he motioned them to follow her.

"Stallion be praised," said Duprey. "Caelian in charge tonight. He's pretty reasonable for a Mirayan." Standing with Caelian were Krysantium and another compact-looking Mirayan man.

Sweet life! It was Duke Wolf Madraga of Lamartaine!

Every muscle in Yard's body went stiff at the sight of this hated man. She kept her eyes down.

"Well, fellow," said Caelian to her. "It seems this is your lucky day. The duke and Prince Stefan have both testified to your innocence. And Prince Stefan has offered to have you and your companions released on his surety."

“I thank you both,” said Yani politely, but inwardly she was roiling with anger. To owe a favor to Eldene’s murderer! She felt dirty all over.

“It is only just,” said Krysantium. “It would be a shame for such a brilliant fighter to be disqualified from the tournament simply because he was attacked by thugs in the street and forced to defend himself.”

“Indeed the honor is mine,” said the Duke politely. “I have admired your fighting. I look forward to seeing you both fight. I am only glad that justice has been done.”

He turned and went away, which Yani was glad of because she wanted more than anything to beat him to a bloody pulp.

But the other two were impressed with the duke.

“He spoke our language,” said Duprey. “And properly, not like they usually do. No wonder the Eastern Seagani like this man.”

“And he stood up for us against the Mirayans!” wondered Montek.

“Never thought I’d see a Gibadgee act with so much honor.”

The magical protections surrounding Scarvan’s bedchamber were the strongest in the fortress. Around midnight Marigoth gave up trying to get through and went over to the West Tower to see if she could get in and see Elena. But those walls were also well warded, and the door was locked. To use magic to open it would set the wardings off. Nobody came in or out all evening. At last in a terrible rage she ran off and set all the horses loose from the stable, just to get back at the Mirayans.

She hid in the fortress storeroom and cried herself to sleep. At dawn, however, she awoke after having a bad dream about Yani. Anxious about her, she slipped out of the fortress. She did not see the other Tari in the fortress that night, the one who entered Druscilla Scarvan’s chambers with no regard for the wardings.

For many nights now the high chief’s wife Princess Druscilla Scarvan had lain awake. Although she seldom left the women’s quarters, she knew everything that went on in the fortress and she was terribly terribly troubled by the prisoner in the West Tower.

Scarvan had had plenty of concubines before. He was a man fond of fleshly pleasures. Though Druscilla bore his rough lovemaking dutifully, she was always glad when his physical needs were turned to someone else. She kept an eye on him, however. She was a noble woman, but she had few protective family here in the Archipelago and she had only managed to produce one son, a sickly asthmatic. Women had been declared adulterous and put aside for less, and their sons replaced by more vigorous illegitimate issue. Fortunately Scarvan had never shown any signs of overturning the settled order—till now.

It was only after she had laid eyes on Elena Starchild that she had become really afraid. First there were the reports that her husband visited Elena every couple of nights. Considering how age and ill health had caused his potency to fall off in the last couple of years this was... interesting. She herself kept honorably secluded, as a high class Mirayan woman should, but had sent a trusted Mirayan servant over to see the woman. When the servant returned she claimed she had not been able to get into the tower. This was odd. The guards usually obeyed Druscilla’s orders.

So she sent her beloved bondserf, Dagmar. Dagmar was clever and cunning and the two women were as close as two women could be. Dagmar’s clever, sensual massages always relieved Druscilla’s tensions, and when Scarvan did not require her attendance, the two women slept in the same bed.

“She is beautiful,” said Dagmar when she returned. “But she is no threat to you.” It was quite obvious that she was lying. When Druscilla challenged her, she burst into tears.

“Do not kill her, lady, please,” Dagmar pleaded. “Please do not harm her.”

So Druscilla called the chief protection mage. The chief protection mage had a penchant for men, a weakness Scarvan would have despised had he known about it. He always did as Druscilla told him.

She met him veiled, as was proper. In fact she should not have met him at all without her husband by, but no one in their right mind would have suspected the mage of designs on Druscilla’s body.

“Let me see the prisoner in the tower!” she demanded. “And do not tell my husband you have done so.”

The mage cast a bowl of seeing for her.

“Why, she is beautiful!” cried the mage, who rarely said such things about women.

And she was.

Oh such a woman! So *very* beautiful. So beautiful that she took Druscilla’s breath away. So dangerous she took Druscilla’s sleep away.

Such a woman could twist any man around her little finger. If Scarvan got a child on her, as he must surely do, given the attention he gave her, and if that child were a son and if it grew to be a man...

Druscilla could only lie awake at night, her head filled with that woman’s beauty, and pray that Scarvan was past getting a son on her. For what man could resist making such a woman his queen?

Druscilla Scarvan was a devout Mirite and regarded herself as a virtuous woman. Yet sometimes in those dark watches of the night, or when she kissed her son in the morning, she thought seriously about having the woman poisoned. She knew she would never be able to. Though she tried to hate the woman, she could not bear the thought of her destruction.

But on the second night of St. Stefan’s feast, she must have slept for she had a vision. She was lying awake, Dagmar sleeping by her side, when a vision of Karana, Holy Mother of Kerum the Message Bringer, appeared at her bedside. Druscilla recognized her immediately from the icons. She was pale and unearthly beautiful with shining golden hair streaming out around her like a halo. Oh, gentle mother of the Shining One!

Her dark slanted eyes were full of tender wisdom. She placed one of her cool pale hands on Druscilla’s feverish brow.

“Oh, Mother,” moaned Druscilla. “Help me. Help me. What am I to do about the woman?”

“My dear child,” Karana said in a tender voice. “I have heard your prayers. I have come to help you.”

Tears of gratitude ran down Druscilla’s cheeks.

“Be blessed,” said Mother Karana, stroking Druscilla’s face. “Do as I say and I will not let any harm come to you. Here is what you must do...”

“Sweet Life! What fools these Mirayans be!” thought Jindabyne as she left Druscilla Scarvan’s room.

Chapter 14

The morning following Yani's release, a furious Prince Alexis Scarvan called Duke Wolf Madraga to him.

Why had Wolf intervened in the matter of the Tari warrior, he demanded to know. Did he have no loyalty to his prince?

It was every vassal's duty to save his liege from making a fatal step, Wolf told him coldly. And he was making a mistake in his dealing with the Tari. Why was he so determined to offend such a powerful people? Did he not realize how dangerous they could be?

"Attacking looks like fear, Highness. It is a mistake."

"Fool," shouted Scarvan, so red in the face that Wolf dared to hope an apoplexy might kill him there and then. "These native legends of all-powerful mages who defeat demons in single combat—where have we seen proof? If the Tari are so very powerful why did they not own this country? You have interfered in matters that do not concern you. Get out of my sight."

Scarvan was sorely tempted to have Wolf arrested, but it was an offense to St. Stefan. The man was very popular with his other followers; a more subtle disposal was called for.

Wolf Madraga left the room and sent for his brother. The Lady of Birds had told him to leave Olbia this morning and now he had every excuse. He walked angrily to the main hall, where the morning religious service had recently finished. Though the door of the prince's chamber had been closed, rumors of his anger at the duke had already spread throughout the fortress, and the duke's face when he came into the hall confirmed them. Several men gathered round him.

Duke Wolf had not expected his anger at his erstwhile friend to be so vindictive. Despite wanting to present a reasonable face, he could not resist telling the others that the prince was so obsessed with Elena Starchild that he was willing to risk all they had worked for here in Sea-gan. He found no agreement among them, though, for most Mirayans found it unbelievable that the Tari even existed. The thing that disturbed them about the situation was that Scarvan and Madraga should fall out over a woman. None of the nobles at Olbia had seen Elena Starchild, so they were mystified by Wolf's actions.

"Do you not see that disunity will harm us even more than these mages of yours?" said Lord Appius to Madraga.

"It is not I who provokes disunity," retorted Wolf. "The prince denies me my rights. Take care that he does not do the same to you."

He saw his brother at the door of the hall and went to tell him to pack.

"Madraga was always too friendly to the natives," said Lord Serranus.

"I do not understand how they can fall out like this," said Appius. "They were like father and son."

The few in Olbia who had seen Elena Starchild could have enlightened the others as to why there was no hope of peace between Prince Alexis Scarvan and his former favorite vassal. They could see Wolf Madraga's claims about the Tari for what they were: mere justification of his envy. But they were not present and since they were either priests or mere men at arms, they had never had any hope of possessing Elena and knew it. It would not have occurred to any of them that she might be won by any other means than by force. She was like some inanimate piece of treasure. They simply burned in resigned hopelessness, knowing her to be only the stuff of dreams.

The third day of St. Stefan's tournament was bright and sunny. A pleasant breeze blew in from the

sea, keeping the temperature down. The areas around the field reserved for natives were crowded. There must have been at least four Seagani men for every one Mirayan, though not all of them were free men. The talk that Scarvan was endangering them all by keeping a Tari woman captive were very persistent. The canceled blessing the day before had caused resentment, and so had Killon's death. The Seagani were looking forward to seeing Yani Tari show the Mirayans that there was still fighting spirit among the Yarmarians.

The sixty competitors in the tournament of St. Stefan had now each fought twice and fifteen winning combatants remained. Today there would be eight bouts. Since there was an odd number of contestants, one of the combatants would have to fight twice, and Scarvan had already fixed it that the Tari would be the one "chosen by lot" to do so.

Now, sitting in the grandstand, he wondered if he had been wise to give the Seagani two opportunities to watch their favorite. He had thought to wear the Tari out, but he seemed to be a man who was nourished by fighting. Two bouts would probably make him stronger. He was half considering having last night's judgment in favor of the Tari overturned. But even though that ungrateful traitor Wolf Madraga was gone, Stefan Krysantium—who was another of the Mirayan patriarch's cousins, curse him—was a staunch supporter of the Tari's innocence, and at the moment he was swaying their fool of a hierarch to his side. Scarvan didn't want to be stuck with this ridiculous native title of High Chief all his life.

Maybe he should just let the fellow win the tournament. What good would it do him? Elena Starchild's sweet little arse was safe in his tower, and the Tari had no proof that he had her.

Yet it was intolerable to see one of the natives beat a Mirayan. He knew that was why the Seagani had come in such numbers. Treacherous, ungrateful barbarians.

The Tari's first bout came up all too soon, and he came onto the field with his opponent, the Eastern Seagani champion Geyome. Geyome was the best of the remaining native warriors. Maybe he would do the trick. Scarvan wrestled with a sense of doom. You are getting old, he thought. It was the first time he had felt this since he had taken Elena Starchild.

The priests tested the iron circlets at the necks of each contestant. The two warriors stood before Scarvan and saluted him. Once again the Tari announced that he was fighting in honor of his missing sister. There were sideways glances at Scarvan from among the Mirayans. Did *they* think he was getting too old? He felt trapped. The two fighters began the round. Steel rang against steel and thudded against wooden shields.

Hack. Clang. Hack. Hack.

Geyome was very much outclassed by the Tari. The fair-haired warrior was quick of foot and hand and his light-looking frame disguised enormous strength. Scarvan was still amazed by it even after seeing two other fights.

He tried to shrug off the feeling of doom. He was still a man, still virile. He was still in control and that very morning he had had Elena's child moved from the convent. Best to have her in hand. His wife could look after her in the safety of the fortress. If the Tari heard about her... How he longed to have the fellow killed! But that would be too dangerous. Even yesterday's attack had made him look desperate. Curse him, Wolf was right. No. It was better to do nothing till after the tournament, when eyes would be turned elsewhere.

Hack. Slash. Clang. Hack. Stumble. Hack.

Had Yam been a Mirayan, Scarvan would have happily made him his champion, but such skills in a native, and such a native, were a horrible threat to Mirayan prestige.

Hack. Clang. Clang. Slash. Hack.

Could they afford to let this native, of all natives, beat them? Scarvan's eyes went to the warrior's square, where he could see Stefan Krysantium waiting for his round, towering over the other warriors. He had great hopes for Krysantium. But he preferred to have certainties and there was no doubt the Tari was damned good. If it had not been for the iron manacles at his neck, Scarvan would have suspected him of magecraft.

Hack. Clang. Clang. Clang.

Metal rang together as Geyome's sword was forced out of his hand, spun midair and landed in dust.

The native element of the crowd went wild with delight. Yani bowed to his opponent and then held up his sword, waving it at the crowd, who cheered even harder.

Let him wave, thought Scarvan. So he makes a blow to Mirayan prestige. We are strong enough to survive it. Let the natives shout. They are no match for Mirayan power. The important thing was that he not be forced to hand over Elena, and there was no chance of that happening.

At that very moment one great iron grille that covered a window of the women's quarters adjacent to the field fell from its place on the high stone wall, crashing deaf-eningly onto the ground below. But no one noticed the grille. For at the window stood the most fair and beautiful woman anyone had ever seen. A sudden silence fell over the field as everyone, Mirayan and native, gaped at her. She flung out her arms. "Yard!" she cried. "Yani, Mari-goth! Alyx is safe!"

"Elena!" shouted Yani, running across the field toward the wall.

"He's lying," shouted the woman. "I am here. Get me free. Please. Get me free, Yani."

"Do something," Scarvan shouted at the chief protection mage, who lost his head and did utterly the wrong thing. He threw a fireball at the women's window.

Scarvan knew full well it was only to drive the woman away from the window, that it would not even get through the protection barrier, but as he watched it hit that barrier, his heart was in his mouth, terrified for his treasure's safety.

To the other onlookers it simply looked like a vicious attack on a beautiful and innocent woman. A Tari woman!

The Archipelagans went mad. They turned almost as one and charged at the mage where he stood on the grandstand, rushing across the field like a great torrent of seething water, screaming their hatred at the Mirayans.

The other protection mages had their wits about them. A magical protection barrier was flung over Scarvan and his party, and the royal bodyguard formed a cordon outside it. They met the oncoming mass of furious but unarmed Seagani with drawn swords.

But it was as if the fireball had unleashed a dam. All the outrages and resentments of the last twenty-three years were given expression. The Seagani fought with fists and boots as if their lives mattered nothing, overwhelming the guards, clawing them down into the crowd, tearing them limb from limb, spattering blood everywhere.

"To me, to me!" shouted Scarvan, and the mages managed to drag a few surviving guards through the barrier as the natives broke through the shield wall and came streaming over the side of the grandstand.

It was the stuff of nightmares—those wild, tattooed faces crammed against the barrier, screaming for blood, tearing at those within with bloodied clawing hands. Out in the crowd Mirayans were dying, being ripped or trampled to death. You could see their limbs or headless bodies being thrown up out of the thrashing crowd. The faces of the protection mages were tense and strained.

Scarvan stayed calm.

“Let’s go!” he shouted to the chief protection mage. Everyone shuffled forward in an orderly movement that made Scarvan proud to be Mirayan. The protection barrier had a force of its own and slowly they pushed through the seething, clawing mass of natives, trampling several underfoot until they got down out of the grandstand.

Several bursts of magic hit the protection barrier, but of course since they were not a concerted attack, they merely shook it. All was blood, fists, and fighting bodies slamming against the invisible wall. Behind there was a crash as the grandstand collapsed. The hierarch was praying loudly. Scarvan concentrated on shouting words of encouragement and pushing the group firmly forward.

The church fathers had set out the rules for the tournament of St. Stefan in a war-torn country. They had known their business. Every aspect of the tournament, including the field layout, was dictated by religious law. Thus the grandstand of the ruler was as far as possible from the armed fighters and as close as could be to the city gate. Though it seemed an eternity before the Mirayans in the protection barrier managed to plow through the torrent of natives, they made it to the gate before the mages collapsed from exhaustion.

The city watch had managed to get the gates closed. Good lads! thought Scarvan with mingled relief and pride. As they came up to them, one of the gates swung ajar and a detachment of the watch came charging out, carving into the screaming crowd before the gate. The Seagani still fought with maniacal savagery. Though still only armed with bits of wood and stone, they seemed determined to rip the guards to pieces and in several cases succeeded. But when a Mirayan mage peppered the crowd with fire, enough of them retreated for the protected party to slip through the gates. A couple of natives managed to force their way in with them, but they were quickly butchered by the watch. In the narrow streets inside it was suddenly dark and quiet. Many Mirayan spectators had managed to get through the gate before Scarvan’s party and they stood around on the blood-slicked cobbles, a couple of them kicking the bodies of the dead natives. Otherwise things seemed quiet inside the town, despite the large population of Seagani slaves who were still inside.

Scarvan ordered those of his magical bodyguard who were not exhausted to help the city watch retrieve those Mirayans who could be rescued from the crowd. They could have done with a really powerful mage like Lev Madraga, but he had gone with his brother. Even so, a trickle of Mirayans was being let in the gates. All Seagani were deemed to be untrustworthy and even known collaborators were left outside to take their chances with the crowd. In this way Dooat and a number of his supporters lost their lives that day.

“They seemed so harmless yesterday,” murmured the dazed Hierarch Jeromsh.

“They are savages, the lot of them!” snarled Scarvan. “They always were and always will be. Now you see what we are up against.”

“You did well,” he told Watch Captain Caelian.

As he spoke Scarvan felt his old battle strength and certainty returning. This was his element.

He turned to the other Mirayans and spoke over the noise of pounding on the gates.

“They are a poorly armed rabble! Do not be afraid. Return to your homes and secure your slaves. We shall have the situation under control quickly.”

He turned and led the warriors along the town streets to the fortress with his old certain step.

In the women’s quarters mages were walling up the window opening. In the inner bedroom the women huddled against the walls, faces covered. Some were the wives and daughters of other Mirayans, weeping with fear over the fate of their menfolk.

Standing alone in the center of the room, Elena closed her eyes and tried to feel the life force, but she could not keep from trembling. And soon enough Scarvan came blasting into the women's quarters, roaring like a red-faced storm.

Elena forced herself to stand strong and proud. She was Eldene's wife. She filled her mind with thoughts of him and did not look. The other women let out squeals of terror and huddled closer together as he came smashing into the room.

"Who did this?" thundered Scarvan.

One of the waiting women pointed to Dagmar, the woman who had led Elena here.

"She brought that woman in!"

"Leave us!" said Scarvan to the women, going purposefully toward Dagmar.

"My lord, it was on my orders," cried his wife, trying to shield Dagmar. Elena was impressed. Scarvan liked obedience, but his wife obviously loved her servant more than she feared him.

"You stupid bitch," Scarvan shouted, catching Dru-scilla by her headdress and backhanding her across the face. "You stupid jealous cow! How many good Mirayan men have been killed today because of you?" He backhanded her several times across the face before throwing her out of the bedroom door. He kicked Dagmar hard after her as she scuttled past him with the other women. He made sure the door was firmly closed behind them before he rounded on Elena.

"You treacherous bitch. Go to the window and tell them you are well and happy."

Anger rushed into her like a red flood. How she hated this filthy bastard.

"Never," she screamed at him. "I will betray you every chance I get."

"Your child will never walk again." he shouted, grabbing at her.

"My child is safe from you, Gibadgee," she cried. "My people have taken her."

Killing rage filled her. She threw herself at him, punching, kicking and biting, getting in some satisfying blows before he got a stranglehold on her.

"I'll show you who is the man here," he grunted, throwing her facedown on the bed. And he did, thrusting into her so brutally she couldn't help screaming. Then he trussed her up clumsily but effectively with the bed rope. Still, as she lay on the bed with her nose bleeding and her arms feeling as if they would come out of their sockets, she could not help feeling a savage sense of triumph. She had lain like this many times before, but this time she could hear the beautiful roaring of an angry mob outside the fortress.

Though she could see Elena there was no way Yani could get through the walls of the fortress or its magical protections to rescue her, and so she turned her attention to the chaos around her. The animal violence of the Seagani horrified her; their savagery was unspeakable and there seemed nothing Yani could do. The bitter black wings of the warbird overshadowed everything. This was her first experience of true battle and the horror confounded her. She could only watch open-mouthed as various Mirayans were torn apart, their blood and limbs splattering everywhere. It was appalling to see people butchered. Then the harsh voice of the raven spoke in her mind, urging her on and hardening her to horrors. She began to fight, pulling Seagani away from Mirayans.

Soon she found herself trying to save a handful of Mi-ryan fighters. The Mirayans who had been in the combatants square had formed a defensive circle, and many of them still lived. The raven in Yani's head knew that these fighters could be of more use to her alive than they would be dead. The raven also knew that the Seagani had to stop this killing spree and concentrate on assaulting the fortress.

“Stop!” she shouted as she struggled with the crowd around the fighters. “We need hostages!”

Duprey appeared at her side and seized her arm. “Quickly, we have to get away. Scarvan will be coming out any moment with reinforcements. He’ll cut us to pieces.”

“What? Of course he won’t. We’ve got hostages. And Mari is just about to...”

She looked around. Already scattered groups of Sea-gani were fleeing away across the St. Stefan’s field. Disaster. Now was the time to stand firm. She turned and shouted,

“Stop! Men of the Seagan! Stop! To me! To me!”

Such was the authority in her voice that most of those running away looked back.

At that very opportune moment the gates of Olbia smashed asunder in a blast of fiery magic. As the smoke and wood cleared, everyone saw a little Tari girl before the ruined gate. She stood in the middle of a huge bonfire that did not consume her. A rain of arrows and a huge blast of magical fire came down from the guard towers on either side of the gate. The little girl flicked her hands contemptuously and suddenly the arrows fell to the ground.

The fireball spun in the air above her and the little girl laughed. She made a throwing gesture of the hand. The fireball flew back at the gate and smashed into the watch tower.

The little girl smiled and put her hands on her hips in disdainful pleasure. Then she turned and gestured at those on the field as if welcoming them to her house.

“Go!” cawed the hard voice of the warbird in Yani’s ear, and hard determination filled her.

“We can win this!” she shouted, running forward. “Quickly! Come and take possession of the town.”

Sword uplifted, she charged through the gates and Duprey and the others, caught up by the wonder of what they had seen, rushed after her. The flow of men across the field reversed as they swept back toward the city.

Inside there was some small resistance. But many of the city watch including their captain, Caelian, were killed and no one else had yet had time to organize. Once resistance was quashed, Yani began to send bands of men under the leadership of Montek and other Seagani champions around the city to take the city watch post, to round up the Mirayan merchants and take custody of any weapons they could find.

“The rest of you with me. We must stop the Mirayans coming out of the fortress!”

“But how?” shouted Brek at her elbow.

“My sister has an idea,” said Yani. “Come on.” She ran fleetly up the street toward the fortress and the Seagani followed her. She had about fifty men following when she left the city gates, but everywhere out of alleys and houses came other Seagani to join the throng, and by the time they had reached the gates of the fortress their numbers had tripled. Most of these new supporters were house slaves, both men and women, carrying kitchen knives or brooms.

The gates of the fortress were shut tight and archers were stationed up in the walls. Soldiers were assembling in the yard before the gate. Outside, Seagani could be seen collected in the covered places behind stalls and in alleyways, Sticks and knives could be seen gripped in their hands. Mad barbarians! They would be cut to pieces.

Then suddenly a little girl skipped gaily across the open ground toward the gate, her long fair hair rippling out behind her. The Mirayans thought she was some kind of messenger and they did not fire on her. They had a basket which they usually lowered for messengers, but they did not bother for her, because the troops were almost ready to leave the courtyard below.

In the gatehouse the Fortress Commander, who had two small daughters and thought it was barbaric

to use a little girl in this way, sent word down to the leader of the troops to keep an eye out for the child and try to get her to safety. The other soldiers in the gatehouse chortled roughly among themselves.

“Look at her. Do you reckon... She’s leaning on the gate. Ah, Mir! Is she trying to push it open then? Ha! Ha! Ha! Now she’s whispering to it...”

Then suddenly—

“Witchcraft!” screamed one of the guard mages, blasting a fireball through one of the arrow slits. The others leapt to join him.

But it was too late. The wood of the gate was already moving and twisting. The men in the gatehouse could see the tops of the huge planks beginning to sprout leaves. They peppered the child with arrows and fire, but nothing reached her and nothing stopped the growing planks. Soon they were driven from the gatehouse by the branches and leaves that were filling it.

Roots grew from the bottom of the gate and drove deep, breaking up the cobbles beneath them. The desperate Mirayans tried to open it, but the crossbar had turned into a kind of creeper and was twining itself into the gate posts, which were also sending roots down into the ground below. The gate rocked with the movement of all this growth, but it showed no sign of bursting open.

Outside Yani began to suspect that Marigoth’s power was failing. Under the cover of their shields, she and a couple of other warriors ran across the open space before the gate and carried Marigoth away just as she began to collapse. There was little response from the Mirayans.

“Bring axes! Bring fire,” they were shouting within.

Jindabyne too had been horrified by the carnage on the field of St. Stefan. She told herself these were only out-landers who didn’t matter, but she retired quickly to the roof of the the fortress so that she couldn’t see the unexpected consequences of her plan. This was not the first time that something she had done had ended in violence. All that mattered was that destiny be properly served, she reminded herself desperately. It was what uncle would have said and she tried to believe it with her whole heart. Still, Marigoth’s actions at the gate were a welcome diversion.

What a good idea! thought Jindabyne. In the form of a sparrow, she flew down and perched on the gate. The spell would not hold. The Mirayans were already chopping away at the roots of the gate tree. This Marigoth was like a fledgling bird, its wings half feather and half down, unable to fly properly. Whereas Jindabyne was a credit to her uncle’s teaching. She took control of the spell.

A few moments later, branches and leaves came snaking out not only from the top of the gate but from all over the timbers. The roots fattened and writhed and thrust even deeper into the soil. Roots dug into the very stone of the fortress, making the rocks scream and sending out great clouds of rock dust. The gate was no longer a gate but a massive tree.

Jindabyne stood back, pleased with her handiwork. She had drawn on the forces of life which were so common within the fortress, the life forces of all the Mirayans and their livestock. She was not using up people’s life spirit the way a demonmaster did. She was merely making it flow briefly through the gate, before it went back to those who generated it. It was so subtly done that they would probably never know what was happening. As long as there were living things in this fortress, this gate would continue to grow, resisting axes and fire.

It was a thing she had observed the little girl do with that Mirayan she had enslaved. Uncle would be proud when she told him of this wonderful spell which maintained harmony and harmed no one.

Suddenly a fireball engulfed her and she saw that the Mirayans were gathered nearby, staring at her with terror.

She was visible in her true guise, a tall green-clad woman. The mages, recognizing evil magic in a green-clad woman mage, had begun peppering her with fireballs. These little balls of fire were so amusing! She threw back her head and laughed. Then, with a carefree slowness and an impudent grin, she began to fade until at last she disappeared completely.

Chapter 15

“Yani Tari has the city,” shouted Ezratah, leaning out of the belltower in the city square. He could just muster enough magic to magnify his voice so that it could be heard all over the city. “Do not resist. Yani Tari has the city. The Mirayans have been defeated.”

It was late afternoon and Ezratah’s words were pretty much true. Monteak had taken the watchhouse completely by surprise and his group was now handing out weapons. Those warriors who had given up their weapons on entering the city had been delightedly reunited with them. There had been some violence against Mirayans as the city fell and the slaves rose up against their masters, but now Brek and Duprey were overseeing the situation, locking the Mirayan men in the watchhouse and their families in various storehouses. Slave manacles were being removed in smithies all over the town. Groups of archers, both men and women, were watching the walls, and patrols were being organized to guard outside the town walls so that the Mirayans would not be able to make a breakout there. The only way out of the fortress was over the walls on ropes, a maneuver that would leave them completely exposed.

There was another unexpected bonus. The moment the city gates had been breached, Brek had sent Tusk up to the slave camps to tell them now was the time. Though it was much earlier than expected, the slaves in the women’s camp, a number of whom were mages, had overpowered their guards easily and quickly gone on to the men’s camp and freed them. Most of the Mirayan men from the Wanderelle river area had been at the St. Stefan’s tournament this day and there were few left to protect their farms. Field hands all along the valley had rebelled and the smoke of burning farms filled the air as the victorious horde of slaves marched down toward the city. Many of those freed field slaves were experienced warriors and their fieldwork had kept them strong—a valuable addition to the forces that already held Olbia.

Only at the harbor had things gone badly. In their first excitement the Seagani had set fire to those ships they could reach and the rest had been warned and put out safely to sea. A number of them were hovering off shore, but most of them had set sail and gone, no doubt to carry the news and get help.

“We could have done with those ships to escape in,” said Brek at a council of the Seagani leaders.

This kind of talk angered Monteak and his friends— they had the town and surely there was some way they could take the fortress. Monteak looked at Yani for support. She shook her head.

“My sister tried to get into the fortress the moment Elena appeared at the window,” she said. “Their magic is too strong for us.”

“But surely the other Tari...”

“The other Tari wanted no part of our rescue of Elena. They will want no part of this,” Yani said quickly, to dash these hopes as fast as possible.

A little before this meeting Marigoth had regained consciousness and had made another attempt to get

through the fortress's magical barriers, this time using the extra powers of the ex-slave mages. It had been a dismal failure. The mages seemed to lack any ability to meld their powers together.

"We must give up any hope of taking the fortress," said Brek firmly. "It is enough that the Mirayans cannot easily come out now. But they have good communications, and no doubt Scarvan has already sent word down the coast to his fortresses at Tarquin and Karanakasta for reinforcements. We have three, maybe four, more days before they get here. They will be well-armed, well-trained troops of the type that slaughtered our people at Cesane and Pucell. We have many fine fighting men and women here, but our numbers are less and I do not think we can stand against the Mirayans here. The place is full of collaborators. Better to escape to somewhere safe in the interior to fight better armed and organized at some later date."

"But what of the troops who may meet us in the uplands?" shouted Monteak. "There may be fighting all along the way."

"We would be better to take a ship," said Reecah. "Then we can get away faster. There would be a welcome for all in the lands of the Mori." There were some looks of disbelief around the table. Seagani and Mori, herders and hunters, were traditional enemies.

It was fully dark before they agreed that Brek's plan of escape was to be put into motion as soon as possible. Tomorrow night most of the escaped slaves would set out on foot or with packhorses to the Northern Seagan border, carrying as many supplies as they could manage. This would give them at least two days to get ahead of reinforcements. Because of the efficiency of the Mirayans' magical communications they would probably have warning that they were coming, but Brek hoped that there would not be enough time for the upland Mirayans to respond adequately.

The Yarmarians had magical communications too. En-sorcelled pigeons would enable them to send ahead to rebel leaders all along their route, asking for aid. It was a desperate plan, but when it came to the vote most of the leaders accepted it as the best one and Monteak grudgingly agreed to be led by the majority.

He was chosen to lead the rearguard warriors. They were to stay behind to keep the Mirayans from breaking out of the fortress and to try and disguise the fact that most of the other Seagani had withdrawn. Their number would be determined by the number of horses that could be collected from the city and the outlying farms.

Reecah and her followers would try to take some of the ships, however. There were plenty among their number who were wounded or too old or too young to make a hard journey on foot with the prospect of fighting on the way.

Though all these plans helped the Seagani, they benefited Elena not at all.

"Look where helping people leads," shouted Marigoth when Yani went to see her. "Now we are on either side of an impregnable barrier."

Yani refrained from pointing out that it had been Mari's own idea to cause the gate to grow into a tree, and that she had been thinking only of protecting the Seagani at that time. Only with hindsight did the sisters realize that their protective impulse had served Elena badly. How could they get into the fortress now? The magical protections were still too strong and the walls too well guarded against non-magical troops.

More ruthless women would have let the Mirayans come out, even if had meant Seagani losses, so that they might have had a chance to get into the fortress behind them and escape with Elena. But such a sacrifice of people had never been an option. Tari simply did not act so. The life spirit must be respected no matter whose body it flowed through. Yet as she thought of the terrible punishments Elena might be facing for calling out from the window, Yani couldn't help regretting that she wasn't ruthless.

The hostages taken on St. Stefan's field were her only hope. She had them brought up to the city gate and demanded Elena in return for them. They were very valuable hostages, most of them Mirayan aristocrats, including Stefan Krysantium and Lord Serranus's son Georgi, known among the Seagani as the Butcher of Cesane. Yard had captured Georgi herself, and the fact that he still survived was a testament to how much respect the Seagani felt for her. His burning and rapine of Seagani villages after the battle of Cesane and his brutality within the captured territory were legendary.

Though Yani gave her word that these hostages would be honorably freed in return for Elena, the Mirayans simply sent an insulting reply. Despite her best intentions, her quest to free Elena seemed to have been taken over by the Seagani struggle against their Mirayan masters. Yani did not feel her first attempt at leadership had been very successful.

Still she kept trying.

She sent Jacques, a Seagani merchant, who claimed to have the ear of the high chief, to be lifted over the wall to try and negotiate with the Mirayans.

"I beg of you, Highness, give them the woman," pleaded Jacques. "There are a mere two of them. Both are only women and one a little child and yet they have wrought all this chaos. Give them the woman before they call more of their people. They have promised to leave you alone if you do so."

"You sniveling fool," retorted Scarvan. "If they are so strong, why do they not come into the fortress and just take her? We Mirayans do not accede to the demands of mere natives. Especially fakes and charlatans like these Tari."

It crossed Jacques's mind to beg them to let him stay with them in the fortress for many of the Seagani rebels had been very threatening toward the collaborators. However, he feared the fortress would become a deathtrap. It was built on the headland just as the last one had been and could fall into the sea just as readily. He went back over the wall in the messenger's basket trembling but with no pleas.

"The only way to get them to listen is to execute the hostages," said Brek and Duprey. "Let us kill Georgi Ser-ranus tomorrow, before the walls. He deserves to die for his crimes anyway."

"No!" cried Yani in horror. The other two looked at her in shock. "My honor does not like this way of doing things. There must be some other method," she told them, and she left the room.

Brek looked after her. "Why?" he asked Duprey.

"This is a Tari we are speaking to," said Duprey. "All life is precious to them. Killing hurts them."

"Squeamishness is a dangerous thing in a leader. Is Georgi Serranus so valuable? We Seagani have suffered greatly at his hands—at the hands of all of them. Are we not entitled to some revenge?"

"I shall talk to Yani," said Duprey.

Yani was standing at the window in the other room. Her forehead rested on clenched hands.

"There is no other way, is there?" she said as Duprey came in. "We have so little time before we must flee."

"Georgi Serranus is an evil man. It would be a better world if he were dead."

"That could be said of almost anyone. I am sure the Mirayans say that of us. And we are both right from our point of view. Killing people is not a way to make the world better. Harmony is not won thus. The life spirit is not served thus. I know it."

"This is not Ermora, Yani. We cannot deal with the Georgis of this world by making them go to sleep as the Tari do."

"I know," said Yani. If they had been in Ermora or even if they had been real Tari, they could have called for help and mages would have come and simply set Elena free. They would have made the

Seagani and the Mirayan soldiers sleep until their leaders had come to a peaceful solution. And they would have let the life force deal with a man like Georgi Serranus in the spirit cave. Without the Tari it was necessary to find other solutions. But this killing of hostages in cold blood... !

“I don’t want to do this. It is wrong. In doing this I will become like those I hate. There is no Tightness or honor in it.”

“This is war. Perhaps the Tari do not have to worry about their survival, but we outlanders do. Do honor or rightness have a place here?”

At this Yani’s shoulders slumped.

“Oh, I am a fool. I love being a warrior. I love to fight. And yet when I see what happened today, what war is really like, I hate the very reason for the warrior’s existence. There is no honor in war. There never can be. War is to kill or be killed—a dirty business where all are led to do wrong.”

She put her face in her hands. Tentatively Duprey moved to her side and put a hand on her shoulder. She leaned against him. A look of satisfaction came onto his face. She was coming to depend on him.

“Will it work?” she said after a few minutes.

“Who can say?” said Duprey. “I hope so.”

“We may have to kill the others as well?”

“It is possible.”

She shook her head. “Is this the first step on the path that will earn me the name the Butcher of Olbia? Is this how Georgi Serranus started out? Will I ever feel clean again?”

“Look Yani, it is not fitting for a Tari to be involved here. You are servants of the life spirit. Distance yourself—forbid us to do it; Brek and I will take the responsibility for the executions.”

“That would be the grossest hypocrisy. This killing is to benefit me. To ignore your actions is just as bad as doing it myself. In fact it would be most fit if I killed him myself.”

“No!” cried Duprey.

“Why not? I would feel better ordering it, knowing I would suffer too.”

“Yani, you must not let their side-or our side-see you weak. How ill will you be after sharing his death? He is not worth it.”

Yani looked at him cynically. “No? Don’t worry. I won’t do it. Even as I suggested it I saw that it was a self-indulgence. We are here to free Elena. I would be weak and sick for several days after killing Serranus. I might even go mad.” She shook her head bitterly. “And it would not make it any more right.”

After a moment she pulled herself up and squared her shoulders. “I can think of no other way. And time is running out. Tell Brek I... agree. I’m going to check the patrols.”

She turned and strode from the room.

Duprey’s shoulders relaxed the minute she left. Several times his resolve had weakened and he had almost told Yani that the Mirayans never negotiated for hostages. He was glad he had managed to hold firm. His own mother had been killed by Mirayan troops after the battle of Cesane. Sometimes in the darkness of night his dreams were made hideous by visions of how she must have died. He craved the butcher’s death with all his being.

And who could say? It might work this time.

That evening Yani patrolled the Mirayan quarter to see that no one was being mistreated. Up till today she would have trusted the Seagani to act well toward their captives. The riot had been a brutal awakening for her. She still believed the Seagani cause was the just one, and yet how could people who had acted with such brutal disregard for the life spirit be right? She began to see why her ancestors had found it easy to turn their back on the non-Tari. But just because that choice was easy didn't make it the right one. She knew she would be glad she had used her skills to help the Seagani. Eventually.

In the same frame of mind as one who picks at a painful scab, Yani decided to go down and see the hostages. She was glad she did, for several were wounded and their Seagani captors had refused them any healing. After an argument as to whether healing could be spared for such "pieces of shit," she stood over the healers while they performed their tasks. She also sent for a Mirayan priest.

"You are to die tomorrow," she told Georgi Serranus. "We have told your people in the fortress that one of you will die every day until my sister is returned. Make your peace with your gods."

"I expected nothing better from you barbarians," said Serranus, spitting on the ground. "If it had been up to me, I would have tied your guts to my shield long ago, you upstart yellow freak."

His eyes glittered madly in the torchlight. The raven came into Yard's head then, regarding Georgi Serranus with a hard, relentless gaze. He was insane and very vicious.

"It is not the Tari way to take life," said Yani with quiet dignity. "We have a cruder, more refined form of punishment. You would be sent to commune with the life force in the Spirit Cave and there you would experience the death throes of all those whose deaths you have caused. Thus does the life force punish those who offend against it. And I know of your crimes, Butcher of Cesane. They are famous even in Dania. Yet still I would offer you an honorable death in battle for I know this is what warriors crave. I will fight you to the death if you prefer."

"Ha!" said Serranus, whose shoulder wound would take several days to finish healing. "Typical barbarian. You fight a wounded man because that is the only way you can win."

"Very well, then," said Yani. The raven still watched. Serranus's reaction satisfied its judgment and salvaged Yani's conscience. "If you prefer to die by execution, I shall make sure it is swift."

"Wait!" cried Stefan Krysantium as Yani climbed the stairs to leave. "May not a champion fight for the sake of Serranus? Would this not save him?"

Yani shook her head. "No. It is necessary that Serranus die so that your people know we are serious."

"That is a pity. I would very much like to fight you, and now it may not happen. I guess I will have to wait my turn. Or will you fight me anyway? We have a bout promised."

Could she beat this fellow? The thought was exciting. For a moment she felt like her old lighthearted self. But this was no game. It sickened her to think that she had once thought of it so.

"Do you hope to kill me Mirayan? I am not the only or the most important leader here."

"I am an honorable man. It would only be to the first blood. To see who is best."

Did he mean it? How could he mean it in face of the fact that they had killed so many of his people so brutally? Suddenly the honor of warriors seemed ridiculously out of place.

"Such a bout would not be right in this time and place," she said.

The breach of the city gate and their trapping in the fortress had taken the Mirayans in Olbia completely by surprise. But when Scarvan told his council that he would not give in to Yani Tari's

demands, there was little questioning of his decision. They could not show weakness— if the Tari were really such a threat, let them come into the fortress and get their sister. The Mirayans were a tough people, honed through a generation of civil war at home and twenty-three years of keeping unruly conquests under control in the Archipelago. They recognized the necessity of sacrificing individuals for the greater good.

No one was very surprised at how easily Lord Serranus had agreed to abandon his son. Georgi was an uncontrollable brute. It was rumored that Serranus had been fending off assassination attempts from him for the last three years.

Perhaps also the strange power of Elena Starchild had had its effect on the Mirayans. Even though they had only had a brief glimpse of her from the side of the fortress, many of them now desired her. The quality of fatal beauty affected each man according to his nature.

Lord Appius, Brek's lord, might find Elena's face haunting, but he had no notion of ever possessing her. He was one of the great mass of humankind who accepted that the blind following of his own desires is not the best path. He had a wife who might be aging and plump, but whom he loved and respected. His fine upright sons would never have forgiven him for divorcing their mother. What could Elena Starchild be to him but a secret golden fantasy? A wise man knew that fantasy never really lived up to reality anyway.

On the other hand self-denial had never been Lord Serranus's way. What he wanted he took. His wife was a sad beaten husk of a woman; his sons, young feral dogs who strove against their father for supremacy. His loyalty to his liege had always been pragmatic and now it was slowly dissolving into something more sinister. Elena Starchild should be his, must be his. He only needed to find the opportunity. As Scarvan outlined his plans, Ser-ranus made sure that he was part of the escaping group so that he could be in the right place at the opportune time.

But the Mirayan escape was delayed, for as darkness fell, Mori and Seagani forces under the command of Ree-cah attacked and captured three ships. The rest were forced to take to the open sea in order to save themselves. Later two of the Mirayan captains claimed they owed their escape to Mother Karana, who had appeared in a vision and warned them of an impending attack. They claimed it was a miracle.

Just before dawn, when she was certain that the pressure on Alexis Scarvan to flee would be maintained, Jindabyne lay at rest on the roof of the eastern tower. For once she wore her own form, for she had worked hard during the last day and night and even she was tired. There had been some unexpected hitches like the attack on the ships and the brutality of the uprising filled her mind with uneasy thoughts, but on the whole she was very pleased with events and with herself—Uncle will congratulate me when I return, she thought, smiling up at the morning star.

Chapter 16

Like many Mirayan castles the keep of Olbia had an escape route. Scarvan had had native slaves dig a tunnel in the rock beneath the fortress down to the cliff face. At the outer end, the tunnel was sealed with a wall of rock carefully constructed so as to be invisible from the outside. Once completed he had had the slaves executed.

Shortly after nightfall on the second day after the capture of Olbia by rebels, Prince Scarvan and Lord Ser-ranus, along with a handful of guards and a phalanx of fighting mages, climbed down the tunnel.

Behind them they left a fortress full of men in good spirits. The fact that their escape had been delayed by the previous night's attack on the ships had not worried them terribly. All day their mages had been sending ensorcelled pigeons to the remaining ships hiding just over the horizon. Now that dark had fallen, one of those ship was coming in close to the fortress.

Queen Druscilla and her bond servant Dagmar were part of the escape party. This was unusual, but Alexis Scarvan had declared he would not leave her there to be a poison to his son. Druscilla stared straight ahead with dignity, despite the black eye she had received from Scarvan. But Dagmar was weeping. Both women knew they would not return from Karanakasta but would be staying there in exile and imprisonment. Last came the two women guards from the western tower, one of them a huge woman called Bogdna, carrying Elena Mori slung over her shoulder.

The tunnel was thin and dark but steps had been cut out of it and the men-at-arms carried torches. At last they reached a rock wall, just beyond which they could hear the rushing and smashing of the sea. One of the mages lifted up his staff and stuck it into the mortar binding the rock together, which melted away. After he had repeated the exercise several times, the rock was loose enough for great lumps of it to be pulled back into the tunnel. Damp salt-spray air flooded into the tunnel and the muffled sound of the surf became a roar.

Even as they dismantled the wall, one of the men-at-arms began mixing the mortar to cement the stones back in place after Scarvan's escape had been effected. A magelight was lit and waved before the hole. There was an answering light from out in the darkness.

The mages fastened one end of a long heavy rope to a hook embedded in the rock wall. The strongest of them took the other end of the rope, closed his eyes and spoke a few words over it. Immediately it darted out of his hands and snaked out of the hole into the darkness. A short time later it snaked its way back in through the hole again; tied to it was another rope and attached to that rope was a small skin boat.

Now the mages bespelled the boat so that it was impervious to rocks and impossible to turn over, while the men-at-arms secured it to the larger rope using a pulley. First the white bundle that was Elena was loaded into the boat and ferried out to the ship with her two guards. Then Scarvan and his men-at-arms went out and Lord Serranus followed. At last the mages helped Druscilla and Dagmar into the boat. When this final load had arrived safely, the mages pulled back the rope and helped the men-at-arms block up the hole and dry the mortar.

Despite the cover of night and the elaborate care they had taken, the Mirayan's escape did not go unnoticed. Fishermen visiting illegal lobster pots in that part of the bay saw the ship and the light in the cliff. They rushed to tell the Seagani encamped in the city.

Brek, Yani and Duprey were having a council. The Mi-rayans had blankly refused to negotiate despite the execution of Georgi Serranus.

"Perhaps tomorrow we should execute more than one hostage," suggested Brek.

"Do you think I am stupid?" said Yani, suddenly turning on him. "Tusk told me that the Mirayans never negotiate for hostages. Don't play me for a fool, Brek. I will not be part of your revenge. My hands are soiled enough by Georgi's blood."

She strode angrily from the room.

"The Tari is not ruthless enough for true leadership," said Brek.

"You know it is not as simple as that," snapped Duprey.

He went after her, only to have her confront him in the hallway.

"You knew they would never give in even if we executed Georgi, didn't you?"

“I thought it was worth trying. I am sorry, Yani.”

“You deceived me. You played me for a fool.”

“I didn’t mean to. I promise you.”

He touched Yani’s arm. She shrugged his hand off angrily.

“There was justice in this action. He was a dangerous man, Yani. The kind of man who beats his servants to death. Who might have been high chief one day. He deserved to die.”

“A Tari must not kill,” shouted Yani, turning away from him. “I have offended the life spirit in this. And what have I got to show for it! Nothing!”

“You have helped a people stand up for themselves against tyrants,” cried Duprey. “You have been a leader to us. Slaves have been freed. These things are not nothing. In future times, generations will thank you for helping to free us from them. That is more important than the life of one madman.”

“All life is sacred to the Tari because it partakes of the life spirit. I was wrong to compromise that,” snarled Yard.

“Our lives are not sacred to the Mirayans. We are outside Ermora now, and life is not simple. And we cannot punish men like Georgi Serranus any other...”

The front door of the inn flew open. Ezratah came rushing out of the darkness with three ragged men behind him.

“Lady! Lady!” he shouted. “A small group has escaped from the fortress in a ship.”

“Elena!” cried Yani. “Quickly. We must wake Mari-goth.”

Marigoth had been sleeping in one of the upper rooms. The minute she understood the situation she wanted to pursue the boat immediately, but Yani had had time to think. What if Elena was still in the fortress?

“Why don’t you do a spell of finding?” asked Ezratah, caught up in their excitement. “It should work. They would not waste effort using wardings to hide her.”

“A spell of finding?” asked Yani.

“Yes. If you have something of your sisters’, you could pinpoint her whereabouts.”

“Rubbish!” snorted Marigoth. “I never heard of such a thing. The life force doesn’t work in such a way.” She glared at Ezratah as if he were a cockroach.

“No, it’s true,” said Ezratah. “It is quite a simple spell and fortunately takes very little magic, for I do not seem to be as strong as I once was. All I need is a bowl of water and something that belonged to your sister, Lady. It would be better if she had touched it recently.”

Yani looked dismayed, but Marigoth gave a yelp.

“What about this?” she cried, drawing a lock of hair from her pouch. “Elena gave it to me when I saw her in the fortress. I wanted a keepsake before I left her.” She gulped suddenly. “You won’t destroy it, will you?”

“No,” said Ezratah, taking it from her. “You wrapped it in linen. The best thing you could have done. Now we need a bowl and some water. And some prophecy cards.”

He took some of the cards from his pack.

Ezratah laid out several cards, naming each one for various relevant points on the map. Then he cast a finding spell into the bowl of water, which lit up with magical lights.

“What are they?” cried Marigoth. “Which one is Elena?”

“None of them,” said Ezratah. “They are the magic being used in this area. Now hush for a moment.”

Marigoth was uncharacteristically quiet, watching intently as Ezratah carefully lowered the hair into the water.

“Yes, yes,” he cried suddenly. “I can see it. I can see a ship. She is on a ship. And the ship is... here.” His finger stabbed at a place between the cards for Olbia and the card for Karanakasta.

“She is on that ship. I’m certain of it,” he cried. Marigoth jumped up and down and clapped her hands.

“I must go after her,” said Yani to Duprey, who was standing in the doorway.

The fact that he had tricked her suddenly seemed unimportant. She had a chance to rescue Elena!

“It pains me to leave when this situation is still unresolved but...”

“No, no,” said Duprey. His eyes held a deep understanding. “You must go. Perhaps it is the best thing. We are almost finished with Olbia.”

“I hope to come back and help you in your struggle with the Mirayans,” said Yani to Brek later as they shook hands. This sudden parting had washed away all her anger at him. “But I must rescue Elena first.”

“I understand,” said Brek. “You will be welcome. I hope you will speak to your people for us too. We have great need of them.”

Yani nodded, turning away quickly.

The Olbia harbor was too public a place for a fond farewell with Duprey. They took each other’s hand.

“I am sorry,” he said. “About Serranus I mean.”

Yani squeezed his hand ruefully. “I see there is much more to war than I thought. I overheard what Brek said about my not being ruthless enough and it has given me reason to think.”

“You are a Tari and that is a beauty of nature,” said Duprey. “You are as you should be. Perhaps you should not seek to be other.”

Though she was trussed up like a parcel, Elena had made a desperate attempt to wriggle free of her captors as they bounded through the breakers in their little boat. Two days with Alexis Scarvan in a vengeful mood had killed any triumph she felt. She just wanted this all to end. Let it all be washed away in the cold fresh sea. Alive, she could never be clean again.

But her guard, Bogdna, had held her tight, twisted her ankles painfully and finally hit her head hard against the ship’s wooden side before they climbed aboard. It was Bogdna’s habit to be casually brutal. She had been Elena’s guard for over a month and though Elena had done her best to be on good terms with her, which had worked in the past, it had not worked with Bogdna. There was something very strange about the way Bogdna thought. She could occasionally be very kind and gentle, but Elena suspected that the more she liked a person, the cruder she was to them.

At last Bogdna dumped her onto a hard little bed. The ship rolled up and down, and Elena’s head was still ringing from the blow. She hoped she would not be seasick. Her head was still wrapped tightly in the sheet. But she did not ask to be released. She had spent long hours chained flat to the bed in her tower room with Scarvan’s juices trickling down her legs before she had learned that asking to be released only led to her being tied up longer.

Now she simply lay quietly where she was. Bogdna liked obedience and passivity. Just like every

other Mirayan.

Fortunately her other guard, Servilla, had heard the crack of Elena's head against the ship's side and, though she was a lazy woman, she was smart enough to worry about Elena's well-being. She pulled off the sheet, peered at Elena and felt her skull.

"Say something," she said to Elena.

"Something."

"Cheek," said Servilla without malice. She turned her back and left Elena lying on the bed with her hands and feet still tied. With difficulty Elena rolled onto the side Scarvan had left less bruised. When Bogdna had tied her up, she'd made herself as tense as possible so that now there was some slack in the ropes. During her imprisonment she had learned to detach herself from whatever pain or degradation was happening to her body and plan for small moments of future comfort. Nobody else would take care of her if she didn't. She was just a body for Scarvan to fuck. She had been just a body for so long that she was beginning to feel as if it were true. Had Eldene really once upon a time called her his clever wife? Perhaps he had been deceived or merely flattering. If she was so clever, why had she been unable to think herself out of this horror? It was all she could do to survive it.

The ship began to creak and there was the sound of many footsteps above. They were sailing.

Oh, Yani and Marigoth, where are you? thought Elena. If only...

No! Stop the if-onlys, Elena. She closed her eyes and forced herself to relax, for there seemed no prospect of escape. As soon as she did, she was glad that she had not escaped earlier and drowned herself in the sea. Yani and Marigoth will rescue me sooner or later, she thought, and Alyx must be safe. Scarvan would have tormented her with Alyx's pain if he could have. Dared she hope? Hope had become an enemy. Hope made her weak and had been dashed too often in the last three months.

Would Alyx, a half-Tari, really be safe in the hands of the Tari? They had to be better than Scarvan. Surely? Oh, if her little girl could indeed be free...

Time passed. The ship was moving forward. The cabin was dark. Servilla and Bogdna were snoring, and even Elena dozed a little.

Then suddenly she was wide awake again. There was something... The air was tingling with magic. She struggled to a sitting position. It was... It was... Was the cabin brighter?

Shining pinpricks of light appeared in the wall, like a fire seen through wooden slats. They grew bigger and bigger. Elena didn't know whether to be frightened or glad. At last a face appeared and then two arms. A Tari woman! She smiled and beckoned to Elena.

The air was thick with magic. Elena could feel it tingling in her lungs as she breathed in. She found the bonds were gone from her wrists and ankles. As quietly as possible she got off the bed and, still limping from Scarvan's usage, hobbled across the cabin. Normally the slightest movement roused Bogdna, but this time the big woman's snores continued. Elena walked easily, unbelievably easily, over to the shining gap in the wall. Outside she could see the dark sea. The gap was just above the waterline and the woman was standing in something that rose and fell gently on the waves. Yet no seawater got in through the hole. Magic must be stopping it.

Gently the woman took her hands. She was standing in a big black caldron that was full of shining green light. There was just enough room for Elena to stand in the caldron behind her and grip her shoulders. As Elena steadied herself the woman picked up a huge wooden spoon and began to drive the caldron through the waves with it.

It was night. Elena could see nothing but blackness. Then her eyes made out the tiny cold pinpoints of light that were the stars in the sky. There was magic all around. Elena was not sure if this was real, but it

was better than most of the dreams she had been having recently. She threw back her head and let the fresh salt wind of the sea blow through her hair. Behind them she could hear distant shouting. She looked back and saw the masts of the ship standing out against a red glow.

“Has someone attacked the ship?” she asked the lady.

“Yes,” said the lady. “Do not look back again.” And that was all she would say.

All those people... Would they be killed? Drowned?

Let them die, the animals. The wind was in her hair and she was going somewhere. Somewhere away from grasping, probing Alexis Scarvan and his filthy, sweaty, spurning body. She was free, free, joyously free. If this was a dream, let it go on forever.

If this was a dream perhaps she would see Eldene again. Oh, Eldene. How she longed to see him and hear his voice again. For the first time in many days she dared to dwell on him. The salt wind brought back achingly sweet memories of Eldene running with her along the beach. Once laughing, she had thrown a lump of seaweed at him and with mock outrage, he had chased her. And caught her. His lips had been so soft and gentle for such a tough man.

She remembered the reassuringly strong grasp of his hand encircling her wrist. Her chest felt too full. Warm tears coursed down her face.

On and on they sped until behind her she could sense the faint light on the horizon, which told her that dawn was coming soon. At the same time she saw a smaller light in front. Then she could hear the thudding roar of breakers.

The caldron lurched as it pushed through the breakers, but the woman continued to drive it along with the spoon till it slid up onto the sand in much the same way as it had slid through the sea. It came to rest beside a huge bonfire.

The woman leapt easily out of the caldron and helped Elena out. The moment she felt cold sand under her bare feet she knew this was not a dream. She dug her toes into it. “Thank you!” she cried in Tari, turning to the woman. “Thank you! You have made me free.”

But the woman was already walking away up the beach toward the fire, and suddenly she saw there was another figure standing there wrapped in a dark cloak. The figure stepped forward and she looked upon the face of the only man she hated more than Alexis Scarvan. El-dene’s killer. Wolf Madraga.

Elena turned and ran down the beach. She threw herself into the cold breakers, but it was no use. Strong hands caught her round her waist and strong arms dragged her back to the shore and threw her down on the sand before the fire. Strong hands held her shoulders down. She caught a glimpse of his eyes and the desire in them. She fought him.

“No! No more! No more!”

“Calm her!” he ordered.

The Tari woman was suddenly there. She passed her hand over Elena’s face. Instantly a terrible heaviness came over her limbs and she could move but feebly.

“I cannot give you long,” said the woman. “The spell is baneful with time.”

“You cow!” cried Elena. “My sisters will come for me.”

“Your sisters are dead,” said the Tari woman calmly, and turned away.

“No!” screamed Elena. “No.” She turned her head away and wept helplessly.

A hand was stroking her face with horrible soft persistence. A voice was speaking. At first she did not notice what it said. Then...

“I have your child,” said Wolf Madraga.

“Alyx! Is she safe?”

“She is safe and well. I have brought a nursemaid for her. I will let you see her if you cooperate.”

“I am cooperating,” wept Elena. She couldn’t help weeping. “I have no choice in the matter.” She closed her eyes and turned her head away. “Come on. Get it over with,” she said bitterly.

Madraga drew back. She sensed he was shocked.

“Such words come ill from such beautiful lips. I am not Scarvan.”

“Are you not? How are you different?”

“I have rescued you from him. I shall make you my wife.”

“No, never!” screamed Elena. She was so horrified, so furious, she almost managed to sit up before the magic bore her down again. “I will never be anyone’s wife but Eldene’s. You can take my body, but you can never never make me consent to it.”

Madraga leant down on her.

“You will do as I wish. I have your child,” he said urgently.

She turned her head away, knowing she was already beaten. The world clamped heavily shut around her. She felt herself suffocating.

“You have been a torment to me, woman,” whispered Madraga. He put his hand on her neck and stroked it. “Because of you twenty-five years of alliance is gone. Your beauty has obsessed me. You must give me release from my torment.”

“I never wanted your desire,” she screamed at him. “You are no different from Scarvan. To use an innocent child against me so. Rapist! Pig!”

He was silent. Then he said, “He offered you shame. I offer you honor. You are safe now. You will be my duchess and the mistress of my house. The mother of my children.”

“No! I hate you! I would rather die—” She spat in his face.

Madraga looked down at her coldly, wiping the spittle from his face. “A Mirayan woman would be beaten for that,” he said.

“I am not a Mirayan woman.”

“No. A Mirayan woman would know the honor she was being given. She would be grateful to be rescued.”

“I am not a Mirayan woman. I am not grateful.”

“No,” he said. “But you will learn to be. And in return your child will live and be well. You may even see her often, for I understand what a woman wants.”

She turned her head away and wept.

“Release her now,” he called into the darkness, and the heaviness of magic left her. The heavy despair did not. She lay there and wept while he simply watched. She wept until somehow the weeping ended and left her cold and empty. If only I did not have feelings, she thought. If only I was indeed just a body as these people seem to think I am. How much less the pain would be.

When he reached down to haul her to her feet, she did not hit out at him as she wished to, but stood up limply.

“Here,” he said, offering her a cloak and a veil. “Cover yourself properly.”

With lethargic hands she wrapped the cloak around her and veiled her head and face in the manner of a Mirayan woman. There was a part of her that still hoped, that watched him all the while to see if there might be a chance to get away. But there was no chance. Wolf Madraga was alert to her every move.

“It is well,” he said when she was covered. “Now you may see your child.”

And he took her arm firmly and led her down the beach to where his men waited to take them back out to his ship. There was no sign now of the Tari woman. In fact she would not see her again for many years.

But Wolf Madraga saw the Lady of Birds again. That very night, when Elena was safely stowed in the aft cabin with her child, Wolf threw himself down fully clad on the bed in the stern cabin and looked at the stars through the cabin window. He did not think he would sleep. His head was full of confused emotions. Joy at finally having achieved Elena Starchild, wrestled with guilt over what the pirates he had hired must be doing this very moment to Alexis Scarvan, his sworn liege.

Moving with stately grace on long stilt-like legs, a tall white bird came stalking across the cabin. Its plumage was soft and shone white in the shadows. It moved to the edge of Wolf’s bed, stood there looking down at him—a creature beautiful and full of grace, and at the same time hunched over and predatory. He was both fearful and delighted by this creature. Like a sensuous woman stretching, the white bird opened its wings in a long graceful arc. Then it swept its wings downward over his body and face. The most intense, sweet pleasure filled him. Softness. Whiteness. Feathers.

Suddenly Wolf awoke. The Lady of Birds was leaning over him, her fingers touching his face. He jumped away from her and she must have jumped away from him, because suddenly she was standing across the cabin.

The room was dark; she was a shadowy figure against the window.

“What do you want?” he cried feeling vulnerable and confused by her presence. Was this where she asked for payment, as all sorceresses did?

“Nothing,” she said. “Just some answers.”

He sat up and fumbled for the tinderbox. With a tiny flash of magical light, the candle by his bed burst into flame.

“What answers?” he said leaning back against the wall trying to be as cool as he could be. He was glad he was still dressed.

The Lady of Birds sat down not as normal people do, but as if roosting, her feet on a stool and her knees drawn up to her chin. She looked at him out of bright dark eyes.

“So tell me, how will you deal with this Elena? The Tari want children from this union,” she said.

“Are you telling me you want my firstborn? That was never part of the deal.”

“My, my,” she smiled, silkily. “What an imagination you have. And so suspicious. I’m glad you’re not going to be my husband. I’d never have any fun. I merely wondered how you are going to get them.”

“I know how to get children,” he retorted. “Unless you Tari beget children some different way. Out of eggs perhaps?”

“I am not questioning your manhood, foolish creature. But I saw how Elena Mori reacted to you. It seems to me you may have some trouble getting her to submit willingly to our plan.” Her voice took on a brisk tone. “So you must make sure that she wears an iron necklet every time you take her. Tari women have power over the life spirit. She may well be able to prevent herself from conceiv—”

“I am not some brute like Alexis Scarvan!” he cried.

“I see,” said the Lady of Birds.

Was that relief in her voice?

“Then you will perhaps find these useful.” She held out a handful of pink charm crystals.

“No,” he said pushing her hand away. He was blushing. Had the woman no shame?

She regarded him thoughtfully. “Then you have some other plan?”

“I have tamed wild things before,” said Madraga, hoping his voice showed more certainty than he felt. “I know how to be patient and kind.”

“Sounds slow,” said the Lady of Birds.

“Do I have reason to rush?” said Madraga.

“Nope,” she said.

“She is grateful to have her child back. She will be grateful to be rescued from Scarvan. She will learn to love me in time,” he said. Such love as his must win a response eventually.

“I see,” said the Lady of Birds solemnly. She rose from the stool, her robes spreading about her like wings. “Still, do not forget the iron necklet.”

She turned, went to the window and threw her legs neatly over the sill. Then she smiled back at him over her shoulder.

“Farewell then, Duke of Lamartaine. I wish you happy.”

She threw out her arms, seemed to embrace the air, and flung herself out of the window.

Instinctively Wolf rushed to catch her, but she was gone. There was no splash below his window, and he thought he could hear the wings of a large bird, beating the air, flying away.

Back in Olbia the Seagani slowly evacuated the town. By the third night, most of those who were to leave Olbia by foot had gone, leaving only the hundred riders who were to keep the Mirayans from breaking out of the fortress. It was not clear if the Mirayans had noticed how empty the town was.

On that third night—the night after Alexis Scarvan and Yani and Marigoth had left—the two captured ships were finally ready and many women, children and wounded, both Seagani and Mori, were loaded onto them. They left very cautiously before moonrise after casting spells to make sure no enemies were about. The moment they left the harbor they were attacked by a Mirayan ship, a huge armed merchantman that came storming out of the north. There were many mages on board, and they must have had used strong magics to disguise it. Though the archers shot well and the Archipelagan mages under the leadership of Reecah fought valiantly, they were no match for the Mirayan fighting mages. Both ships burned and sunk with all hands. The Mirayans ignored all offers to surrender and afterward the mages used magical fire to kill everyone, even small children, who were still swimming. The Seagani on shore witnessing the slaughter and helpless to stop it, were maddened to blood-rage by what they had seen.

They ran through the streets of Olbia, dragging collaborators from their houses at random and hacking men, women and children to death. The city watchhouse was set alight and all the Mirayan merchants burned alive. Houses and people burned in that night of jaw-clenched savagery and the streets ran slick with blood.

Brek had gone by then. Monteak was in charge. Duprey and a few other cooler heads tried

desperately to stop the killing, but reason was no use against over twenty years of pent-up anger. There was nothing those few cool heads could do but open the city gates and warn people to flee. When Duprey ran to the inn to try and save the hostages he found Stefan Krysantium and the rest lying dismembered in pools of their own blood.

Chapter 17

It was almost midday when the fishing boat carrying Yard, Marigoth and Ezratah came upon the wreckage of Prince Scarvan's ship. The water was not particularly deep where it had sunk, and the very top of the ship's mast stuck out of the water, the little Mirayan pennant with its royal insignia fluttering gaily in the breeze. All around floated grisly wreckage—bits of wood, rope and the bodies of three slain seamen. The fishermen on the boat began to whisper a prayer to the sea goddess and make the horned sign to drive away the evil eye, but the bodies of the seamen and the charring on the mast were evidence of a more earthly reason for the sinking.

The sisters' hearts turned to ice in their breasts.

"Chaos!" cried Yarn. "Surely she can't be dead."

"Let me do the bowl of seeing again," cried Ezratah. While the fishermen trawled over the other side for promising-looking pieces of wrack, Ezratah cast the bowl of seeing on the surface of the sea.

Almost immediately he and Marigoth let out a great cry of delight. Elena was quite clearly moving away in an easterly direction, still on the sea. They laughed with joy making the boat rock before it occurred to them that Elena might still be a captive.

After tying a fishing float to the mast in case the ship sank further and could not be found again, they sailed on. The day was still, but Marigoth continued to generate a strong breeze to fill their sail.

But then it seemed that luck turned her face away from them. In the middle of the afternoon a great storm began to come up from in front of them.

"This boat will not weather such a storm, honored ones," said the owner of the boat. He headed in to the nearby shore and they were able to beach the boat and turn it over to take shelter before the storm broke.

The wind was so strong they had to cling to the boat to prevent it from blowing away. Torrents of rain lashed down. At length the wind died down, though it seemed as if the rain would last the rest of the day. Neither Yani nor Marigoth were willing to stop until they could be certain Elena was free and safe. Wrapped tightly in their cloaks, they left the shelter of the boat and climbed over the dunes to firm land. Finding a track that ran along the shore, they walked doggedly eastward. They were so blinded by driving rain lashing into their faces and deafened by the gale, that they didn't notice that Ezratah was following behind them, despite the fact that Yani had ordered him to stay with the fishermen.

At last as night fell the three of them took shelter in a grove of thickly spreading trees. Though the leaves underfoot were soaked, as was every piece of wood they collected, Marigoth was able to light a roaring fire, which made the night a little less miserable.

The following day dawned overcast but calm. Though they had had no food the night before, they pressed on, despite the fact that Ezratah's bowl of seeing showed that Elena was moving farther and farther away.

Around the middle of the morning they rounded a bend in the track and suddenly a hooded figure in green barred the road in front of them.

“Do not go farther,” it said. They could not see its face beneath the hood, but it was a woman’s voice. Her arms were crossed over her chest and instead of hands she had the claws of a bird. The sight of the claws terrified Ezratah, but the sisters hardly noticed.

“How will you stop us?” cried Yani. Red anger flooded her mind and she drew her sword.

“Abomination. You draw steel on me!” roared the figure. She swept her beclawed arm out wide and suddenly Yani crashed to the ground.

Marigoth screamed and threw a bolt of violent power at the figure, but without waiting to see if it hit, she rushed to Yani’s side with Ezratah hard at her heels. As she bent over Yani’s still form, a shadow fell on them. The figure was standing almost on top of them, though she had been several yards down the road a moment ago. Something about her posture was horribly like that of a bird of prey. Though she could see only a sinister darkness within the hood, Marigoth knew from its magic that the figure was Tari. The first new Tari she had ever seen.

“Get away!” Marigoth screamed. She threw a defensive spell over Yani, and Ezratah leapt up and tried to shield them with his body.

The Tari was not interested in the fallen warrior.

“Do not seek your sister, Elena,” she said. “She has a destiny to fulfill as the wife of Wolf Madraga, and we will not suffer you to interfere with it. If you continue onward, you shall all be served in the same way.”

“What? What destiny?” shrieked Marigoth.

“You shall see when it comes to pass,” said the Tari. “These events lead to a future that pleases us. We have judged it well that she stays where she is.”

“No!” screamed Marigoth in horror. “No! How can you?”

The figure ignored her. Instead she turned and looked at Ezratah.

“This one has served you long enough. It is wrong to prey on outsiders.”

She touched the Mirayan on the forehead. Light sparked around him and swirls of green magic began unraveling all over him. He shuddered and fell over backward.

The figure turned and walked away without looking back, seeming to glide across the uneven ground.

“You cruel monster!” screamed Marigoth at her insolent back. “Let her go!”

Ezratah sat up and watched the figure go. He was dazed, unable to comprehend how he had come here.

It was overcast daylight. He was on a sandy track in a bleak heathland and a terrifying figure dressed in a dark green cloak was walking away from him with stately grace.

As he sat there blinking and blinking, he began to recall how he had got here. Yet it hardly seemed real. He could not believe it nor the part he had played in the events he remembered as leading him here.

Marigoth was bending over Yani, sobbing convulsively and patting her head with her hands.

The hell-brat was weeping. The sight of any child weeping wrung Ezratah’s heart. He reached out and touched the fallen Yani. Her arm lay wrongly but Marigoth hadn’t noticed yet. She was wisely concentrating on the head injuries. Yani was deeply unconscious. Ezratah straightened the arm and pressed healing into it and as he did, he felt his power suddenly surging back through him as blood surges back into an arm, causing pins and needles. How strong my magic is, he wondered. Then he felt

something different flowing in at his fingertips. Something was surging through Yarn's system.

Marigoth turned and hit him so hard in the stomach that he fell over.

"Stop it!" she shouted. "You're stealing from her, idiot!"

For a moment Ezratah was winded. Then something snapped inside him. Suddenly he was filled with raging anger.

"Right!" he shouted. He stood up to his full height. "Just go to hell then, you ungrateful little cow. I've had it with you."

He stalked back to the path. Then he began to run full tilt, anger pounding through his feet and into the ground. Suddenly the sea was in front of him. And just as suddenly his anger left him and everything that had happened in the last few days came back to him.

His service to Yani, pretending to be a native, cleaning, doing laundry, the tournament, the fall of Olbia—Oh Mir! His part in the fall of Olbia.

He fell to his knees with his face in his hands, trembling all over, so shocked he began to gasp for breath.

"Oh, no!" he screamed. "What have I done?..."

It was like falling down a hole in the earth. He was overwhelmed with panic and for a few moments he didn't know where he was. Then suddenly everything was quite clear and normal again. He was sitting on his heels on the seashore, watching the gray sea. Amazingly his thoughts had turned to what was behind him, where Marigoth was probably still fighting to repair Yani's injuries.

On some level he knew something terrible had happened to him and that he should be devastated by it, but it was too big to really comprehend. It was easier to go back to worrying about the sisters.

You are an idiot, he told himself. There's nothing helpless about that hell-brat Marigoth. The little bitch enslaved you, fool! Enslaved you!

All that abuse and nastiness. Oh Mir! That night in Yani's tent! He felt himself cringe at the black humiliation of the memory. They'd made him into a useless, mincing, little servant boy, taken away his manhood and ordered him about...

But somehow he couldn't get his anger to feel convincing. It had been another world. And such a wondrous other world! The things Marigoth could do. Such power she gained by manipulating the elements. And she was still only a child. He had seen things, he would never have seen had he not been enslaved. Marigoth making that gate grow into a tree or blowing open the city gate while standing safely in a bonfire. Appearing and disappearing at will—genuinely disappearing by drawing the air over her, not just by making an illusion the way other mages did. And the natives. He'd learned more about them than he'd ever thought possible. They were so... human. He remembered how horrible the Mirayans had been to him when they thought he was a native. It was hard being a native in Olbia.

It was only then that he remembered that he'd been forced to betray his own people by siding with their enemy, and that he'd helped try to overthrow Prince Scar-van. He put his head in his hands again. Oh Mir! He'd never be able to show his face in Olbia again. What about his family's honor? What about the estate? Horror filled him. What was he going to do?

After sitting with his face in his trembling hands for some time, he realized that it was drizzling. A cold wind was blowing a chill right through his wet clothes. He looked anxiously backward, wondering how Marigoth was faring. A Mirayan man didn't leave women on their own like that. Especially with a hostile magical entity hanging about. He stood up and walked back a few steps but could see nothing of them.

Stop it, he thought, resolutely remembering his enslavement. Their fate is no concern of yours now.

You've got your own problems. Problems they caused. He strode resolutely away in the opposite direction till he reached a stand of trees that provided cover from the wind and the worst of the rain.

He collected firewood and while doing so made the lucky find of a rabbit in a snare. He skinned and gutted it rather inexpertly and slung it over the fire on some green twigs, the way he had seen the serfs at home do on hunting days.

As he wanned up and his mind relaxed, his thoughts once again moved away from humiliation and disaster and back to the wonder of the experience. Thoughts unfolded in his head like the soft petals of a rose. Yani fighting in the ring, Marigoth suddenly appearing out of thin air, the mourning ceremonies for Killon, the sound of a bard singing native songs, the good-natured teasing of the Seagani women when he had been washing clothes by the river's edge, the gate of Olbia growing into a tree. And himself... How happy and at peace he had been. All that anxiety about making money and keeping his reputation unsoiled and thinking of home—somehow those cares still seemed distant. Pleasing Yani, that had been all that had mattered then. So simple. And when she was pleased, as she often was, how wonderfully happy he had been. He could not ever remember having been so completely happy before. Was this what it was like to truly be in love? There was certainly something to be said for it.

She had been a very kind slave mistress, he had to give her that. He knew it had been wrong and of course he had no desire to continue it, but it had been such an innocent captivity. Not like some of the ugly things he had seen done to slaves. More like a child's game.

Looking down, he suddenly realized that he was carrying all the party's food in his bag. Oh, no! They had no food! He was up off his seat before he realized what a poor fool he was. He had to remember that these women were enemies who'd enslaved him. He should be resentful at them for making him their beast of burden. And Marigoth was probably charming the rabbits out of the woods and onto her fire at this very moment. In fact he was probably lucky she'd never done such a thing to him.

Just as he was telling himself this and sitting back down again, Marigoth came over the rise. Something black and loglike floated along beside her. It took him a moment to realize it was Yani wrapped in her cloak.

Marigoth stopped stock still the minute she saw him.

"Where the hell did you get to, you useless beast," she shouted. "Get over here and help me." Once again her words angered him. She had no business talking to him like that. He was a Mirayan gentleman. At the same time he was filled with a ridiculous urge to help her, because she was just a little girl with a red, tearstained face and he was an adult man.

He got up and before he had reached her, she was at his side tugging his hand.

"She won't wake up," she cried. "I don't know what's wrong."

He bent over the gently floating Yani and checked her skull. Head injuries were fairly common among the soldiers he had worked with, and she seemed fine to him. Her brain was repairing itself well and the broken bone was already knitting.

"There's nothing wrong."

"But she won't wake up, you stupid man," screamed Marigoth. Tears began running down her face.

"Of course not," he said, before he realized that she was probably too inexperienced to understand. "She'll wake up when her brain is well enough to wake. It's just staying asleep to give itself time to repair, that's all. We just have to wait."

He tugged Yard's shoulder and found she floated quite easily after him.

"Let's bring her over to the fire. We need to keep her warm and dry or we'll have a pneumonia growing in her. Come on. Come over here and have some food. Put her down here. Hmm, this cloak is

wet. I think mine is drier.”

“Don’t put her so close to the fire. You’ll burn her.”

“I know what I’m doing,” said Ezratah.

“I bet you don’t know anything about healing, do you?” she said. “Mirayans never know anything useful.”

“Well, I know more than you. That’s obvious,” snapped Ezratah, maintaining his temper with gritted teeth. She was just being cranky because she was worried. His little sisters got like this too.

“Don’t use that tone of voice with me. Yani wouldn’t like it.”

“I can say whatever I like now,” snapped Ezratah. “That Tari freed me.”

“What?” cried Marigoth. She squinted at him hard. A brief look of anxiety flickered into her eyes. Then she straightened her shoulders.

“Humph! Well, I’m amazed, Mirayan.”

“Amazed?” he said coolly.

“Yes, free this long and haven’t raped either of us.”

“You little bitch,” he shouted turning on her. “You vicious, ungrateful little cow. You…”

He shouted at her for some minutes, letting all the expletives he could think of roll off his tongue in a wonderful, liberating stream of abuse. The look of shock on Marigoth’s face finally stopped him.

“Oh, go to hell,” he said, and he sat down on a dry stone with his back to her. He felt both satisfied and ashamed of himself. He would never have spoken to his little sisters so.

“It’s just lucky your sister is such a good person,” he said. “Otherwise I’d let you both die.”

“Fair enough,” said Marigoth quietly. “I guess that was a pretty nasty thing to say. Thank you for helping us.”

He was too angry at her to accept the apology. He just sat there with his back to her. Every now and again he glanced surreptitiously at Yani’s face. He was relieved to see it was looking pinker. Marigoth rustled around behind his back. As he sat there the anger left him and fear began to grow. He realized he’d made a big mistake telling her he’d been freed. She could quite easily enslave him again.

“Want something to eat?” she said.

“No.”

A while later she said, “This rabbit is ready.”

“You eat it,” he said, unwilling to have any kind of contact with her or anything she touched.

“You know Tari don’t eat meat. What’s wrong? Don’t be like this. Why are you so cross? Look, I’m sorry for what I said. I’m sorry for enslaving you too, if that helps.”

She came over and peered into his face. “Don’t you trust me?”

He avoided her eye.

“You know, I was thinking of freeing you myself,” she said. “We didn’t really have much use for you outside Ol-bia. Yani never liked having a slave, and she probably would have insisted I free you, if she hadn’t been so caught up in finding Elena.”

A sad look crossed her face as she said those words. She shrugged. “Oh well, the food is there if you want it,” she said, and went away.

It was well after midday, and finally he ate the rabbit. It tasted extremely good. Marigoth was wandering about making a pile of small stones on the ground. At length she finished. She must have used some magic then, for she passed her hands over them and they moved around on the ground and formed a different pattern. She peered at them and gave a little grunt of satisfaction. Evidently she was pleased with what they told her.

“What are you doing?” he said curiously.

“Checking for the Circle of Power,” she said. “There is one near here. She must have come out of that. How is she keeping track of us? I wonder how I can get around her.”

“How is it I can’t see your magic?”

“Can you see each other’s?”

“Of course. Well, more like feel it.”

“I don’t know the reason. I can see your magic and the magic of other Tari quite clearly.”

She went over to a nearby tree. After looking up into the branches, she put her hands on the trunk and concentrated. It looked almost as if she was listening to it. Curious, he walked over and stood nearby. Suddenly the branches above them started thrashing about. He jumped back in fright. They looked like tentacles. Blood chilled, he watched them twist and turn until he realized that they were weaving themselves together to make a woven roof. “How did you do that?”

“You have to persuade the elements flowing through the world to move themselves in a way that suits you. I don’t know if a non-Tari can. It’s a matter of connecting with the life force, you see, and outlanders seemed to be... disconnected. Anyway, now we have a rainproof ceiling. Let’s move everything under here. Some more food would be nice.

“I could eat another rabbit Couldn’t you charm one into coming to us, so that I can catch it?”

“Oh no!” she said shocked. “That’s forbidden. You mustn’t use magic to take life.”

“But it’s all right to enslave people?”

She turned on him roundly. “It served you right. All I did was put a warding on Yani so that any spell you cast on her would rebound onto you. All right, so I did make it stronger. But it was your own spell and it was mostly powered by your own magic. Do you understand? You were enslaved by your own magic.”

“You clever little bitch,” he said with grudging admiration. Such language she brought out in him.

“Well, what do you mean by trying to cast such a spell on my sister? Or on anyone? Don’t you Mirayans have any ethics?”

“That spell wouldn’t make anyone do anything they really believed was wrong.”

“A charm spell? Don’t treat me like a fool. Charmed people... they hardly count as free agents, do they?”

“I don’t believe a word of this. That spell made me work against my own people. It can’t have been my charm spell. I did something I thought was very wrong.”

“How did it make you work against your own people?”

“Well...” He couldn’t put his finger on it for a moment. “By helping you and Yani. By... anyway, a charm spell isn’t as strong as that.”

“Maybe in your heart of hearts you thought we were right,” she said.

“Oh, go to hell,” he snarled, and went back to his seat.

He would set off and leave them as soon as they were settled. He didn't have to take this. The thought that he had been charmed by his own spell made him sick with shame. It just wasn't possible. I don't believe a word of it, he thought.

"Yani," cried Marigoth, rushing to her sister's side.

Ezratah saw that the warrior woman was awake. Suddenly he was very embarrassed by the idea of seeing her.

He stamped off into the forest and poked about looking for another snare. He'd try to find more food, then he'd go. He'd need food to travel anyway.

While he was poking about he remembered how magically weak he had been while he was enslaved. It hadn't worried him much then, except that he'd felt inadequate to protect Yani. Did he believe Marigoth's story? She'd never been a liar. Brutally honest rather. But a mirror warding! He'd never heard of such a thing. What a useful spell that would be! He wandered along trying to work out how he could create one of his own and soon stumbled on a scruffy little native hut. The woman inside was happy to give him some oat bread and more cheese and in return he cleaned out her well. By the time he'd magicked three dead rats and a dead bird out of it and fashioned a little wooden cover for it, it was late afternoon.

"Oh, there you are," said Marigoth sarcastically when he returned. "We thought you'd gone for good."

She took his spoils. "A bit rough-looking," she said.

"No one's forcing you to eat it," he said.

Marigoth actually grinned and her eyes twinkled.

"Well, it's very good of you," she said disarmingly. "Thank you."

"Right," he said thrown by this sudden pleasantness. "How's Yani?"

"She seems well enough. But she was tired and a bit muddled so she went back to sleep."

"Muddled?" said Ezratah. He went over to where the sleeping warrior lay and put his hand on her forehead.

The healing seemed to be coming along quite well. "She knew who you were?"

"Yes, and who she was too. She just repeated herself a bit. She was very worried about our sister. She tried to get up but she couldn't. That's normal, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Ezratah. "I think she will be fine. Head injuries are serious, though. She will need to rest. She will probably need to rest for a couple of days."

"And while she rests Elena and Alyx are getting farther and farther away," said Marigoth.

"If she tries to get up any earlier she may damage herself," said Ezratah. "I've seen this sort of thing before."

"Yes, yes," said Marigoth irritably.

He hoped Yani would be sensible. The thing was he could entirely understand their anxiety. If it had been one of his sisters... He wondered if there was anything he— stop it! What a fool he was! In their own ways, they were both of them far stronger than he.

"Um, it will be dark soon," said Marigoth. "I wonder if you would stay with us and keep an eye on Yani. I'm not really..."

Was she frightened? The hell-brat? Of what? The dark? Her Tari enemies? Yani's injury?

“Fine,” said Ezratah. “I wouldn’t get far before the light fails anyway.”

In actual fact he was completely confounded as to where he should go.

They sat by the fire together in silence for a while, and Ezratah felt surprisingly comfortable. Well, he supposed he had been traveling with them for a while now, even if he had been out of his right mind for most of the time.

He saw that Marigoth was depressed. He was unable to stop himself wanting to cheer her up. “Wolf Madraga is well known to be a decent man who treats his slaves well.”

It backfired badly.

“Decent man!” cried Marigoth. “He killed her beloved husband. Would you want anything to do with someone who had killed the one you love? Especially in *that* way?”

“Well I guess... no I suppose...” The whole subject was suddenly embarrassing. He didn’t want to start talking about that kind of thing with a little girl. That was completely wrong. He could see she was embarrassed too.

She was right, though. He wouldn’t want to have sexual congress with someone who had killed anyone in his family. Although women were different.

Weren’t they? What if they weren’t? That would be horrible because so often... when they got captured in battle and enslaved...

He spent the rest of the evening trying not to think about it.

That night he could not sleep. His mind was too full of confusion. What was he going to do now? Dare he show his face in Olbia again? Now that Scarvan was dead, there would be a struggle for power. Best keep out of that—too much chance of being on the losing side. And if there wasn’t a struggle for power, the high chief and Wolf Madraga were certainly on a collision course. How could he know who was going to win that? Should he leave the island of Yarmar completely and go to Ishtak. To do what?

He was a Mirayan nobleman. Someone would recognize his value. But who?

He heard rustling on the other side of the fire and turned his head.

A large tabby cat was just disappearing into the darkness. He sat up quickly. There was still a lump in Mari-goth’s bedroll, but he was suddenly certain that she was not there. He almost got up to check.

No! Wiser not to interfere.

He lay there for a moment feeling virtuous and clever for not interfering. Then he began to wonder what she was doing creeping about in the guise of a cat. Probably trying to get past the Tari. He started to worry. That Tari who had stopped them had been terrifyingly powerful and Marigoth was only a little girl.

That very moment a loud shriek came from the direction of the track.

He leapt out of his blanket, lit the end of his hand and ran toward the sound.

A glowing bundle was struggling and shouting expletives in the center of the track. It was Marigoth in her own form. She was tangled in some kind of net. As he bent down to help her, she shouted.

“No! Quick! Try and get through! Go on! While he’s busy!” She managed to shove him forward.

He understood immediately. It took a normal mage time to recover from a piece of major magic like net-making. He swung round and began to run along the track as fast as he could, holding up his lit hand. His feet floundered in the sand, but nothing came up to stop him. He seemed to be getting through. He had run far enough for his breath to be coming in gasps. How would he know if he got far enough? If he did get through, what then? What should—

Thunk!

He hit a barrier. He caught his foot and knee and arm such a hard crack that he hopped around groaning and swearing for a few minutes.

The barrier was completely invisible. He could see the shadowy shapes of trees and the track in the blackness just ahead, but when he tried to step forward he hit something hard and could go no farther. The barrier went as high as he could reach and when he went left off the track, he could not find its end.

The hardness thrummed, like the feeling he'd had in that stone circle. When he reached out to touch it, the barrier felt unpleasant, like pins and needles in his hand.

"You won't get, through," said a man's voice.

A glowing Tari in a green robe was sitting on a tree stump on the other side of the barrier. His face was also covered by a hood but he had human hands. They were fine white hands resting gracefully in his lap, and his legs were crossed very elegantly. He looked so like a courtier that Ezratah almost felt contemptuous, which was unwise in the face of such power.

"I'm just trying to get to Lamartaine," said Ezratah.

"You're trying to rescue Elena Mori," said the man. "I know. I saw you with the Miracle Sisters."

"Who?"

"Don't play games with me. They're fakes, you know. They're warped and soiled by the outlands. They are not true Tari. They do not know the pure beauty of the life spirit."

"What?"

"Elena Mori has a destiny to fulfill. You can't change destiny, just stop being a pest and go away. Go and get on with your own little life."

The man's smug tone so annoyed Ezratah that he threw a bolt of power at him.

The bolt bounced off the barrier and came right back at Ezratah who had to throw himself on the ground to avoid it.

The man laughed mockingly and disappeared.

When he and Marigoth got back to the fire, Yani was crawling around on the ground, groggily looking for her sword. Only with magic could they force her to lie down again. They stoked the fire up into a high blaze.

"We will never get to Elena this way," fretted Marigoth. "Perhaps by sea. Though I think they must have called up that storm the other day. I thought it came very suddenly. If only..." Her face clenched with anguish and she fell silent.

"What do they mean by destiny?" said Ezratah.

"I don't know," said Marigoth.

"What do you mean, you don't know? Are you three the Miracle Sisters? Is this some kind of arcane Tari thing?"

"I don't know. I really don't know."

"How can you not know?"

Marigoth hesitated. Then she said, "I never met another Tari before."

“What? You mean... aren't you one of these people? Aren't you from Ermora?”

Marigoth looked at him speculatively.

“It's like this,” she said at last, and she told him of their grandmother's flight from Ermora and how they had been brought up in the outside world by half-Tari foster parents.

“I can't believe this. You mean all that stuff in Olbia about being Tari was a just a big confidence trick.”

“No,” snapped Marigoth. “We really are Tari with everything that it means. Just not Ermora Tari. And now we are old enough we can go there if we want. We just never wanted to. I still don't want to.” She looked thoughtful. “But maybe we should.”

“They don't seem very friendly.”

“This isn't how my foster parents described them.”

“Maybe they've changed.”

“Maybe.”

“So what is this destiny stuff?”

“I have no idea.”

“What do you mean? Didn't your grandmother tell you why she left Ermora?”

“I was five when she disappeared!”

“Didn't she tell your foster parents?”

“Not exactly. She said it was something to do with a prophecy, which would warp our lives. Sweet life! Now here we are being prevented from rescuing Elena by people talking of destiny.”

She put her face in her hands.

Ezratah was almost relieved to find that they were as capable of being as foolish as the other natives. They weren't so superior after all! “This is something to do with a prophecy, then? Do Tari believe in that sort of thing?”

“Tari have some ability to foretell the future.”

“What? Oh, come on. No one has that ability.”

“No, it's true. My foster mother, Lashanna, could sometimes tell what was going to happen.”

“Sometimes? Foretelling the future is just clever tricks.”

“Are you calling my foster mother a liar?” Yani groaned on the other side of the fire. Ezratah suddenly realized they'd been shouting at each other. Time to start acting a bit more adult.

“I don't mean to be rude about your foster mother, but I just don't believe in foretelling.”

“Humph,” said Marigoth. She was silent for a moment and then suddenly she grinned wryly. “Well, Lashanna always did say that it was such an unreliable gift that it was pretty much useless. She said that the future changed as the present changed. That what you saw was only the future that would happen if events continued on their present course. But you couldn't tell if they would remain on that course, so you couldn't act on your knowledge of the future.”

“What do you mean?”

“She used to say there was no point acting on your foretellings till the things you foresaw actually started to happen. That Tari were forbidden to do so.”

“But these Tari seem to be acting on the future.”

“Maybe it’s changed. But these Tari seem to be saying that they are trying to bring about a desired future by forcing Elena to marry Wolf Madraga. Is that how it looks to you? It sounds crazy.”

Ezratah thought about it. “It could be a logical explanation of events. If you believed the future could be foretold.”

“But what future could possibly require Elena to marry Wolf Madraga?”

“Don’t ask me! I don’t believe people can foretell the future.”

Marigoth sat staring at the fire and looking miserable.

“You don’t know anyone outside Ermora who might know what is going on?” asked Ezratah, trying to be helpful.

“No. Our foster parents told us everything they know.”

“Well, if these Tari had wanted to harm us, they would have done so by now,” said Ezratah, trying to approach the problem logically. “They are so strong. They could do anything they liked with us. I suppose that means they don’t want to harm us. Perhaps you should go to Ermora and find out why they are doing this.”

“I guess,” said Marigoth. Suddenly with a sob she put her face in her hands. “I don’t want to go to Ermora. Chaos! I wish Yani was awake. Elena is getting farther and farther away, and I don’t know what to do.”

“There now,” said Ezratah, touched despite all his previous bad experience. She talked so much like an adult sometimes that he kept forgetting that Marigoth was just a child. A *girl* child at that.

“Don’t speak to me as if I was some kind of baby,” shouted Marigoth angrily. “I’m smart too. I can—” Suddenly she put her face in her hands and made an infuriated noise.

Used to the tantrums of his little sisters, Ezratah paid it no heed. He made soothing noises.

“Be kind to yourself. You’ve done very well for someone not yet grown. No one expects you to be able to manage like a grown-up. Soon Yani will be awake. I’m sure she’ll know what to do.”

Marigoth was staring at him with her mouth open. What on Mir’s earth had he said to astonish her. Who could understand natives? Or women for that matter. For a moment he thought she was going to shout at him, but instead she shut her mouth and turned her back on him.

He was silent for a moment, unsure how to respond. Here he was taking care of a little girl who had just enslaved him and ruined all his hopes. But you couldn’t blame children for what they did. He almost wished he was one again. Sometimes it was very complicated being an adult. He felt tired just thinking about it.

“Why don’t we get some sleep? It will all seem better in the morning.”

He lay down with his back to her. After a minute he was pleased to hear her climbing into her blankets.

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing,” she said forcefully, “any prophecy that requires Elena to stay with Wolf Madraga is wrong, no matter what I have to do to make it so.”

“Good for you!” said Ezratah with what he hoped was a nice balance between assuagement and encouragement.

Over the years since the Tari had stopped traveling in the outer world, Jagamar had collected a solid

little group of powerful young mages around him, whom he referred to as his Defenders of Ermora. He kept them eager to please him in the same way that he kept his niece Jindabyne eager, by the judicious giving and then withholding of favor. It made them hard-edged and competitive and meant he could rely on them to inform on each other. Of all his young defenders he had most need to keep a watch on Jindabyne, for though she was the most loyal, she was also the most dangerous.

Unbeknownst to her he had had one of his other defenders watching Jindabyne's activities. Thus he knew even before she had informed him that Elena Mori was in the hands of Wolf Madraga. He knew of the pursuit of Elena by her sisters and dispatched two of his other defenders to relieve her. For reasons of his own, he did not want his niece coming into too great a contact with Math-inna's grandchildren who were also his nieces.

Kintora, his spy, was still in his library with him. Jaga-mar liked Kintora—she was a pretty creature, quick and eager to please. She liked to wear jasmine woven into her hair and its scent filled the library. For the moment it pleased him. Later when the time seemed right he would shame her out of wearing it.

Kintora was younger than Jindabyne and lacked her knowledge of the outside world, but she had done well and he had decided to train her up for outland work.

He was instructing her from the Book of Outlanders when the door flew open. A tall bird stood there—a marvelous bird almost as tall as a man, long-legged and elegant with a daggerlike beak and hard predator's eyes. Its black wings were banded with fiery red feathers. When it saw him looking, the bird stalked across the floor toward him with magnificent dignity, its claws tapping crisply on the floorboards.

Jagamar looked at Kintora who, with pleasing obedience, got up and left the room. He returned to his reading. It did not do to encourage Jindabyne in these extravagances. She was getting far too full of herself as it was. He turned the page of his book, caressing the soft vellum with his dry fingers.

“You have come back, then niece?”

He heard a rustling of feathers and a faint creaking of bones as she changed back to her proper shape. When he was sure she was finished, he looked at her.

She was staring at the side door through which Kintora had gone. “Who was that young one?”

“Kintora. No doubt she has grown since you last saw her.”

“Kintora?” said Jindabyne disconcerted. “Little Miss Spotty Face?”

“Yes,” said Jagamar, smiling a little maliciously to himself. How competitive they were! “I have taken her for an assistant. I need some help with the nectar dreamers when you are away so much.”

“Well, you will not need her any longer. I have come back for good,” said Jindabyne.

Jagamar rewarded her with a warm enough smile. “Then destiny has returned to its proper course?”

“It has, sir. Wolf Madraga has his bride.”

“Good.” He took her hand and patted it kindly. “You have done well, my child. Just as I expected. Very good.”

He returned to his book.

Jindabyne stood looking around the room, especially at the door through which Kintora had just left.

“So what happens now?” she asked at last. There was a tentative sound in her voice.

“I imagine you are tired and will want a rest,” said her uncle absently. “Perhaps you would like to go up country and visit some of those little birds that you seem to like so much.”

“Is that what you want, sir?”

“That must be what you want, my dear. Are you not tired after being so long among the outlanders?”

“Of course,” said Jindabyne nervously. She had always felt nervous around her uncle. Strange, considering how much she loved him. She turned and went to the door.

“Sir?” she said. “You still want me as your assistant, don’t you? Sir?”

Jagamar looked up from his book with a pleased smile. “How can you doubt it, my dear? You’re such a good girl. And I have easily enough work for two assistants.”

“So Kintora is to stay?”

“You are both to stay. Come here, my dear.” He held out his arm and she went gladly to his side to accept his rather cold hug. He returned to his reading, but kept his arm around her waist and patted her hip absently.

“Sir?” she said emboldened by these affections.

“Um-hum.”

“I am troubled by what I have done.”

“Oh, Jindabyne. What troubles you this time?”

“It seems to me that it is a cruel thing. That man will never find happiness with that woman. She does not want him.”

“Destiny is a cruel master,” said Jagamar. “But they do not need to be happy. All they need is to get a child. Then she may leave him if she wishes. Don’t be troubled. The woman has spent her whole life among outlanders. She is probably the only one of our people who can bear the crude sight and smell of the creatures. The man is only an outlander. No need to think anything of him. I doubt he has any real feelings.”

Something about her uncle’s words stung Jindabyne.

“Are you sure we have to do this?” she said suddenly.

Jagamar turned to look at her incredulously.

“Are you questioning me, Jindabyne?”

She was suddenly frightened by what she had started, yet there was a sting of anger urging her on.

“No sir. Just—”

“Now that the two are mated I can confidently expect that visions of the burning time should diminish. Do you doubt my judgment?”

“It’s just... she already has one half-Tari child. She had a child with Eldene Mori.”

“Are you giving me advice, niece?”

“But... that destiny might just happen... anyway.” Jindabyne’s voice dropped away at the look on her uncle’s face.

Jagamar’s voice rose. “Are you questioning the importance of acting vigorously to protect Ermora. Just because you have some soft feelings for the people involved? Defenders of Ermora have have no business having soft feelings, especially not for outlanders. I am ashamed of you, girl.”

“May I not wonder, sir?” retorted Jindabyne, exasperated. Then she looked shocked as if she could not believe what she had just said.

Jagamar could not believe it either. She had never spoken to him like this before.

“No, you may not,” he snapped. “You have been away too long. You have forgotten who I am and

who you are. I am your uncle. I have the Great Vision for the future of Ermora. One that will save it from disaster. Have I not earned the right to go unquestioned? Have I not been right about everything else?"

A struggle was taking place in Jindabyne's mind. One part of her was churning with anger at her uncle; the other part was whimpering at the turn events were taking.

"I only—"

He slammed the book shut and stood up.

"You disappoint me, Jindabyne," he said in a low, angry voice. "I did expect greater loyalty from my own niece. I am ashamed of you."

Jindabyne's face was stricken.

"Sir, I have done everything you wanted. Please don't be angry now."

"Leave me," said Jagamar, turning his face away. "I will not have my precious time wasted with this stupidity."

Jindabyne came to her uncle's side and knelt there. "Uncle, forgive me. I was wrong to question you."

Jagamar ignored her.

"Sir, please."

Still Jagamar ignored her.

As she knelt uncertainly beside him the anger in her began to boil over filling her mind with white heat again. She had done well. She had. She deserved better than this after all she had been through for him.

"Very well," she said suddenly. She jumped and went away, slamming the door.

A moment later Gunidah and Kintora came sliding in through the other doorway. Kintora slid smugly to Jagamar's side.

"I can't believe she spoke to you like that, sir."

"Nor can I, my dear." He shook himself slightly and the surprised look left his face. "You see now the dangers of dealing with outlanders."

"I would never disappoint you, sir."

He smiled at her kindly. "I know you would not. Now, if you will excuse me, dear. I must speak with Gunidah."

Gunidah looked concerned. When Kintora had left she said, "What a strange creature your niece is! You were very hard on her. Was it wise?"

"She deserved it. I can't have my defenders questioning me. Or being sickly sentimental about those beastly creatures."

Gunidah hovered thoughtfully.

"If you are too hard on her, she may betray you."

"Jindabyne? Never! She and I are bound together with hoops of iron. She will come crawling back. Don't worry yourself, a much more difficult task is ahead of us."

"What do you mean?"

"It is likely that the sisters will now come to Ermora in search of answers."

"Oh no! Of course! What—"

“Don’t worry! We simply need to make sure to keep them busy so that they don’t go asking the wrong people questions. Just delay them. Make sure above all that neither of them meld in the spirit cave.”

“We’re not going to be able to prevent them forever.”

“We don’t need to forever, just long enough for Elena Tari to conceive Wolf Madraga’s child. That’s the beauty of it. Considering what animals the outlanders are, that shouldn’t take too long. Then she can go free. And who knows... She may want to be rid of the child once it’s born, which will give us an opportunity.”

“You are a master, Jagamar,” breathed Gunidah. “You already had all this planned?”

“Of course. Now I want you to go back to Penterong and make sure that if they *do* come, you are the first one they meet.”

Chapter 18

“They will stop us,” whispered Marigoth. “Let’s try something else.”

“If they’re determined to keep us from Elena it will make no difference where we go,” said Yani. “Come on.”

The sisters joined hands and ran forward. Ezratah had been expecting that, though they had an agreement, they might try to shake him off. So he grabbed hold of Mari-goth’s other hand and ran with them. They dashed between the stones into the Circle of Power. There was a moment of cold darkness so brief that at first Ezratah thought it was simply the stones blotting out the sun, and he felt a sudden lurch as if someone had yanked him backward. It was only when he felt a jarring thrumming in his bones that he knew there was magic in the Circle and by then he was back in sunlight again.

It was all so quick that his first thought was, Damn, they stopped us. Then he blinked. They were no longer on the scrubby hills of the coast where they had entered the Circle of Power.

Yani let out a cry of triumph and exultation.

“I love it!” She shook her head back and thrust her fist up into the air.

Madwoman, thought Ezratah sourly. He was relieved it had worked, however. His teeth were chattering with the thrumming of the Circle’s magic; he walked quickly forward to get free of it.

They had tried for several days to get past the Tari who guarded the road to the fortress at Lamartaine. Two young male mages had stopped them every time, though never as violently as the bird-clawed female had the first time. With great reluctance Yani and Marigoth had finally decided that it was time to go to Ermora to find out why Elena must be a captive.

By then the idea of Ermora had firmly taken hold in Ezratah’s imagination. What kind of place would people like Marigoth live in? It could be wondrous. If he went to Penterong with the sisters, he would know more about the Tari than any other Mirayan and soon this would become very valuable knowledge. His ambitions were reasserting themselves.

Now here they were outside the gates of the legendary Ermora.

For the first time since he had been in Yarmar he could see no mountains on the horizon, only a few sharp green-clad peaks nearby. They must be high up. The mountain air was extraordinarily refreshing

and invigorating.

The stone circle was set just at the edge of a green and beautiful forest of towering trees and ferns. Surely the elevation was too high for trees?

Before them lay a shallow valley where the trees thinned and were broken up by green pasturelands. Black-and-white cows and tall chestnut horses grazed in the pasture, and a meandering stream glinted in the fresh morning sun. Beyond that rose a steep green hillock shaped like a massive earth fortification. There was a perfection, a lightness about the whole view that made him feel good all over. A sudden tremendous longing to see beyond that far hillock filled him. The land beyond must be exquisite. Was it his imagination or was it glowing?

“Ermora,” said Yani looking in the same direction.

“How strongly it calls,” said Marigoth softly. “I would never have thought it.”

“The place our grandmother took us from... to save us,” murmured Yani.

“But from what?” wondered Marigoth.

The two women were silent. For a moment Ezratah feared they were going to turn around and go right back through the stones. Then suddenly Yani tossed her head and reached around to pull her sword off her back. She buckled it round her waist.

“A life lived in fear is a life half-lived,” she cried. “Come on, Mari. We’ve got a sister to rescue. Let’s go!” She strode forward.

They took a nearby road; it led out of the forest, and soon they were striding down it so fast that Marigoth and Ezratah were puffing. A thin strip of pasture land flanked the road. Behind it the forest was lush.

Ezratah felt absurdly happy, tranquil, just being here. It was hard to keep any thought of danger in his mind.

He was just about to beg Yani to slow down when a man wearing a brown tunic and green hose came running out of the forest. Behind him came two women dressed, rather immodestly, in exactly the same way. As they came onto the path, they stopped and stared at Yani and Marigoth. Yani put her hand on her sword and kept walking past them. When Yani, Marigoth and Ezratah were past, the three followed behind. Soon other people came out of the forest staring and following them. All of them were Tari with beautiful Tari faces and tall Tari physiques. Some were dressed in tunic and hose, a couple in long robes, but there seemed to be no difference in men and women’s dress. Did they see them as being the same? How could that possibly work?

“Are they using magic?” he asked Marigoth.

“There is magic everywhere here,” she replied. “Like the weave in a cloth.”

“What do we do if they attack?”

“Run? Lie down and play dead? Make up your own plan,” said Marigoth. “You wanted to come, Mirayan.”

The Tari did not seem aggressive. No one attempted to stop them.

The road led toward a huge rocky outcrop covered in some kind of greenery. Ezratah realized there was a gate ahead when people suddenly began running toward them—a crowd in fact, which blocked their path. The people stared and whispered among themselves. Yani and Marigoth seemed unsure what to do.

Suddenly a voice was heard at the edge of the crowd and a woman came pushing through the bodies. She was as young and beautiful as the rest of the Tari, but her hair was silver instead of gold and her

bearing held the unmistakable air of authority.

“Greetings to you, strangers. You are most welcome to Penterong. I am Gunidah, head of this healing house.”

“I thank you for your welcome, Lady Gunidah,” said Yani, replying in Tari. “But alas we have most serious business to transact. Our sister has been kidnapped and when we followed to try and release her, we were stopped and attacked by a Tari. She broke my skull and my arm and did not stop to see me healed. We come here seeking justice and our sister’s freedom.”

A shocked outcry spread throughout the crowd. Gunidah held up her hand and the talk died quickly.

“This is indeed a most serious matter. If you come with us into the halls of Penterong, we shall address it. But first, may we know your names?”

“This is our Mirayan friend, Ezratah,” said Yani. “I am Yanimena and this is Marigoth. Our sister is called Elena.”

Probably nobody heard this last name, for the moment Yani named herself there were cries of recognition.

“They are calling us the Miracle Three,” muttered Marigoth to Ezratah. “A bit ridiculous—there are only two of us here.”

Gunidah held up her hand again and after a few moments the voices subsided.

“It joys us to greet our dear friend Mathinna’s granddaughters. But we are much pained by your story. Attack and coercion are forbidden to us Tari. We beg you to accept our hospitality and promise by the five elements that you will be entirely unharmed within the walls of Penterong. Your companion is most welcome as well.”

She bowed toward Ezratah with charming elegance.

Yani and Marigoth exchanged looks.

“We thank you,” said Yani. “But have we your word that if we come into Penterong we will be able to leave again at our will?”

The Tari looked more astonished than ever.

“Leave Ermora!” cried Gunidah in astonishment. “Why?...”

Then she appeared to recover herself. “I swear on the five elements that if you wish to leave us again, you shall be free to do so. But leaving Ermora these days carries the threat of exile. Our council may be unwilling to let you enter a second time.”

“It is a risk I am prepared to take for the sake of my sister Elena,” said Yani stoutly. “We thank you, then, for your kind hospitality and will be happy to follow you.”

Even up close it was impossible to think of the gate of Penterong as something man-made, for it looked so much like natural rock. Briar-roses clung to the rock face and their delicious scent permeated the air. Though he knew little of plants, Ezratah had a feeling that it was too late in the year for briars to be flowering in such profusion. Ever after when he smelled that scent, he would remember the Tari.

As they went through the gate the illusion of nature passed away, for within was a wide grassy courtyard surrounded by a colonnaded square three stories high. This reminded Ezratah of the great fortified monasteries he had known as a child in Miraya, which functioned both defensively and as hospices. The courtyard within the gates was full of Archipelagans, all at various stages of healing. Some were lying in beds in the little cell-like rooms along the colonnade and some sat enjoying the sun in the center of the courtyard. The sick paid them little attention, but throughout the building fair-haired, greenrobed figures came peering out of doorways and collected along the upper balconies. Yani striding

along with her sword at her side seemed to excite especial interest.

The colonnades were thickly grown with creeping vines, whose huge spiraling stems covered the pillars of the courtyard so thickly that Ezratah could not even tell if there was any stone beneath. It was a marvelous effect. In fact it was the most magnificent courtyard he had ever seen. But he did not breathe a word of this to his companions. Part of him was slightly outraged that natives could make something so magnificent, but he quickly forgot this thought.

Suddenly, here, life seemed exciting and beautiful, and he felt himself capable of all kinds of wonders. The vague anxiety he had felt about his future receded. He would return to Olbia one day full of valuable knowledge and become a great man on the strength of it.

The sisters were both thrilled and daunted. Will we be able to get anything from these people if they do not want to help us thought Yani, and she sensed Marigoth was thinking the same thing. Yet her heart sung to be here. She could sense the very walls glowing with magic. The life spirit flowing through everything filled her with a tinging joy. Yet as it did so it made her more aware that she was now a creature of the raven. She felt the blackness of her actions at Olbia within her.

Gunidah led them quickly across the courtyard and through an archway into another area of forest. This forest was more closely tended than the one outside. Branches of trees were woven into shelters, lush green grass sprinkled with tiny flowers grew like a carpet on the ground and little wooden chairs and tables were scattered here and there. Stone paths wound away on either side and she glimpsed stone- and wickerwork walls through the low hanging branches. It was more like a wooded garden than a forest. The raven blackness in Yani's spirit was momentarily washed away by its sheer beauty. The life spirit was wonderful and she was lucky to be able to partake of it.

They came to a small clearing where a spring fed into a small pool before trickling away as a stream. Here a wooden table had been set with bowls of fruit and bread and cheese. Some wooden chairs were grouped around it. Gunidah invited them to sit at the table and poured pale golden wine from a jug; a young man and woman offered them food.

"Perhaps your companion would like to see Penterong while we discuss your concerns," said Gunidah. She nodded at the young woman who was serving them.

"Wynnbryng would be happy to show this Mirayan around Penterong, wouldn't you, dear?"

"I would love to," said Wynnbyng, giving Ezratah what Marigoth later described as a disgusting gooey look.

Ezratah immediately took some bread and cheese and went off with her.

"Typical," muttered Marigoth.

The moment he was out of earshot, Gunidah turned to them. "I long to hear news of my dear friend Mathinna."

Yani and Marigoth exchanged looks. "I'm afraid she disappeared many years ago," said Yani. "We had hoped we might find her here."

Gunidah looked shocked.

"Here?" She shook her head vigorously. "No, she's not here!"

"We thought you might be keeping her prisoner," said Marigoth provocatively. Yani was convinced Grandmother was dead, but Marigoth was keeping faith. Certain that Ermora held the key to her whereabouts. She just had to stir up the right ants' nest. Then maybe Grandmother could help them with Elena.

The young man serving shot Marigoth a look of outrage, but Gunidah replied calmly, "That could not

be done; such an act would pollute the very essence of Ermora. You would be wiser to look for your Grandmother elsewhere.”

“We fear she has come to some harm,” said Yani.

“Then the cause is obvious,” said Gunidah shortly. “We know well how dangerous outlanders are. But I am most troubled to hear this.”

And she did indeed look worried.

“We too are sorry that she is not here,” said Yani, looking warningly at Marigoth. Grandmother had been gone eighteen years. They needed to focus on Elena now. “But we are very concerned about our sister. Perhaps you could explain to us why we have been attacked by Tari?”

“I cannot,” said Gunidah. She was obviously disconcerted by this forceful change of subject, but she recovered quickly. “I am mystified. We Tari have taken a vow not to leave Ermora and even if we had not, the Tari are children of the life spirit. We would be overwhelmed by the horror of it. Your sister must know this to be true from her own experiences as a mage.”

It was on the tip of Marigoth’s tongue to say that she knew no such thing. Her own experience told her that you could commit considerable acts of violence using the life spirit. You felt badly when you committed them and you knew that one day you would be called to account for them but only the taking of human life caused you to actually suffer. But it was time to be agreeable or at least let Yani be agreeable, so she held her tongue.

“The people were Tari. My sister felt their magic,” said Yani.

“Your sister,” said Gunidah thoughtfully, looking at Marigoth. “I see.” The slight tone of disbelief in her voice made Marigoth bristle, but still she controlled her tongue.

“These people spoke of my sister having a destiny. A destiny to be with Wolf Madraga. Who else but the Tari have any insight into destiny?”

“Destiny?” said Gunidah smoothly. “Strange words indeed, considering... I think you should tell me all about it, then.”

It took them a long time to recount the story because Gunidah continually interrupted and asked questions. She seemed to need information on so many things quite irrelevant things about the outside world. When they got to the description of the attack, she was shocked to her core that Yani had drawn her sword against the bird-clawed woman.

“What were you taught?” she cried in horror. “To offer violence to another human being.”

“What should I have done, then?” said Yani defensively. “I am no mage. Should I have just stood by and let that creature keep me from my sister?”

“A true Tari would... I’m not surprised that whatever it was attacked you if you attacked it first,” said Gunidah roundly. “It probably would never have attacked you otherwise. I can see you have learned many wrong ideas in your years in the outlands.”

Yani struggled to suppress an urge to confirm Gu-nidah’s bad opinion of her by giving her a good shaking. Fortunately Marigoth spoke up.

“But I thought that Tari mages were supposed to send you to sleep if you attacked them. Did not the Tari do wrong to offer us violence in return?”

“I am not convinced this person you speak of was a Tari,” said Gunidah. Suddenly she turned on Yani.

“You wear a very warlike garb. Am I to understand that you are in the habit of using violence? You said something about a tournament. Did you take part in it?”

“In the outside world it is necessary to defend yourself sometimes, and I am not a mage who can send my enemies to sleep.”

“So you admit to this horror,” snapped Gunidah.

“It is not a horror, and yes I do.”

“Did it never occur to you to take yourself out of reach of the violence, so that you would do no wrong?” asked Gunidah.

“It was not always possible. From the very early days I was involved in defending my sister Elena.”

“You could have returned to Ermora.”

“Our grandmother told us that danger lay here for us,” snapped Yani.

“What! Sweet life! Why ever... Well! That was very wrong of her. Very wrong. But you could have found some secluded place to live away from outlanders and their violent ways. I think you have sought out violence, haven't you?”

This was not a time for anger. Yani pulled back her temper. “Perhaps you are right.” Agreeing might be the best way to finish this infuriating argument and get back to Elena. She just hoped she sounded more sincere than she felt. “Perhaps I should reconsider my ways. But tell me, why did our Grandmother believe Ermora was so dangerous for us? Perhaps you could tell us why you think she was wrong?”

Once again Gunidah was confounded by a masterly change of subject.

“Her reasons? Well um, well... it's a long and complicated story but basically it started when your grandmother's son Garroway died at the hands of Asgor. He was her only surviving relative.

“At this time Shara, your mother was pregnant with you. She too was devastated. Her grief was so strong that she went into the Spirit Cave to commune with the life spirit. When she came out, though, it was far too early. She gave birth to three babies, you three. A miraculous thing; triplets are unknown to the Tari. Everyone believed she had only one baby in her womb when she went into the Spirit Cave. Many Tari believed that this was a special gift from the life spirit to make up for the Three Mages who had been ripped out of the great circle of life by demons. Then another miracle. During your presentation to the life spirit, Spirit Stones at the mouth of the cave spoke in a human voice and pronounced this prophecy for all to hear.

“I know it by heart. It was such a rare and magical occurrence.

*Three children born of life force,
A bridge from death to life,
from imbalance to harmony.
The warbird flies at their command
to reign in the people of the dragon.
A demon fire that burns toward Ermora
Yields to their quenching
A melded child of their making
is born to rule the dragon
To bring harmony in clasped hands.*

She sighed.

“A beautiful verse. With this, the life spirit claimed you for itself.” She shot a venomous look at Yarn.

“It cannot have known what wicked uses its chosen ones were going to put themselves to.”

Yani and Marigoth were too amazed by her story to care about her venom.

“What happened to our mother?” asked Marigoth. “Grandmother said she died.”

“Of course she died!” snapped Gunidah. “Giving birth to you killed her!”

“Killed her!”

“Giving birth to triplets... Tari do not have the same brutish, animal vitality as outlanders. You could hardly expect her to survive.”

“But the life spirit,” cried Yani. “Our mother must have known we... our birth would... Why?”

“Your mother was glad to do this thing for the life spirit. Death is small matter for the Tari. A return to the great Circle of Life. I only wish your grandmother had had such a strong sense of duty. But alas...” She shrugged pettily.

“What happened?” asked Yani quickly, sensing hot words rising to Marigoth’s lips in defense of their grandmother.

“From the beginning your grandmother insisted that the prophecy meant nothing. She didn’t seem to like the fact that you were special. People felt that she wasn’t dealing very well with the death of her son and that she was not a fit person to take care of such important babies. She questioned everything, the council, even the life spirit itself! Outlanders had killed her only son and yet she opposed, loudly opposed, the closure of Ermora and the disbanding of the Society of Travelers. Astonishing. Almost unnatural. But she was always soft on the nasty creatures.”

The loathing in Gunidah’s voice chilled Yani to the soul. Was this how all Tari felt about outlanders now?

“Now, your mother Shara came from a very public-spirited family. Her father served on the council and her brother still does. They led us in closing ourselves off from those wretched outlanders. Shara’s family merely made a proper claim in the council to gain custody of you. Your grandmother refused to agree to their rights. She took you and disappeared from Ermora, and there we are. And what a great disaster has followed. The life force’s favorites have been dedicated to a life of chaos and destruction.”

Yani and Marigoth had been utterly overwhelmed, but Gunidah’s nastiness brought them back to themselves.

“Thank you for your opinion!” said Marigoth, just as nastily. “But we are much more interested in the well-being of our sister than what you think of us.”

“Mari!” hissed Yani. She turned to Gunidah. “It may be that I have done wrong. But my sister speaks truth. To us the most urgent matter is to see our sister rescued. After that, we will deal with other concerns. If you are right and it is not a Tari who has stopped us, we must still beg you to aid us. Otherwise I fear I shall be forced to commit more acts of which you will disapprove. Until now there has been no other way.”

Marigoth heard the mockery in Yani’s voice, but Gunidah appeared to miss it.

“I fear you have done much wrong to the life spirit, young woman, but at least you acknowledge it,” she said, with patronizing graciousness. “I have been thinking about your quest. The two of you should go into Ermora to consult the council, but I’m not sure you”—she gestured toward Yard—“can be allowed to go. I am afraid your wrongdoing will pollute our holy land.”

“My foster parents told me that wrongdoing was a matter for the Spirit Cave to deal with, and I am perfectly willing to face its justice,” said Yani.

“Are you?” said Gunidah, looking at the two of them thoughtfully. “No, I’m afraid it cannot be

allowed. Your case is too serious.”

“If you won’t help us, we might as well leave now,” cried Marigoth, leaping to her feet.

“I didn’t say that,” said Gunidah smiling silkily, in a way that made Marigoth feel childish. “I am certain the council will want to do something about Elena. The idea of a Tari woman in the hands of outlanders—such violent dangerous creatures... But disharmonious people like your sister cannot be allowed into the holy land. I can take only you. We shall go together to your uncle and he will help you put your case to the council. I trust that meets with your approval,” she inquired of Marigoth sweetly.

“I suppose it must,” said Marigoth. “If I go into Ermora, I will be allowed to leave, won’t I?”

“If that is what you wish,” said Gunidah calmly. “We do not keep people prisoners. However if you leave you may not be allowed to enter again. And you will have to sacrifice all chance of melding.”

“I think I can bear that after all these years,” said Marigoth. Yani shot her a warning glance. “I would be most grateful for your help,” she added quickly.

Gunidah nodded graciously. She looked coolly at Yani. “And you also can be aided. If you truly wish to release yourself from your wrongs, there is the ancient cleansing rite, which may allow you to enter Ermora at some later time.”

“I see. Thank you very much,” said Yani, trying to keep the irony out of her voice.

“You’re most welcome,” said Gunidah sweetly. “It is our wish to always create balance wherever we can.” She looked expectantly at the sisters.

Yani took hold of Marigoth’s arm. “Sister, let us walk a little if we may and discuss things.” She dragged Marigoth away along one of the paths.

“I can’t believe—” started Marigoth furiously.

“Hush! Speak Dani. They may be listening.”

“I won’t believe in that woman. Everything she said about Grandmother is a lie,” Marigoth snarled.

“We can’t know that.”

“What do you mean? Our grandmother was a fine woman. Timmic and Lashanna would never have believed in her otherwise. Do you think they were fools?”

“There can be many different forms of the truth,” said Yani. She was full of doubt. It was easy for Marigoth. Children are full of certainty about good and bad. They had only been five when Grandmother had left, not old enough to see beyond their love for her. After Gunidah’s speech Yani did not feel clean enough to enter Ermora anyway.

“We cannot go on if you are going to doubt,” said Marigoth, shaking Yani. “Of course she was lying.”

Yani’s face hardened. “I have no doubts about the need to free Elena.”

“And I swear to you, it was Tari that stopped us, no matter what that woman says.”

“So what are we going to do now, then?”

“Fix ‘em!” said Marigoth.

“Very helpful,” grinned Yani wryly. “Perhaps you’d like to give me a few more details on who and what you mean to fix?”

“Come let me show you my favorite part of Penterong,” said Wynnbyng.

“I have never met a Mirayan before. Are you as fearsome as the other outlanders say?” she said, looking at him sideways out of her almond-shaped Tari eyes. Though she looked quite foreign, she really was breath-takingly lovely. Such lovely skin she had! Though she was tall and slim, her graceful figure was lush in all the right places.

“I hope not. I come here hoping to make friends and learn about the Tari.”

“And I hope that I might learn something of your people from you. Tell me, was it really one of our people who attacked you? Not someone pretending to be one of us?”

“I do not think so,” said Ezratah. “Your way of doing magic is completely different from ours. If it had been one of the peninsula folk pretending to be you, I should have known it instantly, and so would the little girl, Marigoth.”

A brief frown crossed her face. “No it cannot be possible,” she said. “Our people do not behave so.” Then she smiled again. “Let us talk no more of such a nasty subject. Here is my favorite place in Penterong. I hope you will enjoy it.”

In the clearing before them stood a grove of enormous cherry trees. Rich, dark cherries dangled from the branches. Comfortable chairs with cushions had been set under the trees. Seated, Ezratah could simply reach up and pick cherries from above his head. In some places, the branches were so laden with fruit they touched the ground. It was deliciously cool in the shade of the trees, and Ezratah began to ply Wynnbyng with questions about Tari magic. After all, he was here to learn about the Tari. But it was quite difficult to keep his mind on the task. Wynnbyng was so charming and such a flirt. She kept looking at him from under her lashes and brushing his knee with her hand. Though he loved to flirt with ladies, he’d never actually done so without a chaperone in the background. Only very low-bred women had no chap-erones, and Wynnbyng was obviously not such a one. He kept expecting her outraged husband or father to come thundering through the grove. The moment he realized this, he knew he was being ridiculous. Natives gave their women much more freedom. Yet even his initial meetings with his native mistress had taken place under the auspices of her family. He couldn’t help checking to see if Wynnbyng was married.

“Oh no, I’m not ready to have children yet,” she said.

“And your father?”

“My father? He’s back in Ermora. Why do you ask about him?”

“No reason in particular. It’s just that in Miraya, it’s not seen as proper for men and women to be alone together without someone watching them.”

“Isn’t it? Sweet life! How do you get little Mirayans, then? You make love in front of other people? Don’t you find that a bit too intimate?”

Ezratah flushed with embarrassment. “No! No, no, no! Of course I didn’t mean that. I mean men and women who aren’t married to each other aren’t supposed to be alone together. It’s not seen as proper.”

“Proper? What does that mean?”

“Proper. You know... moral.”

“Moral?” said Wynnbyng thoughtfully. “You mean good and bad. But how can sitting here together be bad? Are you not enjoying my company?”

“Of course I am, charming lady!” said Ezratah.

“I’m so glad. I’m enjoying talking to you. But I wish you would explain more about how it is between men and women in your country. Do they really never spend time alone together till they are married? Whyever not?”

Ezratah squirmed.

“Well, this is not really a very proper, I mean, moral subject. But...” He had an inspiration. “It’s about babies, you see. It’s important to a man that his wife’s children should be his.”

“Oh I see,” said Wynnbyrng. This was obviously a new idea to her. Ezratah couldn’t imagine why. Paternity was a universal human concern. At least he’d got her off difficult subjects. Or had he?

“Babies are not a problem for Tari women. The life spirit enables us to choose when we have children and with whom.”

“Right,” said Ezratah. His face was burning. He wished he hadn’t brought the topic up. At the same time he was also finding it exciting to talk about this subject with a beautiful woman.

“What interests me is how men and women know they are suited if they don’t try each other out before they get married?”

“Oh!” said Ezratah. This *was* turning into an exciting conversation. “Why? Do you Tari... um... try each other out?”

“Of course! It seems only sensible.”

“Err... But doesn’t your husband mind that you have belonged to other men before him?”

“Belonged? What a funny way to put it! How does making love to a someone make you belong to them?”

A swamp of embarrassing explanation loomed ahead. Ezratah took the coward’s way out. “Um... you’re right. It is a funny way to put it.”

She had no morals at all. Though it was not in the horrible, sluttish way of prostitutes but in the innocent childlike way of a native who knew no better. It was rather sweet really. Were all Tari like this?

“So your husband wouldn’t mind?” he asked.

“Of course not. When I choose him he will know I have chosen the best. Do you see?”

In a morally skewed way it was quite logical. “I do see your point.”

“I really do not understand your culture. How can there be anything good or bad about people making love together?”

She leaned against him in a way that seemed inviting, and was certainly damned sensuous. Behave yourself, Ezratah thought. You’re not with some street girl, however it may seem.

“I’ve sat under this tree with lots of people and the life spirit never told me that it was wrong. And the life spirit knows these things. Would you like a cherry?”

Of course he bit one off the bunch she was holding over his mouth and, wouldn’t you know it, just at that moment a voice said in Seagani, “Nose in the trough again! Honestly, you leave a Mirayan man alone for a few minutes, and where does he end up?”

Marigoth stood at the edge of the grove regarding them with a sarcastic smile.

“That’s a very nasty remark for a little girl to make,” said Ezratah coldly.

She smiled smugly. What annoyed Ezratah most was how guilty he felt being caught by a child in such a situation.

“Excuse me,” he said, politely to Wynnbyrng. He hoped she did not understand Seagani. He got up and drew Marigoth away down the forest path.

“Are you going into Ermora?”

“Yes. But you can’t come. Gunidah says only I am welcome. You can stay here and wait if you wish.” She smirked. “I think they’re interested in you. And I’m sure you can find plenty to entertain you.”

With a cheeky grin she turned and ran away down the path, leaving him free to return to the cherry grove. He forgot about her the moment he saw Wynnbryng’s smile.

A magical time followed. He and Wynnbryng walked among the beautiful trees, talked, and watched groups of Tari dancing graceful, stately dances on the green sward. He lay upon silken cushions and soft dry moss, Wynnbryng leaning at his side, the long tresses of her flowing hair trailing like scented golden ropes across his chest and cheek, her soft breast nuzzling against his arm. She smelled of roses and her robe felt as if it were made of rose petals. She fed him sweet nut cakes and fruits, her ripe red lips just above his. Intoxicated by her beauty and the wine, at last he dared to lean forward and kiss the honey from those lips.

By then evening had fallen and crickets were calling sleepily in the grass. Smiling, she led him to a bower strewn with silken cushions. A fall of briars and a gauzy curtain gave them privacy. By the golden light of candles she slid her robes from her shoulders, revealing ripe beautiful breasts and long slender legs. She caressed herself with her hands, dancing and teasing him so much that when she came to him and began to loosen his clothes, he was so aroused that he coupled with her before she’d even got his shirt off. He was sorry then that it was over so quickly, but she, nothing loathe, gave him some herbal wine to drink, undressed him completely and stroked him with her silken hair and body until he found to his delight that he was able to perform again. This time she took command, a delightfully novel experience, and rode him with sensuous slowness, each stroke squeezing more intense pleasure from him till her body convulsed in ecstasy and took him with her.

He woke to find himself alone in the bower. Sun was streaming through the gaps in the roses. It was morning! He scrambled into his clothing and rushed out into the sunshine only to discover that he had no idea where he was. Fortunately a young Tari man was kind enough to take him to the right place, a pair of arched trees, the Parting Gate. He arrived just in time to see Yani and Marigoth.

Yard’s eyes were amused when she saw him. Marigoth said something acerbic in Tari, but she turned and very sweetly bid him good-bye before she went and joined Gu-nidah on the path that led out to Ermora.

“Aren’t you going with her,” said Ezratah to Yani.

“They do not let those who use violence to enter the holy land,” explained Yani with a wry grimace. “I will have to undergo several days of cleansing before I am allowed to follow. By then Marigoth could be back.”

“You mean you’re going to let a child, especially one as forthright as Marigoth, go into this dangerous and sensitive situation on her own?” cried Ezratah.

“Marigoth and I are twins,” said Yani.

Ezratah’s jaw dropped. “You mean...”

She shrugged. “After a certain point she just never got any older. I think that is why she has so little magic.”

“So *little* magic!” cried Ezratah goggling.

“Come and have some breakfast,” said Yani soothingly.

Chapter 19

Elena was determined in her refusal to marry Wolf Madraga, but in the dark chapel, where the shame took place, Alyx stood like a small bright light between two tall dour soldiers.

“Mumma!” she cried reaching out to her when she saw Elena’s veiled form come in through the chapel door.

“Do as you are bid and no harm will come to the child,” said Wolf Madraga as they approached the priest. Madraga’s face was frighteningly grim. Much later, far too much later, she discovered that he was bluffing. He would never have harmed a child. At the time she assumed he was the same kind of man as Alexis Scarvan, and so she did as she was bid and stood quietly as the priest recited the words of the marriage ceremony.

Oh, Eldene. Forgive me. Now I have truly betrayed you. She tried not to remember the day she had married Eldene. The forest had been full of sunlight and the sweet scent of mangiri flowers. How happy Eldene had looked when he turned to take her hand. It had made her heart turn over with delight. She could almost feel the hard calloused skin of his palm on her hand now. But, no, she would never touch him again.

It was obscene to be making the same promises to her husband’s murderer.

Her eyes were barren during the ceremony, but afterward when Wolf led her into an antechamber, they brought Alyx to her. Alyx reached up to her, her eyes just like Eldene’s. Elena suddenly burst apart with grief. To her everlasting shame she could not stop, but wept and wept even after Alyx, terribly frightened, began to wail herself.

Strangely, the men did not interfere but left them alone together so that at last, when she was too exhausted to weep any longer, she was able to put off her veil and kiss and comfort Alyx. The little girl, tired out by her own weeping, soon fell asleep with her head pillowed on Elena’s breast. Elena felt her despair lift a little.

If only time would stop here, she thought.

But it did not. Soon enough a pleasant motherly-looking Eastern Seagani woman came. The Easterners were no friends to the Mori, but at least she was not Mirayan.

“My name is Leona,” she said. “I am to be Alyx’s nurse.”

“Where are you taking her?” cried Elena, clinging to Alyx so that she woke.

“You will see her tomorrow, in your quarters,” said the woman.

When Elena had soothed Alyx back to sleep, Leona bore her away. Then other women came and took Elena to a bedchamber decorated with late summer roses. They bathed her, rubbed her body with scented oils, arrayed her in a fine linen nightgown and in other ways prepared her to be violated yet again.

When they had gone she avoided the bed and sat instead on a hard wooden chair, waiting for the inevitable. She was trembling. Have some pride, she scolded herself. Do not show fear. But where would she find the strength to endure more? And from that man. She would never forget the self-righteous look on his face that terrible morning as he cried. “Thus perish all enemies of Miraya” as he stood over Eldene’s dead body. The suspense was terrible. She almost wished for him to come so that it would be over quicker.

At last the door opened and he was there. She kept her head bowed. Relax, she told herself. It will hurt less. But her every muscle tightened as he walked across the floor toward her. He stood before her, so close that she could see his boots and smell his scent. He smelled of leather mostly, far less offensive

than Scarvan's sweat and sour wine.

"Have you everything you need, lady?" he said quietly.

"Yes," she choked out.

He reached out and took her hand. "You are trembling," he said. "There is no need. You will receive nothing but kindness and care from me."

"Will I?" she said. Bitterness began to fill her. What was he playing at?

"It is not my intention to press you into a full marriage till you are used to me," he said. "In Miraya we are taught to treat our women with kindness and respect."

Anger filled her. Did he think she was a fool?

"I know how Mirayan men treat their women," she shouted, looking at his face for the first time.

"You will forget about that," he shouted back. He stopped and she saw that he was shaken. "Please do not speak of that again," he said. "I am aware of how... how you were used. But that is not how it will be here. You are my wife. Mirayan wives are treated with kindness and respect and that is how"—he touched her hand again—"you will be treated. You may not believe me now, but in time you will become used to me. You will forget what is past. I... I bid you good night, lady."

"I will never forget that you killed my husband," she cried. A red mist of hatred rose before her eyes. She could have killed him in that moment. The Tari in her was shocked.

He turned and looked calmly at her. He did not, as she half-feared, half-expected, attack her.

"I am your husband now, lady. And I will see to it that no man ever harms you again."

She lay sleepless that night, expecting him to return and take her. She had no intention of going willingly to his bed. She would never betray Eldene so. And Madraga would not wait forever. She was certain of that.

Chapter 20

As Gunidah and Marigoth walked through Ermoya that day, they passed several Circles of Power.

"Wouldn't it be faster to use those?" asked Marigoth. Gunidah shook her head.

"It is not possible," she said simply. When pressed she told Marigoth that it was too complicated to explain. She refused to use any kind of magic to speed or ease their journey, though she obviously had little experience with long-distance walking.

As the day wore on Gunidah began limping and her replies to Marigoth's questions had become more and more irritable. Marigoth kept the pressure up. Neither she nor Yani trusted Gunidah, and if Marigoth made her angry she might be able to glimpse the real woman behind the polite mask.

And there was so much to ask about!

Marigoth's senses were ravished, enchanted, intoxicated by Ermora. In her wildest dreams she could never have imagined such a beautiful place. Lush green forests full of soft ferns and dappled sunlight led into shady clearings containing bubbling fountains or strange, delightful sculptures. Fascinating paths ran out into beautiful meadows of grass and wildflowers. Huge obsidian boulders reared out of the ground and lily-fringed pools reflected the sky in dark, silk-sheened water.

The sky was rich with wonderfully colored birds and their delicate, piping songs. Sometimes as the birds flew past, trailing long colorful tails behind them, she could see small figures riding on their backs.

Flowering vines festooned the trees. Little animals with pointed faces, thick, russet fur and long prehensile tails played among these flowers, licking the nectar from them with long thin tongues.

Despite her anxiety for Elena and her distrust of Gu-nidah, Marigoth felt her spirit singing a wonderful song within her. She knew that song was the life spirit. Ermora was soaked with the life force as a rich fruit cake is soaked in liqueur, and it made the sounds, the scents, the colors and textures of this land so much richer and more vibrant.

Sometimes their path kept to quiet and peaceful places. Other times they passed companionable little groups of people working at crafts, picking fruit or just lolling in the shady glades, reading from scrolls or talking. Sometimes those people were obviously using magic to make their chairs float in the air or to create charming illusions, but here in Ermora it was difficult to feel individual manipulations of the life spirit because the land itself was pervaded by its magic. In fact, here it was possible for anyone, no matter how weak their powers, to create magical effects.

There were few buildings, though everywhere little shelters or bowers were woven into the branches of living trees. Occasionally they passed small stone cottages thatched with straw and flowers or roofed with grass, and there were several other buildings that seemed to have been carved in fantastical shapes from hollowed-out pinnacles of stone.

In spite of the urgency of her task, Marigoth could not resist stopping to gaze at these structures. Outside one, a swirling flock of colorful parrots were eating bread and honey from a wooden platter held out by an elderly woman. Another house was covered with flowering vines.

A Tari man was tending huge spiky blue flowers by brushing their yellow throats with a small brush. He told Marigoth all about pollination while Gunidah sat on a nearby bench and rubbed her feet.

As twilight fell, little lights shone out from the trees, making the path visible. Gunidah told her the light was created by small caterpillars called glowworms.

At last when full dark came, they stopped in a large clearing. People were sitting around a fire eating and drinking honey wine. A bubbling pot of stew gave off a very savory smell.

With an "oof!" of exhaustion, Gunidah sat down against a tree trunk, closed her eyes and began massaging her temples.

"Please child, go to the spring and get me some hot water," she said with a wave.

Marigoth wandered in the direction she was waving. People stared curiously at her, but unfortunately nobody actually spoke to her. Marigoth was dying to ask other Tari about destiny and also for their versions of the story of her own birth. However, Gunidah had expressly told her not to speak to anyone. Marigoth did not trust her, but she did not want to alienate her just at the moment.

On the farther side of the clearing, a hot spring bubbled from underground and filled the cooling air with steam. She picked up a bucket from a pile nearby and lined up behind several other people to collect water.

"Hello!" said a voice behind her. "Who are you?"

The man asking had smiling eyes and curling golden hair. His companion, a serious-looking woman, was staring at Marigoth intently. They both wore white robes embroidered with golden leaves.

Marigoth told them her name.

"Marigoth!" cried the woman explosively. "Daughter of Shara?"

"And granddaughter of Mathinna," said Marigoth. "Did you know them?"

“Yes, very well,” cried the woman. “Has your grandmother returned to Ermora?”

“My grandmother disappeared almost twenty years ago. Maybe she’s dead,” said Marigoth, not because she believed it—she refused to believe it!—but in the hope of provoking a reaction.

Both of her questioners looked satisfactorily shocked, but before they could reveal anything interesting, a voice behind her purred, “Why, Derrum! And Tjalparra. How astonishing to see you so far away from the Spirit Cave.”

Damn! Gunidah was quick!

As she spoke, Gunidah took Marigoth’s hand.

“Is Mathinna really dead?” asked the man earnestly. “Did you know? How did it happen?”

“This child is going to speak with the council and there can be no discussion of these things before then. They will act upon the information. Come away now, Marigoth. I bid you good day, Derrum.”

“Who were those people?” asked Marigoth as Gunidah hauled her away.

“Nobody much.”

“They seemed to know my mother and grandmother. Perhaps they know where my grandmother was. Why couldn’t I talk to them?”

“Didn’t you talk to them enough? And didn’t I ask you not to talk to people until you had told your story to the councillors?” snapped Gunidah.

“Why shouldn’t I just say hello to them?”

“Because... because it will compromise your story. Can’t you see that, you foolish girl? You are new here and you don’t understand our ways. For life’s sake, do as you are asked. Those two may have seemed friendly, but they are not friends. Derrum is an obsessive past lover of your grandmother, who would certainly be the first to tell you not to trust him.”

“And the other one?”

Gunidah sighed like a woman pushed too far. “Just some woman your grandmother didn’t like.”

They came to a Circle of Power.

“What! Are we going in one of these now? Why now? Why not earlier today?”

Gunidah turned on her.

“Because, for one thing I am fed up with your questions,” she shouted. “I am trying to do my best for you, girl, and all you can do is ask these interminable, stupid questions. Anyone would think you didn’t trust me. Would you prefer it if I *didn’t* take you to the council?”

“I’m sorry, Gunidah,” said Marigoth. “I didn’t mean to be so demanding. I’m very grateful to you.”

She kept her head lowered so that Gunidah could not see the satisfaction in her eyes.

At the other end of the Circle of Power two torches flanked a huge metal door with squares chased in gold and silver. Marigoth could not see if the door was attached to anything, for it was overshadowed on all sides by tall, perfectly straight pine trees.

“We are now going to meet one of our greatest visionaries,” said Gunidah with a theatrical gesture of her hands. As she reached for the door, it swung open. A beautiful but sulky young woman stood there, wearing an elaborate gown. White jasmine flowers were twined through her braids.

“Ah, Kintora,” said Gunidah briskly. “This is Marigoth, whom you will have heard about. We are here to see councillor Jagamar.”

“Come in, then,” said Kintora with a look of cynical amusement. “He’s always here.”

Suddenly Marigoth was in an enormous library. She was so astonished that for a moment she could only stare. Surely the pine trees couldn’t have obscured a place this size. It was the most monumental room she had yet seen in Ermora, and the first place not permeated by living things. Shelves full of scrolls and huge, roughly bound books lined it. Along its length stood a line of tall black pillars carrying great white globes. They reminded Marigoth of moons and later she learned that they were, in fact, pieces of moonlight focused and enhanced by magic.

A man sat at a desk reading from a big untidy book.

“Councillor Jagamar,” said Gunidah.

“My dear, Gunidah!”

Physically Jagamar was as tall and fair as any other Tari, but he moved with more decisiveness and looked at them intently. Here was a man with a firm purpose in life.

“So this is one of the three lost sisters,” he said. “It is a great pleasure to meet my dear Shara’s daughter. You look so like her. I am your uncle, you know.”

Once again Marigoth found herself staring in astonishment.

“Gunidah, did you not tell her her mother was my sister?” chided Jagamar gently. Gunidah smiled smugly, not the least put out. In fact she was probably enjoying Marigoth’s discomfiture, the mean old hag.

“Had things been different I would have been your foster parent,” continued Jagamar. “But enough of that. It is simply wonderful to have you here now.” He leaned over and placed a kiss on her forehead.

So this was the man her grandmother was supposed to have taken them away from. No doubt Grandmother had had her reasons. What had they been?

“Gunidah has told me all about your concerns,” continued Jagamar. “I am very sorry to hear of your grandmother’s death. We were not friends, but I would never have wished her harm.”

Marigoth opened her mouth to protest that her Grandmother was not dead and then closed it. She wasn’t sure why, but it seemed the right thing to do.

“Now,” said Jagamar. “Sit and tell me of your problems and those of your sister, and we shall see what there is to do.”

He listened very attentively to Marigoth’s story and asked far more sensible questions than Gunidah had. He did not get sidetracked by Yani drawing her sword either, although he did make a tutting noise. But he seemed just as mystified as Gunidah as to the identity of the Tari who had stopped them.

“Are you certain they were Tari?”

“Positive!” said Marigoth. “And they spoke of destiny. If we could find out who believes in destiny, we could find out who these Tari were.”

“We all believe that Tari can see the future in their dreams. Just as we are beloved of the Circle of Life so we are intimates with the Circle of Time. But destiny is not set until it comes to pass. We are also warned not to act upon these foretellings. Perhaps what you saw were half-breeds. They do not have the life spirit to guide them, and such people might get mistaken thoughts in their heads. And there are a number of them in the world.”

Marigoth was slightly shocked to hear him use the ugly term half-breed for melded folk, but perhaps it was different here in Ermora.

“Their magic was very strong,” she said. “I thought melded folk could not use the life spirit as we can.”

And they talked of..." She was getting sidetracked again— getting bogged down in this talk of Tari or not Tari, when the real issue at hand was Elena. "Councillor, we don't much care who is stopping us from rescuing our sister. The only important thing is that she be rescued from the appalling situation she is in now. Can you help us?"

Jagamar blinked with surprise and his body tensed slightly. Gunidah and Kintora both shot her looks of shocked disapproval.

So I'm not supposed to speak to the great man so bluntly, thought Marigoth. Tough luck!

"Yes indeed," said Jagamar, recovering smoothly. "A full-blood Tari—what a temptation to the Mirayans and their demon familiars. It is only lucky she is no mage. We must try and persuade the council how important it is that she be recovered. They are stubborn, but I am not without hope."

"Could you not help us yourself?"

"I personally? No, child. I do not have very strong powers." He smiled humorlessly. "Your grandmother was always very slighting about them. Outside Ermora I would be capable of very little. And before you ask, I don't know if you will be able to find anyone who will come out into the world with you. Apart from the fact that the council has forbidden it, people are afraid to leave Ermora. They are afraid of demons and of the way the outlanders may sacrifice us to them."

"But that's crazy," cried Marigoth. "The outlanders love the Tari."

"I'm sure your father thought that, and look what happened to him," said Jagamar in a voice that expected no argument.

Marigoth gave him one anyway, earning her another shocked glance from the women.

"That was just one instance. I've been all over the out-lands and have never seen anything to fear."

"Those single instances are what matter," replied Jagamar.

For a moment Marigoth thought she saw a flicker of something, perhaps dislike, in his eyes.

"Do you know that as a Tari you are a greater source of nourishment to demons than the other outlanders? You stare? I can see you were not told. How curious. Perhaps your grandmother did not know, though I must say I'm surprised. It would have been so much better had you been brought up in Ermora."

His tone made Marigoth bristle. Hold steady, she told herself.

"As we Tari are closer to the life spirit, we are more valued by demons as food," he continued. "In fact there has been speculation that they see us as a gateway to the very life spirit itself, which makes it all the more important that we keep out of their clutches. For the Abyss of Destruction to get into the life spirit... Horrifying thought! If that filth Asgor had known how much his demons wanted to consume Tari lives, he could have used your father and his two companions to bargain with his demonmasters for enough power to threaten even Ermora.

"Fortunately it appears that demons would rather not bargain highly for such tasty morsels as we. But a little knowledge and some logical thought could lead easily to a realization of our value. I am certain these new Mi-rayans who are infesting Yarmar would be quite capable of coming to the obvious conclusion—mine us like gold. The council decided the situation was desperate enough to warrant severe action, which is why they have used such a cruel threat as exile to prevent people from leaving Ermora."

"But the Mirayans hate demon magic. They are not going to start sacrificing Tari to them."

"My dear," said Jagamar. in blunt dismissal. "I have had considerable experience with Mirayan mages. When I was a young man, my father disguised me and a number of other young Tari as outlanders and sent us to Ishtak to study the Mirayans. I met several mages, backstreet mages it is true,

but Mirayan mages nonetheless, who dabbled in demon magic. In my opinion they are a power-hungry people willing to do anything to gain an advantage.”

Marigoth remembered the demon in Lev Madraga’s mirror. Perhaps Jagamar was right. Mirayans were disgusting in most other ways. But she was getting sidetracked again.

“If the council is so worried about demons being outside Ermora, surely they must send someone to rescue Elena.”

Jagamar smiled with patronizing kindness. “How focused you are, my dear! I must warn you that the other councillors are very conservative. For years I have been trying to persuade them that the Mirayans are a danger to us and that we should do something about keeping an eye on them. If we go about the outside world in secret so that the Mirayans do not know we are there, we should be safe enough. Alas, they will not listen to me. We must hope they will be persuaded by your far more urgent needs. I will certainly do everything in my power to help you. Tomorrow we will begin our effort. But I think now you must be tired, and my dear Gunidah looks worn out. Let us have some dinner.”

They ate at a great stone table in a clearing surrounded by rustling pines. It was very somber compared to the rest of Ermora, and the air felt heavy. Was this because of the powerful magics that must be in use to maintain this place?

“Why is there nobody else here?” she asked Jagamar.

“All we Tari have our private places and this is mine,” said Jagamar. “My father started the great collection of Tari writings and the dwelling place to go with it is my design. My assistants keep it strong for me, the dear creatures!”

Marigoth did not think that Kintora, the only assistant she had yet seen, was “dear.” She spent the whole meal smirking at Marigoth and making remarks designed to make her feel like an idiot. What a revolting creature!

That night as she lay awake in her mossy pine-scented bower, wondering if she was going to get anywhere here, Marigoth heard Gunidah throwing off her covers in the nearby bower. An instinct for deception made Marigoth feign sleep. She heard Gunidah’s feet crunching softly on the fallen pine needles at the opening of her bower, heard her stop for a few moments as if listening to see if she was asleep, and then heard her feet crunching away. Silently, Marigoth slid out of bed and followed Gunidah along several rows of pine trees. Jagamar was leaning against a tree trunk. Gunidah put her hand on Jagamar’s arm.

“I’m not sure about this,” she said.

“It is going beautifully,” he said. “I have everything safely under control.”

They embraced, kissed and Jagamar drew Gunidah into the darkness beyond the tree trunk.

Marigoth left them to it. How revolting! They were quite old. Still it was worth knowing about Gunidah and Jagamar, if only because Gunidah obviously didn’t want her to know. What Jagamar had been talking about? If there was anything to know she would find it.

Over the next few days Marigoth found out what sort of help she was going to get from the Tari council. Precisely none!

In Ermora, most conflicts were resolved by the concerned parties going to the Spirit Cave. Melding with the life spirit made it easy for people to see each other’s point of view and come to an agreement. Therefore the council had little day-to-day work and only met if they were requested to do so by enough people. Marigoth’s first task was to make sure enough people were concerned about Elena to request a

council meeting.

Thanks to Jagamar, Marigoth must have seen about thirty people in the first seven days—all of them, so Jagamar said, vitally important to their cause. All kinds of people came; mages, craftspeople and councillors. Yet all considered it pointless to have a council meeting. The world outside Ermora was too dangerous for Tari. Didn't the disappearance of Marigoth's grandmother prove this? Even Jagamar's suggestion of sending a cadre of powerful mages from Ermora to free Elena was out of the question.

Despite a warning from Gunidah, after the first couple of refusals Marigoth got angry and began to ask them why they were so set against the idea. To hear them speak, the world outside Ermora was covered in a great seething mass of hungry demons all yowling for Tari blood. Nothing Marigoth could say about her own experience made any difference. Elena's suffering made even less. When they spoke of her capture it was as if they were discussing an interesting intellectual problem. What was wrong with these people!

She changed tack. Wasn't the fact that some Tari were obviously operating illicitly in the outside world some cause for a council inquiry?

The first person she put this to, an elderly councillor, told her sternly that no one believed her story of rogue Tari.

"You have been deceived by a clever outlander disguise," he told her in his powdery voice. "They were just pretending to be Tari, probably to lure us out so that we can be fed to their demons."

"You're crazy. How can you have such delusions?" cried Marigoth, so outraged that she lost all sense of discretion.

"How can you be so sure of yourself, when you have so warped your power that you haven't even grown up?" snapped the councillor, his thin mouth tight and disapproving as he swept from the room.

After that every visitor asked her why she was so sure that the people who had attacked them were Tari. Several of them implied she was not a competent mage because she had not been trained in Ermora. Two stated it outright.

"How can you be so sure our attackers were not Tari?" she cried in answer.

And found herself back at the beginning. Tari do not harm people. Tari do not misuse destiny. Tari are honor-bound to stay within the confines of Ermora. It is not possible that you really saw Tari.

"Naturally the mages can feel that your growth is blocked and of course it worries us all," said one pleasant-faced young craftsman. "If your power flowed properly, you could not help but grow up naturally." He looked at her with owlish concern. "If you melded in the Spirit Cave, it might really help to rebalance—"

Before Marigoth could answer, Gunidah forcefully hustled the young man off.

"What a rude young fellow," she said. "How could he say such personal things? After all if you don't want to grow up, surely that is your own business."

Marigoth had been just about to say the same thing, but hearing the words come out of Gunidah's mouth gave her pause. She was suddenly sorry that the craftsman had been hustled away.

She had thought several times about the question of growing up since she had been defeated by the bird-clawed woman. She could not remember having made any conscious choice about it, but... Oh yuck! No! Her flesh crept at the thought. Why must she sacrifice her freedom? Why choose the cage of duty and responsibility?

Yet if she had been grown up, she might have been able to take on those Tari herself, and would not be here now asking idiots for help.

If only she could find Grandmother. She could take on these rogue Tari and the Mirayans, and best them all. Grandmother was a mighty mage.

All Marigoth wanted to do was scream, but she refrained (with what she felt was great heroism) and struggled on. A couple of her visitors were troubled by the question of Elena's fate and agreed that this was probably something the council should act on, though they were vague as to when a meeting might take place.

Marigoth had so little faith in their promises that she began to send despairing messages to Yani, suggesting that she try to find another way to free Elena.

She herself tried to look for other options, but there did not seem to be any. No one offered any other solution; and finding Grandmother, which she'd been so certain she could do in Ermora, seemed more and more unlikely.

In addition she began to realize that she was almost a prisoner in Jagamar's living place.

She could not seem to get out of Jagamar's living place alone, despite numerous attempts. She could not seem to even find the front door without Gunidah by her side. She searched for another way out, but somehow she always found herself trailing along another endless corridor of tall evenly spaced pine trees. They were so oppressively orderly, it made her want to scream.

She tried climbing the pines but the trunks were too thick and smooth. Even magic would not get her into their branches.

She even tried walking away from the library in a straight direction. Every corridor simply brought her back to the library again no matter which direction she went, though she was certain she had walked in a straight line. Some very powerful illusion was at work here—one so powerful that Marigoth could not even work out where it began.

It was always twilight in Jagamar's living place. Overhead dark green pine needles made a still, shadowy roof. The thick green moss on the ground between the long rows of pine trees made soft spongy carpet that seemed to deaden sound. The very air seemed dead.

Marigoth's head began to feel permanently muzzy. Was it the strong magic that must be being used to maintain such a place? Or were boredom and frustration sapping her energy? She had both these feelings in spades.

She should have asked Jagamar himself to help, but Marigoth found that she was afraid of him, which was confusing. He was her own uncle, after all. Was it the coldness in his eyes or the way he sometimes changed from smiling to venomous? Or... It did not take her long to realize that of all the Tari she had met, he was the only one energetic and interested enough in the outside world to carry out a plan that might involve the capture of Elena. The moment this thought occurred to her, she wished it hadn't. She was horribly aware how much she was in his power.

She must find out what he was doing!

Marigoth had not been sneaking around the living place long before she discovered that Jagamar's assistant Kintora had a place just outside the library where she liked to lurk and spy on what was going on inside. When Kintora was inside the library working as Jagamar's clerk, Marigoth lurked in her place. She could barely hear anything, but she could see lots.

Jagamar had many visitors. Most of them were unkempt-looking men or women with dreamy eyes. With wild gestures they told Jagamar long stories, which Kintora wrote down for him. Afterward Jagamar would give them vials of some kind of substance, which they snatched up with eager shaking hands. Marigoth quickly realized that these wild-looking people were nectar dreamers, people addicted to the dreams brought about by supping the nectar of the Galla flower. Why was Jagamar interested in these visions? Surely they were just the mad jumble of thoughts to be found in the attics of the mind.

The rest of Jagamar's visitors were energetic young people. They stood at attention before him, reporting things and listening with proud faces while he spoke to them. They seemed like students or followers. If only she could have heard what they said.

Once she came upon Kintora and another of Jagamar's young people standing outside the library. She was reminded powerfully of a confrontation between angry cats.

"This is Jindabyne," Kintora sneered.

Jindabyne was beautiful, but hard. Her eyes were as cold as Jagamar's. Her dress was unusual—the neck and sleeves trimmed with black feathers and she had black feathers in her hair.

She leaned languidly against one of the trees with her arms crossed on her chest. She reminded Marigoth of Yani before a fight.

She reminded Marigoth... "Have we met before?"

"I doubt it," said Jindabyne, dismissively but she did not meet Marigoth's eye. Instead she turned back to Kintora.

"It's been a pleasure, Kintora," she drawled in a tone that conveyed quite the opposite, then she turned and walked away with a lazy yet powerful stride that reminded Marigoth more than ever of Yani.

"See you," said Kintora. "Don't go having anymore soft feelings, will you?"

Jindabyne gave Kintora a truly poisonous look.

"Oooh!" squeaked Kintora in mock fright. "You are so overemotional Jindabyne."

Jindabyne shot her a look of disgust and turned away again.

"You should be careful of her," said Kintora conversationally to Marigoth. "Her mother's a nectar dreamer and quite mad. Goodness knows what kind of insanity runs in that family."

Jindabyne looked back at her disdainfully. "You really are a cow, Kintora."

"Better to be a cow than dead meat," sneered Kintora.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, nobody wants you here, do they? You're just taking up space. And starting to smell."

With a look of fury, Jindabyne raised her hand. A dull thud echoed in the air. Smugly Kintora batted something away with her hand. Marigoth was impressed. Jindabyne had thrown a considerable force of magic at Kintora, but it had had no effect. This place must be heavily warded!

Once again she found herself wondering where she had seen Jindabyne before. A moment later Jagamar came out of the library.

"You two," he said, "stop fighting. Kintora, come here and do something useful." He glared at Jindabyne. "Isn't it about time you both showed a bit more restraint?"

The look of hurt and confusion on Jindabyne's face turned to something harder and angrier. It was entertaining to observe the politics among Jagamar and his followers, but Marigoth could not see how it would benefit Elena.

She decided to look around the library when nobody was there. She chose a night when Jagamar and Gunidah had gone off to their little love nest.

After checking that the library was empty, she moved to Jagamar's desk and opened the lid. Aside from the usual things like paper and unused quills, she found a locked box that seemed to be of Mirayan design. Things rattled inside, but the box was well-guarded with magical wardings and there was no way she could open it without anyone knowing.

She examined the books around Jagamar's desk. One book was beautifully bound, with the title *The Prophecies of Life Spirit*. There were golden-hued bookmarks in a number of places. One opened to a well-worn page where the prophecy about her and her sisters was transcribed. The sight chilled Marigoth. Jagamar must read this often. She read the prophecy through carefully, doing her best to memorize it.

The three children seemed pretty clear and the people of the dragon *must* be the Mirayans, but the warbird? Quenching demon fire? A melded child? Was that Elena's half-Tari daughter Alyx? It was hard to believe she would ever rule the Mirayans, since the Mori had been shattered by Wolf Madraga's attack. But if Elena had a child with Wolf Madraga? Could that be what those Tari had meant? But why did it have to be his child? Or hers, for that matter? Yani could just as easily marry a Mirayan. She was warlike too. But the warbird was a raven. Gah! Who would bother trying to work with this stuff?

The other books near the desk consisted of big untidy collections of papers sewn together and bound in wooden bindings. The papers were written descriptions of dreams and visions. Each book was headed either *Fire Visions* or *Other Visions*. These had to be the visions of those wild-haired nectar dreamers who visited Jagamar. From the little notes in the margins, someone obviously studied them as well. Marigoth understood why. She could have read these marvelous, weird visions for hours, especially the really gruesome *Fire Visions* describing people being burnt alive or eaten by demons in gut-grabbing, bone-shuddering detail. She was not sure how much time she had, so she tore herself away and kept searching.

Standing on the stool, she got down a big book from the top shelf, the *Book of Outlanders*. Inside was much detailed information about the Mirayans.

"Finding anything interesting?" asked Jagamar.

Marigoth almost felt embarrassed to be so discovered. Oh well! The only way out now was forward!

"There's a lot of stuff in here about Miraya," she said.

"I think I already told you I've always been very concerned about the Mirayans," said Jagamar, coming over and firmly taking the book away from her. "*The Prophecies of the Life Spirit* have shown what a grave threat they represent to Ermora. I particularly remember the one about demon fire from the prophecy about you three. Knowing the Mirayan propensity for demon magic as I do, I cannot help fearing that the fire will come from them. That's why I collect the visions of the nectar dreamers. An extraordinarily large number of them concern fire. Ah, I see you've been reading them. Yes. I keep hoping the council will listen to me. But most of them scoff at my efforts. They feel certain the life spirit can protect us from anything."

"You don't think so?" asked Marigoth.

"I think it would be a good idea to help it as much as we can."

"So you think it's a good idea to interfere with destiny?"

Jagamar threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, you are getting desperate, aren't you, my dear? I can assure you, your sister's captivity is nothing to me. I wouldn't dream of interfering with destiny so closely. But, as I said before, it doesn't seem wrong to make some kind of preparation. That is why I have set down everything I know about the Mirayans."

"There's a great deal about Alexis Scarvan and Wolf Madraga in there," said Marigoth. "Surely you didn't learn about them in Ishtak. They're quite new to Yarmar."

Jagamar smiled and chucked Marigoth under the chin. "Little Madame Suspicious. What? Do you think I've been flying round Yarmar engaging in nefarious information collection?"

"That could be one explanation," Marigoth said roundly.

“Indeed it could. If I were not a loyal Tari and too weak a mage to safely go among the outlanders. Another explanation might be that many outlanders come to Pen-terong and lots of them have been the victims of Mirayan violence. It is easy to learn about the Mirayans from them. I suppose you shall have to choose for yourself which explanation you want to believe.”

Despite herself Marigoth felt embarrassed. Maybe she was being stupid. “I guess it does make sense.”

He smiled at her kindly.

“Indeed it does. And so does my other activity. Because to make sure that I’m not the only one who knows this information, I’ve been instructing some of the more open-minded young mages in what I know of outlander activities. I daresay, you’ve seen some of them visiting me here. It is a small thing but I cannot sit by and do nothing.”

He looked so relaxed. Not at all guilty.

“Actually, I’m sure you’ve got many useful things to tell me about the Mirayans, but you seem so caught up in your fight for your sister that I hardly like to bother you. Does it go well?”

“It goes nowhere,” said Marigoth.

“Oh no, my dear I think you’ll find it goes somewhere. Several councillors have expressed concern about your sister to me. I think we are building up interest in her.”

“But it’s taking forever!”

“Things move slowly here in Ermora.”

“And all the while my sister is suffering. Isn’t there some other way? One of these young mages could come secretly with me to Lamartaine and free her. It would be work of a moment. The Mirayans are weak.”

He looked stern. “It would be cruel to expect the young people to take such a risk. No, not the risk of demons. Anyone who leaves Ermora risks exile. You’ve never melded so you can’t understand how important it is to us Tari, but we are destroyed without it.”

“No one need know.”

Jagamar’s face hardened.

“Do not even think of it. It would always be found out. Defying the council to leave Ermora is wrong, and after melding, a person would simply be overwhelmed with the need to confess. That is why we think the Tari you met in Seagan are fakes.” His voice was angry. “If I find you even suggesting it to one of my young mages, it would be unforgivable. And since your appeal to the council is going so well, you would be cutting your own throat.” He turned away dismissively. “I think it is time for you to sleep now. Go to bed!”

Marigoth was halfway back to her bower before she realized that he had no business ordering her around like that. He might not have magic, but he was a powerful personality.

She didn’t know what to make of their conversation. Was he lying? His interest in destiny might be quite innocent.

If he was involved with her sister’s captivity, what could she do about it? Who else would help her here? She could insist on being set free to go back to Penterong, but then what? And what if he was genuine and she missed this clear chance to rescue Elena? He had certainly done a lot for her.

Could she subvert one of his young mages? Now *that* was an interesting thought.

The following afternoon as she wandered gloomily up and down the pine corridors, wondering what

on earth to do, she glimpsed a sudden brief flicker of bright light in the corner of her eye. As she spun round quickly, she felt a brief draft of fresh air. She ran quickly toward the place where she had seen the flash of light.

“You look weighted down,” said a voice above her.

A man was crouched in the fork of one of the trees. He smiled quizzically.

It took Marigoth a moment to recognize him as the man she had met the first night she had been in Ermora, Derrum. Gunidah had told her not to trust him. But then how much did she trust Gunidah?

“What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to talk to you, and Jagamar is strict about who he lets into his abode. Your grandmother and I were very close friends. When we met in the forest, you said your grandmother had disappeared and you thought her dead. I wanted to know what had happened.”

Oh yes! Gunidah had said he was her grandmother’s obsessive ex-lover. Once again the ugly head of sex rearing up!

“She simply disappeared when I was five. Our foster mother always said that she would have come back if she could have. We came to feel that she no longer existed in the world. The life force has not told us otherwise.”

Derrum frowned. “You know nothing of her fate? Why did you not come back when she disappeared?”

“She told us to keep away from the Tari. We have been in hiding most of our lives.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “She didn’t want your childhood to be overshadowed by the prophecy. So why have you come now?”

“My sister Elena has been taken prisoner by a Mi-ryan lord, and I seek help in freeing her. My sister and I tried to rescue her but we were stopped by Tari who had powerful magic and spoke of destiny.”

“So the rumors of her captivity and people dressed as Tari are true, then,” said Derrum.

“It is not people dressed as Tari. It was real Tari. Their magic was strong and drew strongly from the life force. What other people draw on it as we do?”

“Hmmm. If that is so, I wonder who might be doing this and how they can do it without anyone knowing.” He stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Interesting.”

“It is not interesting!” shouted Marigoth. “My poor sister is enduring horrors because of these people, and all everyone can say is how interesting it is! What is wrong with you people?”

Derrum blinked in surprise.

“Er... sorry,” he said after a moment. “I can see how you must be upset. You get a bit disconnected here in Ermora. I apologize for my countrymen. I will gladly help you in any way I can. I would like to be of service to my old friend’s granddaughter.”

“You could come back to the outlands with me to rescue Elena. If you can stand the risk.”

Derrum looked apologetic.

“I would be willing to leave Ermora,” he said. “But I wouldn’t be any use to you. My magical powers are almost nonexistent outside. That was why I always traveled with your grandparents, who were strong mages. You know you have your grandmother’s face. It’s easy to tell you are her relative. Are you sure you don’t know what happened to her?”

“No!” snapped Marigoth. Was this man just another annoying fribble who couldn’t keep his mind on

important matters? Then it occurred to her that she had many questions.

“Tell me, is Jagamar more interested in destiny than other Tari?”

Derrum grinned. “Has he been telling you about his little hobby? He’s not interested in destiny as such. But he has this absolute obsession that the Mirayans are a threat to Ermora. It seems to have started on his study tour in Ishtak years ago, and it’s taken complete control of him. He’s convinced that they are going to be responsible for the destruction of Ermora through demon fire. What a fool!”

“Is that so unreasonable?” asked Marigoth, perversely offended on Jagamar’s behalf.

“The life force protecting Ermora is stronger than any demon. Did he show you his collection of nectar dreams? I bet they make thrilling reading. He combs through them for references to the... uh-oh, someone’s coming.” As he reached up for a branch he said, “Come back here tomorrow. I’ll see what I can do in the meantime.” He pulled himself up into the tree.

Gunidah appeared a moment later.

“Did I hear you speaking to someone?” she asked.

“Only myself,” said Marigoth smoothly. “I was cursing the fate of my sister.”

“Have hope,” said Gunidah kindly. “I’m sure things will improve.”

For the first time since she’d been in Ermora Marigoth agreed with her.

Chapter 21

Back in Penterong Yani could not bring herself to really trust her kindred, and she rejected offers of a bower to sleep in. The healing hall had been built to serve far more people than it now contained, and Yani chose to sleep in one of the many little white rooms that were empty. She felt safer, though she knew full well that in a place full of powerful mages this feeling must be an illusion. There were few other Tari here. A few healers came to her part of the healing hall and that was all. A couple times she found nectar dreamers hanging round her room. They seemed to find her presence a good focus for their strange visions. Something to do with this bizarre prophecy, no doubt. She could hardly comprehend, let alone accept, all the peculiar things that Gunidah had said about their birth. What could they have to do with the reality of their lives? She would have preferred not to think about it, but the lines about the warbird haunted her. Given her past, did the lines about the warbird have some special significance for her?

Yet the raven that had haunted her since she had killed that assassin in Dania was gone. She was not sure when it had disappeared, but she had not felt its presence since Olbia. Why had it gone when the prophecy seemed to confirm its presence? Once it had troubled her, but now that it was gone she felt abandoned and full of doubt.

She knew she was the only Tari to ever have taken up arms because the woman overseeing her cleansing process told her so in terms of bitter contempt. Her name was Indulkanna and Yani could not believe that a Tari could be so full of anger.

On the first day Yani was ordered to undress and lie on her back in a shallow stream that ran eastward out of Ermora. The other overseer, a young male mage called Tarapan, who was “witnessing this rare ritual so that it might not be lost,” retreated behind a wooden screen during this process, while Indulkanna squatted on the bank beside Yani, reciting a hymn to the cleansing powers of water. On the

first morning she glared at Yani's naked body as the clear water ran over it.

"Your body bears many marks of violence," she snapped. "Tell me where you got them from."

She pointed to all the scars Yani had, even the ones that could not be easily seen, like the scar she had got on her scalp from falling over and cutting herself on a sharp piece of stone as a child. After Yani had told the story of all her scars, Indulkanna got up and left, telling her to meditate on how if she had never taken up a sword she would never have had any of these scars.

Indulkanna's words struck Yani as ridiculous. A proportion of her scars were simply the result of the accidents of an active life.

Later, she was allowed to leave the stream to sit wrapped in a linen towel facing both Indulkanna and Tarapan, as Indulkanna began to question her.

"When did you begin this path of wrongdoing?"

"Which particular wrongdoing are you asking me about?" replied Yani. Indulkanna's method of questioning did not make her feel very cooperative.

"You see!" snapped Indulkanna to Tarapan. "They expect me to do something with her and she is so far gone in wrong she does not recognize her evil."

Before Yani could protest she barked out, "The sword, girl, the sword. When did you take up the way of violence? When did you start killing people?"

"But I only ever killed one person," cried Yani. "And I felt their death as painfully as any Tari does."

"You would not take up the way of the sword if you did not secretly like to kill."

"No! I deny that!" cried Yani, trying to reign in her temper but not succeeding very well. "Swordcraft is a joy in itself. An exercise of skill like any other craft. It is the fighting I enjoy, not the killing."

"Are you attempting to justify yourself? I cannot believe this!"

"I did not take up the sword just for the pleasure of killing," protested Yani. "In the world of the outlanders, warriors are vital to protect the weak from the the strong. Surely that is important."

"What is important is that you are a killer and yet you seek to pollute Ermora with your evil!" shouted In-dulkanna. She leapt up and stormed away.

"Why can I not just commune with the life spirit?" said Yani to Tarapan, who had until then sat silently.

"The Lady Gunidah said that it should be better this way," he said quietly. "They are worried about the purity of Ermora being polluted. It is for your own protection also, Yani. You have never communed, have you? Whenever you enter the Spirit Cave, before you achieve oneness with the life spirit, you understand and sometimes experience the wrongs that you have done against it. It would be wise for you to come to some sense of your own wrongdoing before you communed with it."

"I am already troubled by questions of right and wrong. I would be glad to undergo the punishment of the life force if understanding could be achieved afterward."

"If you love the life of the sword too much, there will be problems. Understanding can be very painful. People have been known to go mad."

"Is it not so that if the life spirit shows me that swordcraft is wrong, I will find it easy to give it up?"

"That is how it is supposed to be," said Tarapan uneasily.

"Then why must I undergo this extra treatment?"

"I shall go and talk to Indulkanna. Perhaps we can find another way into this."

Alas, there seemed no other way. The following day they began the cleansing again with the same stream bath. But once again things quickly fell apart. This time as Yani was talking of her childhood training with her foster mother, Lashanna, who had been a member of the Queen of Dania's bodyguard in the days before she met Timmic, Indulkanna realized that she was assiduously avoiding revealing the whereabouts of the island where Timmic and Lashanna still lived.

"You are not cooperating," Indulkanna growled.

When Yani explained as calmly as she could that she wished to keep the location of her home a secret, Indulkanna shouted, "You dare to mistrust us?" and stormed out once again.

Tarapan again persuaded both women to try again, but there was not one day when Indulkanna did not storm out on some pretext or other, always shouting that Yani was so sunk in wrongdoing that she was completely lost. It was as if she found Yani's following of swordcraft so unforgivable that she could not see the point of even trying this cleansing.

Was Indulkanna setting out to make this as slow as possible just to prevent Yani from ever getting into Ermora? The thought made Yani feel angry and desperate.

It was not just Elena's captivity that troubled her. Since the execution of Georgi Serranus, Yani had felt lost in a kind of gray mist. All her life she had thought she could follow the warrior's path if she stuck to the cause of right, but in Olbia, she had discovered how badly the realities of war and power sat with considerations of right and wrong and how difficult it was to tell the two apart. Even if she did not kill people herself, the leader was responsible for the death and suffering of a battle.

The logical answer was to cease all battles, but that was not an option in the world outside Ermora where there were no Tari to put people to sleep until they made peace. Yet the life spirit flowed through the outlanders as well.

And then there was the problem of Georgi Serranus. Surely the death of such a man could only be a good thing. Did it not serve the life spirit? Yet she knew with every fiber of her being that killing could never serve the life spirit.

As a Tari she was glad that it was hard for her to take life, but as a warrior she saw only a dangerous weakness in this hesitation. Obviously war was no place for a Tari, but must she stand by and watch the Seagani be ground into the dust by the Serranuses of this world? That could not even be considered!

If this crazy story of her birth was true then the life spirit had gifted her with her strength and possibly her aptitude for warcraft as well. Why had it done these things if it did not want her to use them? Or had she been following the wrong path? What use could the life spirit have for a warrior?

These questions kept Yani awake at night.

If only she could talk them over with someone. Indulkanna? If she had learned about the execution of Georgi Serranus, she would probably have stormed out of the room and refused to ever come back. In the end for lack of someone better, she found herself talking to Tarapan.

At least he did not storm out of the room when she pointed out to him that most of the rest of the world did not have the ability to defend itself with magic and so had to take up arms in defense. To him, however, this was merely an interesting intellectual problem. She could not bring herself to shock him by telling him about hard realities like Serranus's execution. He seemed too innocent.

"How long will this take?" she asked him desperately after the cleansing had been going five days.

"As long as it takes," he replied calmly.

"But while I wait here, Elena suffers," she cried. She told him then of all she knew of her sister's captivity in Olbia. For the first time her words made him turn pale.

“It torments me that she may still be suffering such abuses. Is there nothing you can do to help me?”

He looked very troubled. “Perhaps I should send to the council,” he said.

But nothing changed.

Then one day as she was wandering in the woodlands outside Penterong, a group of young Tari invited her to join their riding party. Yani was delighted to have a chance to ride one of the beautiful chestnut Tari horses. Once mounted she found the horse very responsive to her commands. When she pushed it to a full gallop she could feel how it enjoyed running flat out. Yani laughed with exhilaration. It was only when the horse was tired and had slowed to a trot that she realized she had rudely left the others behind.

As they caught up one of the young people, a mage called Illynya, cried, “Sweet life! Weren’t you terrified to go so fast?”

“It is exciting to be terrified,” grinned Yani. “I feel so alive.” Several of the party looked quietly disapproving, but Illynya, her sister Syndal and a male friend of theirs called Mathaman came close to Yani and began to ask her about life outside Penterong. Yani avoided the difficult subject of war and told them only of the court of Queen Sharma and the colorful customs of the peninsula folk.

The three all seemed very restless and discontented with their lives. When they stopped to sit under one of the trees and drink some wine, Yani remarked that it was a pity that the Society of Travelers no longer existed. Then they could have gone out to see the world for themselves.

“We are too great a temptation to the outlanders,” said one of the other riders, a self-satisfied non-mage called Mulgan. You could easily tell who lacked magical abilities for they were not as able in casting glamour over themselves and so were not quite as beautiful as the mages. Despite this they did not seem to feel inferior. Yani had already heard one of them talking about how much more practical non-mages were compared to mages.

“Temptation?”

“Yes, to feed to their demons. Like the three martyrs,” said Mulgan. “You cannot trust the outlanders.”

“That was an isolated incident,” said Yani. “A single madman. There are no necromancers now and the out-landers hate demons as much as us. The outlanders always treated me with kindness and respect. They still have great love for the Tari. There was never any threat of demons.”

Mulgan snorted, but a young woman mage called Nimbi said more politely, “If you will forgive me for pointing it out, you are not a mage so demons are not so interested in you. We’ve all seen the outlanders who come to Penterong. They seem to lead very disordered lives. Isn’t that true, Yani?”

“I guess you can see it like that,” said Yani. Their complacency brought out a spitefulness in her. “But the life spirit flows through them as it does through us. Perhaps order is not its only pattern. Or perhaps... Did not the Society of Travelers see it as the duty of the Tari to bring greater knowledge of the life force to those who could not experience it directly? Perhaps this disorder is simply lack of Tari presence.”

Some of the young people looked struck by this. Mulgan snorted. “I hardly think we owe any duties to those who would feed us to demons. And you...”

“Be honest,” said Nimbi quickly. “Is not Ermora the most beautiful place you ever saw in your life?”

“Yes, it is lovely,” agreed Yani.

“And we lead a happy and peaceful life here, which is more than you can say for any of the outlanders,” said Mulgan in a satisfied voice. “This is the best of all places in the world. I can’t

understand people like Illynya who want anything else.”

It was a sentiment Yani heard again and again at Pen-terong. She could not blame them for it. Penterong had healers, craftsmen, farmers and traders who bustled about busily at their tasks, but magic could be and was used for all unpleasant work. There was no need to ration magical power as there was in the outside world. And none of the Tari would ever face difficult moral questions such as the execution of Georgi Serranus, because such questions answered themselves when they communed with life spirit in the Spirit Cave.

This must have been why they all seemed so young, for Illynya, Syndal and Mathaman were all Yani’s age and Tarapan was older. They were so untried and unsure of their judgment, and their ignorance about the outside world was profound. Since the only other outlanders they saw were the victims of disease or violence who came for healing, it was not surprising that they saw the outer world as a place of chaos.

Illynya, Syndal and Mathaman continued to be fascinated by the outlands, however, and every evening they came to Yani’s room. They brought friends with them, and by the end of a week there were about fourteen people, both mages and non-mages crammed into her room every evening. Most of them were here in Penterong to learn about healing, for the Archipelagans who came here had many ills that they were never likely to see in peaceful Ermora. After two years here they would go back into Ermora to find mates, have children and spend their lives taking part in the tasks of daily life and the rituals that honored the life spirit. Some of them found the prospect stifling.

Having lost all faith in the cleansing process by then, Yani was much less careful of what she told them. Perhaps she might be able to persuade one or two of these young malcontents to leave Ermora and help her free Elena.

She proceeded subtly. She was aware of that Tarapan was keeping a watch on her activities, so she simply told the young ones of the situation between the Mirayans and the Seagani, of people like Georgi Serranus, of her sister Elena’s captivity and of the Tari who attacked them before they came to Penterong. Like everyone else the young ones denied that Tari could do such things. It was obviously wrong to treat destiny in such a way and to encourage violent captivity and anyone who melded would see that. This struck Yani as interesting.

“So if one did not meld, there would be no bar against such wrongdoing,” she said.

“But everyone melds,” they said. “It is inconceivable that Tari could forgo such a beautiful experience.”

Yet I have never melded, thought Yani to herself. So it is possible for Tari to function without it.

She tried to find out if there was some authority that made them meld, but the young ones scoffed at the idea that an authority would be necessary.

“Tell us more about the Seagani and the Mori,” they said, changing the subject. “Tell us more about the out-lands.”

Often Yani felt understanding for the young mages’ yearnings. At other times she thought, Here I am sitting with these bored, young dilettantes and who knows what is happening to Elena. This thought made her feel less guilty about leading these young people into trouble.

“How can I stay in Ermora and live a happy, quiet life, knowing that everywhere in the world people are suffering and that perhaps I can do something to help it?” she asked Tarapan at one point. “For that matter, how can you?”

“I serve the life spirit and love Ermora first before everything,” said Tarapan coolly. “And it does not tell me to go to the outlands.”

She received several messages from Marigoth inside Ermora, each more gloomy than the last. She decided to go ahead with her own plan to get help from the young malcontents. She was still wondering how to push this plan forward when, fifteen days after she had arrived in Ermora, an ensorcelled hawk came bearing a message for her from the Seagani. They had been cut off from Northern Seagan by superior Mirayan forces and were begging desperately for her help.

Chapter 22

Yet another councillor! This one lived in a bower that appeared to be made entirely from red rose petals though Marigoth doubted it was. Councillor Galga served rose-flavored wine from rose-petal cups. In the middle of the meeting, all the rose petals, even the cups turned into white fur.

“We have to save my sister,” said Marigoth, trying to keep her temper. This person was supposed to be one of the Tari’s leaders. “Can you not imagine the horrors?...”

She was interrupted by a white cat with golden paws that came running up and began to juggle balls.

“Oh, bravo!” cried Gunidah. “Marvelous illusion!”

This was too much for Marigoth. “Damn you!” she cried. “Must you play these stupid games? Can’t you see my sister is suffering?” She threw her furry cup on the ground, splashing rose wine all over the white fur.

Galga was highly affronted.

“Those who cannot appreciate great art shall not have it,” she snapped. With a clap of her hands she was gone and so was the illusory bower, leaving them sitting in a grassy clearing with simple wooden cups and dishes scattered on the ground before them, and a jug of red wine spilled on the ground.

Gunidah sighed, righted the jug and made the liquid run back into it.

“You will never get anywhere with the council this way. It is bad enough that you look like a child. Must you behave like one?”

“Does no one in this place take anything seriously?” shouted Marigoth. Why should she behave like an adult when nobody else was? She at least had some excuse. She turned and ran from the clearing.

“Give it time,” shouted Gunidah behind her.

“I have given it time!” growled Marigoth, running headlong in blind rage. “I have given it time, time, time!” With each “time,” she hit at a passing bush.

Then a bush gave way and she fell into an open space.

It was as if she had suddenly come from a dark room into brilliant sunlight.

Before her was a hill covered in long grass which rippled softly even though there was no wind. Marigoth’s eyes were irresistably drawn to the mouth of a cave just at the crest of the hill. The opening was flanked by four shining stones, taller than a Tari, made of some glittering glasslike substance that seemed to be moving like slow flowing liquid but without changing shape. They were hung about with flowery garlands. Marigoth felt as if they were looking at her, beckoning her across that softly rippling grass. She felt a sudden surge of love, an intense desire to rush forward and embrace everything, especially the stones. The feeling of joy was so overwhelming it frightened her. It was in that moment that Gunidah caught up with her.

“What are you doing here?”

“What is this place? These are the Spirit Stones, aren’t they?” cried Marigoth realizing the answer even as she asked the question. “And that is the Spirit Cave.”

“Yes, that opening in the hill is the Spirit Cave. But surely you do not want to go here,” cried Gunidah. “What about your sister? If you go into the Spirit Cave now, you may be in there for months.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve never communed before, have you? It will take longer than usual for you to reach true communion. Then there is the problem with your age. It indicates some blockage...” Gunidah smiled delicately. “You wouldn’t be able to leave the cave until that was resolved. Surely you don’t want to indulge in the Spirit Cave just now.”

“Oh!” said Marigoth in confusion. “No, no! Of course not.”

“Very wise!” said Gunidah. “Now, let us go back to Jagamar’s place. I will see who we should see next.” She took Marigoth’s hand and led her firmly away, and Marigoth, still slightly dazzled by the miraculous place, followed with no objections.

She seemed to have come a long way up the hill without realizing it. As Gunidah guided her, she noticed that the hill was honeycombed with openings into the Spirit Cave. Before each opening sat a Guardian in a white-and-gold robe embroidered with gold leaves. How had she missed them before? How had she missed all the other people lying in the grass or climbing the hill, singing the hymn of life?

“They are going to commune,” said Gunidah, nodding at the white-robed singers. She sighed.

“Do you ever commune?” asked Marigoth, struck by the look of longing on her face.

“Not often,” said Gunidah briskly. “We... I believe it makes you soft and unable to deal with reality. Tari would be stronger if they were more self-reliant, depended less on the life spirit. Now, let us go.”

Marigoth followed Gunidah obediently, yet leaving that hill was like watching the sun go behind a cloud.

Marigoth had marked the place where she had seen Der-rum by dropping a piece of white thread from her dress at the bottom of the tree. The next afternoon, the thread was still there and, as a bonus, Derrum was crouched in the branches waiting for her.

“I want you to come with me. I have something to show you,” he said.

Marigoth looked up at him measuringly.

“What?” asked Derrum.

“Gunidah told me my grandmother did not trust you,” said Marigoth.

“Of all the—” snapped Derrum angrily. Then his face lightened as if he saw humor in the situation. “Gunidah and I are not friends. And between Jagamar and myself... All I can say in my defense is that I was a very close friend of both your grandparents. Anyway, do you really trust Jagamar and Gunidah? Haven’t they kept you shut up here without a chance of speaking to people on your own?”

Marigoth shrugged. “That doesn’t mean I should trust you.”

“True,” said Derrum, looking perplexed. “Well, I don’t really know what to say now. Except that I have found someone who can help us. You need to speak to her and she can’t come here, so if you want to do this, you will have to come with me. You’ll just have to decide for yourself.”

Marigoth was seriously tempted. At least Derrum offered something new. And Gunidah was sitting in

the library talking with Jagamar and would probably be there for some time yet.

“Very well, then,” she said, putting her foot on the trunk of the pine tree and holding up her hand. When Derrum leaned down and took her hand, suddenly it was as if the skin of reality peeled away. The smooth and un-climbable tree trunk was now rough and full of toe holds, like a normal pine tree. She got easily onto the forked branch where Derrum had been crouching and climbed quickly up through the tree behind him.

A short time later they were at the treetop and white sunlight flooded over them. The branches swayed in the light breeze. All the heaviness Marigoth had felt in Jaga-mar’s place vanished, leaving her light and free and not at all scared to be swaying on such high branches.

“What’s that?” Marigoth asked, pointing to a thin trail of smoke coming out of one of the nearby mountains.

“That’s Koroyit, the fire mountain. The fires of the earth have come to the surface there and the rocks melt in their heat. Some say that is why Ermora is such a focus of the life force. Come now, we have a way to go. Keep between the ropes,” said Derrum.

He was pointing to two lines of rope that led away across the treetops. They seemed to be just floating in midair. Following Derrum along the path of the ropes, she found that the tops of the trees were springy but perfectly firm to walk on. It was as if they were walking over a series of lightly undulating sand dunes. After a short time they reached a place where the trees thinned.

Derrum lowered himself down among the leaves and began to climb down. Marigoth found it amazingly easy to climb down from branch to branch. No doubt this was some kind of spell.

They descended into a grassy clearing, full of bustling people. A couple of them stared curiously at Marigoth, but most just went about their business. Some small furry animals were sitting on their haunches in the center of the clearing, eating fruit. A family of pricklehogs trundled by.

“You don’t look old enough to be a friend of my grandmother’s,” said Marigoth, looking at Derrum.

“So I’m vain,” said Derrum. “Here in Ermora it is possible to cover aging. I might make the same accusation of you, young woman. You look far too young to be one of the Miracle Sisters.”

“What business is it of yours?” snapped Marigoth, bristling.

“None at all,” said Derrum calmly. “But you must have inherited your grandmother’s power in full to have been able to stop yourself from growing up.” He looked around. “Come on. Let’s get going. This way.” He led her along a path.

“How does this story of the Miracle Sisters go?” asked Marigoth, thinking she might test Gunidah’s story.

Derrum told her exactly the same version as Gunidah had, until he came to the part where they were to be taken from their grandmother and given to Jagamar. Then he said casually that of course there was bad blood between Mathinna and Jagamar because Mathinna blamed Jagamar for encouraging their mother Shara to destroy the tower of Olbia.

“My mother destroyed that tower!” cried Marigoth.

Derrum looked conscience-stricken. “Sorry! Didn’t you know? It’s true, I’m afraid. Ask anyone. You shouldn’t really blame your mother, though. She was very easily led.”

“That just makes it worse!” cried Marigoth. “Why did my mother destroy Olbia? And why did my grandmother blame Jagamar?”

“Mathinna said Shara used a Mirayan power crystal to help her, which she’d got from Jagamar. But no crystal was found, Jagamar denied Mathinna’s charges. He had been with her when she destroyed the

tower, but Shara wouldn't say a word against her brother. He was not forced to meld, which is the usual result of such accusations. It helped that Jagamar and Shara's father was on the council.

"To tell the truth, though people were horrified by the extent of what Shara had done, no one blamed her. A madness possessed us then, and our hearts were hot against the destroyer of the three mages. There were many calls to kill both Gorice and Asgor. We Tari do not fear normal death because we know we become part of the life force, but this... When those three mages were consumed by demons they were sucked out of the Circle of Life. Their spirits will never again be part of any living thing.

"My favorite sister was one of those mages, dear, dear Terrawa. Her life force is lost forever. I would have destroyed Gorice myself if I could have." His face grew bleak.

"But your grandmother was greater than that, even though she had lost her son. She killed Asgor, but in her place most Tari would have fed him to his own demons that he might share the desolation of three mages. She said that to feed demons under any circumstance was a shame against the life spirit and a path into the Abyss. She was right too. I saw later how wrong our madness had been.

"Your grandmother always planned to take Gorice to face the justice of the Spirit Cave. Life only knows how his outlander mind would have coped with communion. To discover her son's widow standing over a boiling sea and a blasted cliff where the royal Tower of Olbia had once been..."

"This is awful," said Marigoth again. "How could she?"

Derrum took her arm and gently pushed her down onto a tree stump. "Just sit down here for a moment or two. You've gone all pale."

"As well I might," murmured Marigoth. "To discover my mother was a mass murderer."

"Personally I agree with your grandmother. I think it was Jagamar's idea."

"You cannot blame Jagamar for my mother's wrongdoing."

"I knew your mother. She was sweet and kind, but your father made all the decisions and that was how she liked it. When he was killed she clung to Jagamar. I truly think he could have persuaded your mother to do anything he wished."

"That doesn't prove he was responsible for her actions," muttered Marigoth.

Hearing that her mother was so weak was somehow harder than hearing she was a mass murderer.

"True. He always claimed he was an innocent witness of his sister's madness. But Jagamar has never chosen to meld once since that day."

Marigoth sat silently for a few moments. Derrum watched her, a kindly look on his face.

At last she asked in a small voice, "So is it true our birth killed our mother?"

"Sweet life! What a thing. Who said such a thing to you?"

Marigoth shrugged.

"It is true that your mother died giving birth to you. But your mother wanted to die. She couldn't live with all the deaths she had caused. You kept her alive those few extra months. You and the life force who made you three instead of one."

It was a better way of looking at things. Marigoth felt her spirits lighten.

"And after my mother died?"

"The council ordered you given to your mother's family to be brought up. To your Uncle Jagamar in other words. Your maternal grandfather had no interest in children."

"But if Jagamar organized this attack on Olbia, why?"

“I told you. He denied it and his father was on the council. And your grandmother was unpopular. She spoke out in favor of the outlanders at a time when no one wanted to hear it. Not even me.”

“So my grandmother took us away from Ermora because of Jagamar.”

“Yes. On her deathbed Shara had begged Mathinna to guard you against being brought up by him.”

“And here I am staying in his house. Ironic.”

“Yes, indeed. Though you are old enough now...” Derrum stopped and looked fixedly at Marigoth for a moment, then changed the subject. “Also there was the prophecy. Many people came to believe you had some great destiny. Mathinna wanted you to grow up as normal children.”

“I thought the Tari did not believe that destiny should be acted upon.”

“People believe a variety of things about foretelling. Some, like me, think the foretelling is too unreliable to be acted upon. Others, like your uncle, believe there is something in it.”

“So there are plenty of Tari who could happily force Elena into the destiny she is supposed to have?”

“No!” cried Derrum. “There you are utterly, utterly wrong. The life spirit would never allow anyone to do such an awful thing.”

“I can’t see how it could stop them.”

“If you had melded you would understand.”

“But not everyone melds, do they? My uncle doesn’t, for one. What’s to stop him from forcing Elena into captivity?”

Derrum stared into the air as if looking desperately for an exit.

“I know!” he cried at last. “The council would stop him. If they are concerned about people’s behavior, they can order people to go and meld. You don’t have to do it, but everyone knows if you don’t, you’ve got something to hide.”

“So why don’t they ask Jagamar to meld?”

“Why would they do such an unpleasant thing? We are all equal here. If Jagamar is crazy enough not to meld it is his own business.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing!” shouted Marigoth, throwing up her hands. “How does this place keep together? Look! You have to at least entertain the idea that someone in Ermora is doing something they shouldn’t. Can’t you see how easy it would be for them?”

“But Tari don’t do those kind of things,” cried Derrum back. “It is not how we work.”

“Can’t you even consider it?” cried Marigoth.

Derrum just shook his head. “You’ve never lived here,” he said. “Otherwise...”

He gave an exasperated sigh and looked off into the distance...

Marigoth sighed too. She was tempted to yell at him. but as was so often the case these days, there seemed nothing to gain from it. He had a fixed mind like all other Tari.

“So tell me about this person you found to help me.” she said. “Are they prepared to leave Ermora. Will I be able to get Elena free?”

Derrum flushed with embarrassment.

“Oh no. I mean I haven’t done anything about that. This is about your grandmother. Don’t you want to find out what happened to her?”

Marigoth sat for several minutes opening and closing her mouth. She wanted to scream. Of course

she wanted to find out about her grandmother, but she had been counting on Derrum to help rescue Elena. Sweet life! Did any of these Tari live in the real world?

By the time she could speak again, self-control had got the upper hand. She knew she would just have to be grateful for any help she got.

“Very well, then,” she said, trying not to grind her teeth. “Show me what you’ve got.”

Derrum led her to a hill. Immediately they began to climb it and she noticed a little dark cave with a white-robed woman sitting outside.

“Here, what’s this?” she cried, stopping. “You’re taking me to the Spirit Cave.”

“What’s the matter?” said Derrum.

“I’m not going in there.”

“You’re... ?” He looked astonished. “Sweet life, what a strange reaction! Of course, not, if you don’t want to. But why... ? You should. It might help you resolve... Well it might give you ideas about how to rescue your sister.”

“That would take months and I have to free my sister now!” said Marigoth.

“Months? What are you talking about? We Guardians wake you from the communion sleep whenever you wish.”

“I thought... Gunidah said I would have to be in there several months.”

“That’s a strange thing to say. Why would she try to put you off, I wonder? She’s quite wrong. The first part of melding is only a few moments long. It is because people enjoy it so much that they stay for weeks in the Spirit Cave.” He sighed. “Well. Anyway, we are not here to meld, but to see someone who is always near here but who never herself melds, a madwoman named Wynna.

“Her madness started eighteen years ago, when you must have been five.”

“What? What on earth does that mean? Oh! You think she became mad when my grandmother disappeared.”

“They were very close friends,” said Derrum. “Wynna was a nectar dreamer. She stopped drinking nectar at the same time as she stopped melding, but she became more crazy instead of better. We Guardians tried to get her to go into the Spirit Cave, but it is wrong to force her. For many years I have wondered what she could not bear to face the life spirit with. Last night a couple of us compared notes. It is possible that your grandmother’s disappearance and her madness are connected in some way.”

“Really?” said Marigoth doubtfully.

“Yes—Wynna is your mother’s sister.”

Marigoth stopped. “Do you mean to tell me that two people in the same family don’t meld because they have something they can’t face? And nobody cares to find out what?”

“You are right. It is a bit odd,” said Derrum thoughtfully. Then something seemed to spark his sense of humor. He grinned at her. “You know you do look like your grandmother. Especially when you are looking at me like that. I wonder if Wynna will recognize her in you. Come on.”

Marigoth followed Derrum across Spirit Hill. Once again Margioth felt as if the great stones at the top were smiling at her. It was a pleasure just being close to it. Perhaps she should meld. Dare she? Who was lying? Derrum or Gunidah?

They moved back into the forest. “Quietly now. We mustn’t frighten her away,” whispered Derrum.

Tjalparra, the woman Marigoth had met with Derrum on that first evening in Ermora, was sitting on a

stone seat in the middle of a clearing. A little distance away an old woman was crouched on the ground, picking through the fruits and nuts that lay on a plate before her. Marigoth had never seen such an old-looking Tari before. Yellowish white hair stood up around the woman's face. She was thin and clothed in dirty rags, and her skin was like blotched parchment.

Marigoth and Derrum crept forward until they were almost level with Wynna. The Derrum reached out and gripped Wynna firmly on the arm.

The old woman twisted round. She caught sight of Marigoth and immediately her eyes widened and her jaw dropped, showing her few broken teeth.

"Hello," said Marigoth. "I believe you knew my grandmother, Mathinna."

The old woman's red-rimmed eyes grew big with horror.

"Tell me what happened to her," demanded Marigoth.

Wynna recoiled as if she'd been hit.

"No! Mathinna!" she whispered in horror. Suddenly she screamed, "Mathinna! No! No! No!"

She covered her face with her hands and threw herself down on the ground.

Shocked, Derrum let go of the woman's arm. But Marigoth pounced on her, shaking her. Elena was forgotten. Suddenly she had to know where Grandmother was.

"Tell me! Tell me!" she cried. "You know!" She had seen knowledge in those terrified eyes and she was going to have it.

Wynna struggled away from her, still shrieking her grandmother's name.

"Tell me! Tell me, you stupid woman," shouted Marigoth, shaking her.

Someone seized her around the waist.

"No!" she protested. "She knows. She knows."

"Someone's coming," hissed Derrum. "Come on."

"No," protested Marigoth, but she let him drag her away, for she had already seen the hopelessness of the situation. Tjalparra was leaning over Wynna, trying to calm her but even after Derrum and Marigoth had left the clearing they could still hear Wynna screaming Math-inna's name.

After fighting for some distance through the forest, Derrum put Marigoth down.

"How could you treat a poor mad woman like that?"

"She knew what happened to my grandmother! She knew, I tell you! Let's come back there tonight and mind-search her. She knows."

"We can't do that. It would be wrong."

"We can't just stop now!"

Derrum looked down at her with revulsion. Then suddenly his face changed and he laughed. "You are so like your grandmother."

"No! Listen to me!" shouted Marigoth. "She knows what happened and if we look inside her mind we can know too."

"No. It's wrong to invade someone's mind," said Derrum. Marigoth could almost feel steam coming out of her ears. She could have hit Derrum. Instead she let out a low growl of rage.

"You bloody Tari!" she shouted at the sky. "You will drive me mad."

She plumped down on the ground and put her head in her hands. She'd thought finding out about her grandmother hadn't been very important, but now she had to know.

"Er... sorry," said Derrum. "You just shouldn't do some things."

For a moment Marigoth could not bring herself to answer him. They were so close to knowing and he apologized? Then it occurred to her that she didn't need Derrum to search Wynna's mind. She just had to get her alone somehow. Time to appear to give in.

"I guess you've got a point," she said. "I just wanted to know. And now I've probably offended Jagamar, who is the only person trying to help me, and what have I got to show for it?"

"I'm trying to help you!" cried Derrum.

"Well, have you found me someone to help me rescue Elena?"

"Not yet but... Anyway, what has your uncle done for you?"

"He's trying to organize a council meeting."

Derrum looked surprised. "Is he? He hasn't told the Guardians about this. How exactly has he been going about this great task?"

"He organized for me to see influential people."

"Has he just? Tell me who."

Marigoth told him.

"What, them?" scoffed Derrum. "They're the most conservative members of the council. The fearful ones we call them. You'll be here forever if you try to persuade them to send people out to help your sister."

"You talk as if there are Tari who are not afraid to leave Ermora."

"There are those who miss our traveling. Who think it is wrong that we use our power for no good reason but to please ourselves. I am one. Tjalparra is another."

"Then come with me now, help me rescue Elena."

"I told you, I've almost no power," said Derrum. "It would be no use."

"I thought you wanted to help Mathinna's granddaughters. But you're just like Jagamar. All excuses. Isn't anyone able to go outside Ermora? Just for a few hours."

Derrum looked unhappy. "I'll see what I can do. Come on, now. We'd best be getting back."

He was rather subdued as he took her back to Jagamar's place.

"You won't tell Jagamar of this, will you?" he said just before she went back down the tree. "He'd be annoyed if he thought we were tormenting his poor sister."

"Of course not. I'm not silly," said Marigoth. "But I would be very interested to know how many people don't meld in the Spirit Cave. No names you understand, just how many."

"Still looking for your hostile Tari? Well, we don't keep records, but I'll ask around if you like. And I'll do something about your sister this time. I promise."

"Thanks," said Marigoth.

Fine words. She did not have much hope that they would come to anything.

Chapter 23

After a couple of weeks in Penterong Ezratah had become fluent enough in Tari to have complex conversations without resorting to trade talk. Tari bore little relation to other peninsular languages, but that just made it more interesting for Ezratah, who liked to learn new languages.

Perhaps if he mastered their language they would let him into Ermora. The country beyond Penterong drew him. Several times a day he found himself at the Parting Gate peering down into the gorge, hoping to see what was beyond. Every day he asked Wynnbyng if he might go into Ermora. She always said no, but she more than made up for it in other ways.

She gave him presents—a beautiful staff of lightweight wood and mage’s robes of fine blue silk. And, in those weeks at Penterong he had let himself be seduced by three other women, and she did not seem to mind at all.

On one level all this love sport was delightfully free and joyful. He even wondered if his own countrymen weren’t unnecessarily prudish. It was delightful to spend time simply flirting and chatting with Tari women. On the other hand he felt secretly contemptuous of their loose behavior, though chivalry dictated that he never show it. Did these women have no self-control? Why did they act so cheap?

Yet it wasn’t really their fault. The easy way they came to his bed just proved everything Mirayan priests had always said. Women had no moral sense, which was why you had to limit their freedom. So why didn’t Tari men do that? How did they stand for women acting so loose? It all seemed to run smoothly on the surface, but the Tari didn’t always stay married. Often men wound up caring for children that weren’t their own. In fact when he met people, he was never very sure whose children were whose. That couldn’t be healthy for anyone, especially not the children! Tari men didn’t seem to care but they really should.

Mind you, they were making things hard from themselves. Well over half the Tari had strong magical powers and it was difficult to get a woman with power of any sort to mind you. Mirayan women with magical powers spent their lives wearing iron collars, as dictated by the book of Mir. The Tari did not have the benefit of such a foresight-ful God. Their women were trained just like male mages. To their credit, they were also more responsible than Mirayan women, but they were still victims of their passions. Which was very enjoyable for him, but couldn’t be good for their society.

As the days passed in Penterong he was assiduous in his researches into how the Tari lived. Apart from the fleshy distractions, it was easy to learn about them. Wynnbyng took him bathing and rose-gathering, taught him to dance. He went to poetry readings and musical performances and a particular kind of Tari artistic event which involved a “performance mage” creating some kind of delightful magical illusion for everyone’s enjoyment.

There were no poor people—no hungry people. The place was run like a huge monastery in that delicious food and wine and soft clothing were supplied for everyone; and things like horses seemed to be owned in common. Yet it was freer than any monastery he knew, and they led delightful, elegant, easeful lives using magic for all unpleasant tasks.

Everyone was treated equally, which was nice but also mystifying. Not everybody was of equal ability or equal value to a society. It might be well enough to just muddle along freely when times were easy, but a crisis would come as it always did (in fact he had a rather gloomy feeling that his own people would bring it to the Tari’s doorstep now that they knew of their existence), and then how would they cope?

Mirayan society was orderly. Mir had given everyone their place, so everyone knew who to follow and what to do in times of emergency. This was what had given them the strength, the moral fiber to

survive many, many wars, build a mighty empire and to bring civilization to places like Yarmar. Where was the order among Tari? Even their families were a mess. Who ran the place? Who would lead them when someone needed to make strong decisions? He had a difficult time finding that out.

Wynnbyng said that there was a council making those decisions. Not very efficient! Everyone knew that one capable man in charge worked better than several. This council was chosen by election, a ridiculous clumsy way of doing things. Mind you, when he asked around he discovered that few Tari bothered to vote. Few of those he met even seemed to care. After a while he began to understand why.

Wynnbyng told him that if they were ever in doubt about how to behave or what to do next they went into this place called the Spirit Cave at the center of Ermora and melded with what she called the Great Circle of Life. There the life spirit told them what to do.

Then she asked how Mirayans knew the difference between right and wrong if they could not sense the life spirit.

“There are natural moral laws, which fathers teach their children as they grow,” said Ezratah. He tried to give her some idea of what these were but she quickly became bored. Tari had no ability to apply themselves and little interest in the outside world. Surely when it finally came to a conflict, the Mirayans would beat them.

Whoever controlled the Spirit Cave must be the one who controlled the Tari. This was an interesting thought. What if Mirayans got control of this Spirit Cave? How simple it would then be to control the Tari!

Tari magic did pose a real threat, however, especially if they threw off their languor. If he was going to make his name by being an expert on the Tari, he needed to find out about the magic. Yet the more he asked about it, the more it eluded him. This life spirit they talked about—he simply could not feel it, though he tried and tried. He suspected it was just superstition. Yet something did give them enormous control over the five elements of water, air, fire, earth and life itself. Mirayans could light fires, cause fountains to rise and make trees bend as they liked, but even the strongest mage could only maintain these changes for a couple of hours.

Unlike any other mage Ezratah had ever seen or heard of, Tari could actually change things permanently. Pen-terong was full of constantly playing fountains that came from nowhere and the trees that were bent by magic remained bent. He had even seen Marigoth do such things in the outside world.

And Mirayan magic was limited—if you used too much you had to stop to rest and replenish yourself. Tari power seemed to flow like a permanent spring. They had so much that they had created this wondrous country of Ermora, where even those like Yani with no magical powers could draw on enough magic to light candles with the tips of her fingers. Ezratah tried to do the same but he had no luck. This damned life spirit again.

If Mirayans could learn the secret of such magic, what power would be available to them. What could they not do then? They were far more worthy to use it than the Tari, who did nothing but play. And if he could bring it to them—why he would become almost as famous as Mir himself! A great benefactor of mankind. Intoxicating thought!

Perhaps this Spirit Cave that Wynnbyng spoke of actually generated this magic. Such places did exist in legend. How could he persuade his hosts to let him go there?

On the twentieth evening after he had arrived, he was bathing with Wynnbyng in a deep pool. Flowering trees bedecked with lanterns hung over the pool and little candle boats floated in the water. He enjoyed bathing. The Tari were not a modest people, though they kept their genitals covered with

loincloths. This meant that all the women bathed delightfully bare-breasted. Most enjoyable!

A new young woman called Aranda had joined their group and was now sitting next to him, running her hand up and down his thigh under the water. He was just beginning to wonder how he could get the two of them away from the others, without being too obvious, when a flustered-looking young man appeared at the side of the pool and said, "Where is the Mirayan? Yani asked me to find you, Mirayan. She urgently wishes to speak with you."

Ezratah had seen little of Yani since they had been in Penterong. The nature of their past association, especially that horrible night in her tent when Marigoth had kicked him in the groin, hung between them like a veil. Yet he still felt a connection to her and, yes, respect as well. Her idea of masquerading as a man might be silly but she could certainly fight like one, and her countrymen made Ezratah see how sensible and responsible a woman she was.

A small knot of people were gathered in the corridor outside what must be Yarn's room.

As he hurried closer he heard a voice cry out, "Burn down a forest? But the imbalance!"

Ezratah could not make out Yani's reply.

"What? So many?" cried the man. "Sweet life, Yani! What can you do? You're just one person!"

Ezratah reached the door.

"I started them on this course," he heard Yani say. "I cannot abandon them."

The moment they noticed him, the people around the door moved aside. He was too intent on what was happening to notice how contemptuous they were.

Yani was putting her armor on. He almost began helping her with her greaves, but stopped himself in time.

"What's happened?" he cried.

"Ezratah! Thank the life. I am trying to leave here. I received a messenger bird today. The Seagani escaping from Olbia have been trapped in the Jika forest. Your people are going to set fire to it with them inside. At this time of year, it is certain death. I must go to them and see if there is anything I can do to help."

"You cannot go alone, Yani," said the man who had been arguing with her. "One against so many. It doesn't make sense."

"No," said a young woman by the door. "What could you do?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I could kill the sentries so that they could get away."

Everyone in the room gasped.

"What else can I do?" said Yani, with a hard look on her face. "I'm not a mage. I can't put them to sleep. I am sorry about my cleansing, but how can I just turn my back on these people? Now Tarapan please will you send me through the Circle of Power. I know there is one near the Jika forest, and it is the only way I can get there in time."

The man just gaped at her. Yani sighed. She turned and clasped Ezratah's hand.

"I am going to battle against your people, Ezratah, so I fear this must be a parting of our ways. I'm sorry for it. Thank you for all your help. You will be safe enough here. The Tari never take sides in these matters."

Emotion choked Ezratah suddenly. They hugged like companions-in-arms. Funny the way he had stopped thinking of her as a woman. She certainly felt womanly.

“I will not forget you,” said Yani. “Farewell. May the Circle of Life enfold you and bless you always.”

“Thank you for everything,” said Ezratah. “Fare—” He stopped, realizing that positive wishes for Yani were negative ones to his own people. “Be careful,” he said at last.

He left the room with a mind full of confusion. He could have told Yani this would happen. The Mirayans could not let slaves rebel without punishing them. Yet he had spent time among the Seagani and he felt for them. In a few generations they would accept Mirayan civilization, but this would be an ugly battle because it symbolized the dying struggles of an old way of life. Oh Mir, he hoped Yani would not be hurt.

He was so troubled he did not notice the nectar dreamers until they were right on top of him. Suddenly a wild-haired man grabbed hold of his robe and shouted in his face, “Nine horses! Nine horses!” Ezratah found himself struggling with a lunatic. Then just as suddenly as he had appeared, the nectar dreamer’s eyes rolled up and he fell in a shuddering muttering heap to the ground. That was lucky!

Nectar dreamers were an example of everything that was wrong with Tari society. They were basically drug addicts—Tari who drank the juice of some flower in order to achieve visions. Instead of casting them out as normal people would, the Tari allowed them to stay in Penterong, where they were a constant source of chaos. Several times in the last few days he had been confronted by an ill-kempt wild-eyed person who would collapse at his feet and writhe around, yelling some incomprehensible thing about burning or Mirayans or nine horses. It was disgusting behavior.

In fact the Tari almost encouraged this behavior, for there was a widespread belief that nectar dreamers could tell the future. Wynnbyng had laughed the last time one had confronted him. She said that since he was unusual he must be a cusp of destiny, a place where different futures branched off.

He made to step over the nectar dreamer only to have another one cling to his ankle. A third was running through the moonlit trees toward him, yelling something about Mirayans asleep in the grass. He was tempted to tread on the ankle-gripping hand but he saw it belonged to a woman, so instead he prized her hand off as gently as he could. It wasn’t easy but he got free just in time to duck the third dreamer’s grasping hands and sprint off down another path. Mir-cursed nectar dreamers! By the time he had shaken them off, he was well and truly lost and had to ask several people for directions before he found his way back to the pool.

In truth he was too churned up to hurry back to his “harem,” as he liked to think of them. He wandered slowly among the trees, watching the way the moonlight fell on their leaves. How soft the fern tendrils looked. Some kind of nightingale began to sing and in one little glade he saw sugar gliders, a type of flying squirrel, gliding between the tall tree trunks and scampering along the branches like little undulating waves of fur. The air was sweet with the scent of flowers. He squeezed some mangiri leaves the way Wynnbyng had showed him and inhaled the fresh, spicy smell. Everything was so beautiful and peaceful it was impossible to envision that elsewhere in the world people were embroiled in violent and deadly struggles.

At times like these he could almost believe in the life spirit, for everything here was so full of life. Melancholy filled him. Was it really necessary that the Mirayans destroy this place? Did he really want to have a part in that? Perhaps he should abandon his ambition and leave now. To go where? But... if he did not tell his people of the secrets of Ermora, someone else would. He might as well get the credit for his work. He was just lucky to be seeing it in all its last beauty.

In this melancholy mood he approached the pool. He was coming from a completely different direction and he was able to hear the women talking well before they could see him.

What charming little fripperies were they discussing? He stopped to listen.

“Oh yes,” said Wynnbyng. “Quite different... sort of crude but so enthusiastic. It’s rather refreshing.”

“And so very obliging,” said Nardoo, another of his erstwhile lovers.

Wynnbyng laughed. “I suppose you could call it that. He’s like a greedy dog. He doesn’t have any self-control at all. You can make him do anything.”

With a prickle along his spine, he realized they were talking about him. Face red with embarrassment, he backed away from the pool.

For a moment he was hurt. He had assumed they had liked him, yet there was little liking and certainly no respect in their voices when they spoke of him. It was as if he was just a thing—not quite human. Sweet Mir! These people! Who could understand them?

Then came anger, refreshing, reassuring anger, boosting his courage. Those women! Greedy dog indeed! What business had they talking so righteously about a decent man? They who were no better than they ought to be; they who were given over to nothing more important than the pleasures of the flesh. At least he was trying to make something of his life! The sooner their decadent society fell in a heap, the better! And to think he had had compassion for them. Undeserving wretches! He went away in disgust and found a mossy bower under which he could sleep alone.

Some time later, he was woken by a sudden blast of light. As he sat up protesting, someone seized his shirt. A face thrust into his view.

“Where have they gone? Damn you! Where has that vile creature taken them?”

“Wha...” mumbled Ezratah in confusion.

Someone else grabbed his arm. Wynnbyng was kneeling beside him.

“Nine horses,” she whispered in a horrified voice. “Nine horses. Oh, how could it happen?”

The man holding him shook him. Ezratah recognized him but could not for the moment drag his name to the surface of his mind.

“Where have they gone?”

“What’s happening? Who...?”

“The nine riders. Yani and those young fools who have followed her. The others won’t tell, but you *must* know.”

“The Seagani sent for her help,” he said, too dazed to even think of lying. “She went through the Circle of Power. She didn’t... Mir! They must have gone with her.”

“Yes, but where?” cried Wynnbyng.

“Why did she leave you behind?” shouted the man. His name was Tarwon, and he had some official role in the healing house.

“They were going to fight Mirayans...”

Wynnbyng gasped and Tarwon let him go.

“Fighting!” shrieked Wynnbyng. “Fighting! Oh life, forgive us. Those pure young fools.” She pressed her hands to her face.

“This is what the nectar dreamers saw!” She began to weep. “Nine horses. Fire and death.”

“They have gone to fight Mirayans?” barked Tarwon at Ezratah.

“Yes. My people have the escaped Seagani slaves from Olbia trapped in the Jika forest and they intend to set it alight and burn them out.”

“Burn the forest!” cried Tarwon. Wynnbyng stopped sobbing from the shock. The two Tari stared at him for a moment.

“They are mages,” said Tarwon. “Perhaps they will shed no blood. That is not unlawful.”

“Battle is about shedding blood,” cried Wynnbyng, beginning to weep again. “That is how the outlanders are. I have no hope. We should have quarantined that vile creature the moment she came. We should never have let one defiled by blood near our precious young folk.”

“At the very least they have defied the council,” said Tar-won sternly. “That cannot be allowed to go unanswered.”

The following morning no one would speak to Ezratah. Angry faces turned away everywhere he went. His previous love partners, even Wynnbyng, turned their backs on him.

In the end he went outside Penterong and roamed around the fields and forest edges all day, avoiding those working there. Toward sunset he took his courage in both hands and went back, hoping they would at least let him have some food and a place to sleep.

As he entered the healing house, Tarwon came walking purposefully up to him.

“Greetings to you, Mirayan mage. I have serious words to speak with you.”

Ezratah knew he was about to be thrown out.

“Know that we do not blame you. You are an outlander. But we have decided that you must leave Penterong. The mages have insisted. Mages are so used to the world running their way; they take it very badly when things go against them.”

“You are not a mage, then?” asked Ezratah, surprised that Tarwon could have authority in a place like Penterong without having magical powers. Another example of this curious Tari way of running things.

“No, Mirayan. But I am the elder of this healing house, second after Gunidah, and so to me falls this task. I gather that in the way of outlanders, your people have made enemies of the Mori and the Seagani who surround us. We do not wish to cause you harm. That would be impious to the life force. So tomorrow Lady Wynnbyng will send you through a Circle of Power to some place safe for you. Come now. I will show you to where you may lodge tonight. There is food for you there.”

There seemed little point in arguing. At least he wasn't going to have to get back to the coast alone. That would have been very ugly.

Ezratah followed the man into the healing house. Tar-won showed him a small white room much like the one Yani had been occupying. His pack was there and on the bed was a basket with a flask of honey wine and a cloth-wrapped bundle.

“I'm sure Yani did not plan this,” he said to Tarwon as the elder turned to leave the room.

“Possibly you are right,” said Tarwon. “She simply seduced them with her vigor and her exciting stories. They were all restless young people without children to stabilize them.” He shrugged. “At least she only took the mages. They will be able to protect themselves against the out-landers. We must hope they don't attract the notice of demons.”

“There are no demons in Yarmar,” said Ezratah, surprised. “Or necromancers. The Mirayans would never tolerate it.”

“Is that so?” said Tarwon, not even interested enough in his words to be disbelieving. “Well, enjoy your meal. I shall come for you tomorrow morning and escort you to the Circle.”

As he sat on the bed that night, Ezratah's main feeling was that of disappointment. Now he had no chance of getting into Ermora or of seeing the mysterious Spirit Cave.

Then he thought, Why not? Why not just set out from Penterong and see if he could get into Ermora by himself? The land beyond the Parting Gate drew him as nothing else ever had. There was no use in trying not to offend the Tari now. He might as well do as he pleased. He had it on their own authority that they would never actually hurt him. So even if they caught him he had nothing to lose.

He wanted so much to see Ermora.

Yes, he would do it. He would.

* * *

An hour before dawn, Ezratah got up and slipped carefully down the stairs with his pack. Unlike the arch leading to the outside world, the Parting Gate was simply a pair of trees that grew in an arch. Beyond the Parting Gate, the forest was lush, green and untended, full of tall mangiri trees and tree ferns. There were no fruit trees or roses here. On either side of this forest stretched the high rocky walls of a gorge covered in mosses and little climbing plants. He followed a path which wound between those walls.

As he walked along the path the gray light became dawn and the sun rose. The gorge widened slightly. The vegetation became less lush and green and the ground between become more and more stony until he was walking across rough loose stones between bare rock walls. The stones clattered and moved under his feet and he stumbled often.

Perhaps this is what Ermora really looks like without the magic, he thought. If this were so he could not understand why the magic had ceased. He struggled forward over the stones. Above him, the sky began to grow dark till it was as gray as unpolished steel. Shortly after mid-morning, rain began pouring out of the sky like water out of a jug.

It had rained while Ezratah was in Penterong, but that had been soft, warm rain—summer rain. This was utterly different. Within moments he was soaked to the skin. A freezing wind howled down the gorge toward him. The rain seemed to be blowing directly into his eyes no matter which way he turned his head. Stubbornly he struggled on. Surely he must reach the end of this gorge soon. Then there would be a place to shelter.

The rain pelted down. It was so cold, his hands and feet became numb. Water trickled down his back. His nose ran, though he could not tell if it was with rainwater or not. Miserably he stumbled on.

At last he found shelter under an overhanging part of the gorge wall, protected from the wind and most of the rain. Shivering with cold, he dug around in his soggy pack and managed to find a blanket that was merely damp rather than sodden. He also came across a little flask of herbal spirit which he had packed the day he left the duke's service. He'd forgotten he had it. Who could blame him? So much had happened since then. Now blessing his own forethought, he forced the mouth of the flask between his chattering teeth and took a good, long swig and then another. The alcohol warmed his throat and stomach wonderfully. He wrapped the damp blanket around him and sat huddled on the ground. This had to be a magical storm. It was too violent to be natural. They had talked about Ermora's protections at Penterong, though they had not specified what they were. Such command of the weather even in this limited space showed amazing power.

The most frustrating thing was that he still couldn't sense the magic, no matter how much he tried. He took another couple of swigs from his flask, and leaned back comfortably against the rock, waiting for the rain to stop. Rain poured out of the sky. He waited and sipped and sipped and waited, then finally slept.

Suddenly Ezratah woke up. Some instinct made him turn his head. His blood froze. A hooded figure which reminded him of a bird of prey was standing before him.

“Who are you? What do you want?” he cried.

The figure shook its head and the hood fell back. It was a Tari woman with green feathers in her hair. The rain had stopped falling but the sky was still dark gray. It was difficult to tell what time of day it was or if he had been asleep for long.

“What are you doing here, Mirayan? This is no place for you.”

“I wanted to see the Spirit Cave,” he said without thinking. He felt at a distinct disadvantage so he got up, stiff all over from the damp and from lying on the stones.

“You wanted to see the Spirit Cave,” she repeated in a voice of poisonous sweetness. “How very presumptuous. I’m afraid that is not a place for you. As you can see the very elements forbid it.”

“The rain was magical, then?”

“If you like. You should return to Penterong soon. Or it will start again. Worse.”

“I see,” said Ezratah. “Very well, then.”

He turned and shouldered his pack.

“I would have liked to at least see beautiful Ermora,” he said regretfully, just to see if she might give in and help him.

The woman tilted her head to one side. “It does seem a pity,” she said. “To have come all this way. You should have brought one of our people with you.”

Aha! She was softening!

“I suppose so,” he said neutrally. It wouldn’t do to be too enthusiastic just now.

She smiled. There was something about that smile. Suddenly he felt very frightened. Perhaps it was just the eerie effect of the dark day and the hooded cloak.

“Maybe there is something we can do for you,” she said. She put out a hand and took hold of his wrist. Her touch was strangely sharp and when he looked down he saw that her hand was a bird’s claw.

That was when he screamed.

Chapter 24

The Seagani had taken refuge in the Jika forest, which was the largest of a string of densely forested valleys following the course of the Lalagullas river. The river came down in a waterfall at one end of the valley and simply disappeared into the ground at the other to reappear many miles closer to the sea. The valley itself was no more than a few miles long and the “forest” was simply one of the few really large stands of trees growing on the grassy plains of Yarmar’s interior.

The Jika forest was holy to the earth goddess Nezhrus and had a sacred grove at its center. It was a deep secretive place, full of rustling leaves and quiet birdsong. The underbrush was so thick it was impossible to see the natives hiding there, but the moment the pursuing Mirayan forces had got within range, they had been greeted with arrow fire.

Nonetheless, triumph filled Vladék Serranus, leader of the Mirayan forces, as he viewed the scene at the top of the valley from horseback. The Seagani had delivered themselves into his hands by taking cover in the Jika forest and he was going to win himself some glory teaching them a bitter final lesson.

Vladek was now Lord Serranus, Master of the Northern Marches and he was riding on the crest of a wave of triumph. This was a spit in the eye for his late self-righteous father and, more to the point, a kick in the guts for his brother Georgi. Many times in the past Vladek had wondered if he would be strong enough to survive that unspeakable bastard. Now here *he* was the last man standing. Rot in hell, big brother!

“I think we hurt them pretty badly back there,” he said to his second-in-command, Lucius Callus, a mercenary recently arrived from Miraya. “Now all we need to do is burn the remains.”

“Can they escape through the caves where the river goes into the ground?” asked Callus.

“Not a chance,” said Serranus. “After we raided their sacred grove last time my father sent some serfs down it. Two of them drowned. It’s nought but rushing water in narrow black caves. There is no air to be had.”

“So you’re going to set fire to the forest. How will this help us? They’ll just put it out.”

“Oh no, they won’t. These are Yarmarian trees—as pernicious as everything else in this nasty little country. Mangiri is incredibly flammable and it burns hotter than hell.”

“Won’t they just hide in the stream?”

“They can try, but I’ve seen streams boil in the heat of mangiri forest fires. And the Lalagullas is so shallow at the end of this dry season that I doubt it’ll give much protection. Most of them are going to die of the heat and smoke. The rest we can cut down as we like or take home to make an example of.” Vladek smiled ferally in anticipation. “They’re going to learn what happens to those who flout their masters and massacre innocent women and children.” He turned and motioned one of his captains to come forward.

“The fighting mages will be here by nightfall. We’ll set up patrols of the perimeter for tonight and start burning at daybreak.”

The Seagani watching from the cover of the forest had a very good idea of what would happen. A Seagani chief would never have burned a sacred forest in the service of war, but the Mirayans had no such qualms. Throughout the hot, still afternoon, the Seagani lay in cover among the ferns and underbrush, watching bleakly as patrols of Mirayan horse and foot soldiers moved along the sides of the valley. Near dusk, five phalanxes of mages arrived from the south. Against ordinary soldiers, backburning might have been some use, but against mages who could force fire across fuelless ground, there was no point.

They themselves had only a handful of mages among them, not nearly enough to fight off five phalanxes.

It seemed especially vicious of fate to let them survive twenty days of small skirmishes against the Mirayans only to be attacked within sight of the northern lands by a vastly superior force. The only thing that had stopped them from being cut to pieces in the open was the fact that a scout had stumbled on the Mirayans and lived to bring back the news.

Forewarned, those on foot had made for the Jika forest while those on horseback had launched a lightning strike against the oncoming Mirayans and slowed them down. Even with the element of surprise, the Seagani casualties had been high. Now here they were with even fewer horses, weapons and warriors, trapped in the forest awaiting the inevitable.

Up near the waterfall they were already digging pits in the forest floor for people to hide in. Lying in these pits covered with a wet woollen cloak, provided a burning tree did not fall on you, you might have some chance of surviving a moderate fire. But tomorrow’s fire would not be moderate. In pre-Mirayan times there had been a ceremony to clear the undergrowth by burning the forest every couple of years, but that ceremony had not been held since the Shaman Edict and the undergrowth was thick and

dangerously flammable. With so much fuel the fire would rage very fiercely, making the air so hot it would blister the skin and burn inside the lungs. No one held out much hope of survival.

Their only hope, and it was a very slim one, was that the message birds they had sent to Yani Tari at Penterong and to Raynar the chieftain of the Northern Seagani would bring help in time.

“We must try and break out,” said Monteak.

“Aye,” said Brek. “I guess we have a choice of suicides. But you women should surrender now,” he said to the three women leaders. “You’re valuable alive.”

“We are not so sure of that after what happened to Reecah’s ships,” said a stout-bodied Northern Seagani woman. “Anyway we have talked among ourselves and none of us want to go back into slavery.”

“But your children—”

“I would rather see my child burn cleanly than die in a Mirayan brothel,” said another woman, a veteran of those brothels.

There were nods of assent from the others.

“We have given the other women the choice and they have all refused it,” said the Northern Seagani. “But if you plan to break out tonight we will go with you.”

“We could wait to see what Yani does,” suggested someone tentatively. “The message bird was ensorcelled. It should have reached her by now. There is a Circle of Power just near here. They may come in time to save us.”

There was a brief silence around the fire.

“The Tari turned their backs on us a long time ago,” said the Northern Seagani woman looking at Duprey and Brek. “Do you really believe they will aid us now?”

“No! We can expect nothing from the Tari,” said Duprey.

Yani had told him the Tari would not help them and even if she came, what could she do against so many? He regretted sending out the cry for help, knowing that it would probably only lure her into danger.

“Then let us try to break out,” cried Monteak. He jumped up and held out his sword. “If we must die, let us die fighting like heroes.”

A great cheer rose to answer him.

It was decided that a proportion of remaining horse-riders, now under a quarter of the total band, should attack the Mirayan camp and try to keep them occupied while everyone else tried to escape by climbing the little paths up the cliff face and creeping through the grass beyond. Brek and Tusk were to go with the escapees, while Duprey volunteered to go with the horsemen. He was not much good on foot, but on horseback he would make those Gibadgee bleed.

That night before moonrise, the horsemen thundered out in the probable direction of the mage’s camp. The Mirayans were fully prepared for their attack and the horsemen did not even reach the camp before they were stopped by an enormous force. Huge mage flares went up in the air, filling the night with stark, white light. It was a slaughter. Still the Seagani attacked and attacked again with the gallantry of those with nothing more to lose. Duprey managed to unhorse a number of Mirayans before the Seagani were pushed back into the forest by the sheer weight of numbers. As he turned to see if it was possible to charge back out at them, he saw Monteak beheaded by an armored knight.

The failure of the attack had been expected. A far worse blow was how quickly the Mirayans discovered those escaping at the other end of the valley. Mage flares there made the movements of the

Seagani as clear as day, and Mirayan horsemen came sweeping down through the grass, cutting down everyone in their path. They took no prisoners. The escaping Seagani were forced to flee back into the valley. Tusk was killed and Brek badly wounded.

It was a much smaller and more bloodied group that finally collected at the bottom of the waterfall. A few groups had got through the cordon of horsemen on top of the cliff, but as the trapped Seagani sat binding each other's wounds, they could still hear screams coming from above and they had little hope for those missing.

It was decided that the remaining children would shelter in the deep pool at the bottom of the waterfall. There were thirty-four of them, about as many as could fit in the pool in its shrunken late-summer state. Lots were drawn as to who was to be in the center. Those who could returned to digging pits near the river. Several men and women slipped off into the undergrowth to reaffirm life on their last night on earth.

Duprey felt proud of the calm way they faced their deaths. He was glad to be a Seagani. He would have preferred to be almost anywhere else on earth at that moment and yet did not regret for a minute that he was not one of the Mirayans circling the valley outside. How could he have lived with what the Mirayans were about to do?

The Seagani had always accepted him. Their rich lives made the Mirayan life he remembered as a child seem barren and gray, and ever since he had met Yani, he had felt confident of the existence of the life spirit and of his place within it. She had had that effect on many of the Seagani.

He had several flesh wounds and a deeper one on his bad leg. He bound them up, and began to sing the old Seagani songs that his mother had taught him. The others joined in as they could. There seemed no point in sleeping this night or in saving their voices. They sang until dawn. Then they prepared themselves to fight the fire by tying back their hair, binding cloths over their faces and hands and bowing together while a shaman led the prayers to Nezhrus and to Maguerre the Goddess of War.

By the time the white-hot sun had risen in the merciless blue sky, four phalanxes of Mirayan mages had come up to the edge of the forest. Patrols of foot soldiers and horsemen were moving sedately around the side of the valley. There was a flight of arrows from within the underbrush, but they thudded uselessly off the mage's defenses. The Mirayans did not even bother responding.

The man-at-arms at the head of each phalanx lit his torch and under a protective barrier of magic moved forward and lit the underbrush. The dry twigs and bushes caught fire so vigorously that one man-at-arms was almost caught up in the conflagration. Within moments the loose bark hanging from the branches of the mangiri trees had caught and fire began licking up their trunks with a wild crackling.

The Tari Circle of Power stood a few miles northeast of the Jika forest. It was dawn when Yani and her eight companions came out of it.

A hot red sun was rising through an early mist. The young Tari whooped with delighted exhilaration. Illynya dug her heels into her horse and galloped forward.

"We're out! We're out!" she cried. Syndal and Mathaman galloped after her, laughing. The others followed suite. All of them cantered round and round the Circle of Power.

Beside Yani, Tarapan said, "If you can point me in the right direction, I can find the largest collection of trees on our way."

"Good! I think it is in this direction," said Yani, pointing southwest. "Quickly, we must get going."

“Come along, children,” shouted Tarapan at the others, a form of address which gained their instant attention.

“And have your defenses ready,” shouted Yani. “We do not know when we shall meet the Mirayans.”

She and Tarapan set off and the others followed behind, still laughing among themselves over how to repay Tarapan for calling them children. They pattered along for all the world as if this were a picnic, and Yani had to keep urging them away from interesting plants and animals.

I am the only one taking this seriously, she thought with irritation. It seemed to take forever to reach the forest. Soon they could smell mangiri smoke on the air.

Although Yani had warned them to be on their guard in the ride across the grasslands, the Tari had been too busy marveling at the world outside Ermora to pay attention. So when they suddenly came upon a group of Mirayan horsemen near the top of a hill, they were completely unprepared.

The Mirayans were also taken by surprise, but they were well-trained troops. They had their swords out quickly and attacked while the Tari were still gathering their wits. Yani drew her sword and met the closest horseman crying, “Come on! They’re weak. They can’t harm you.”

Fortunately Tarapan had the presence of mind to throw out a blast of magic that caused both men and horses to fall asleep in crumpled heaps on the ground. As several other soldiers came running or riding to attack, Illynya and Syndal threw out similar blasts of power. Soon over twenty Mirayans were lying in crumpled heaps on the grass and Tarapan was picking his way among them, making sure no one was crushed under a horse or otherwise hurt.

Just over the hill they were able to see the Jika forest clearly. Though the head of the valley was some distance away, they could see that the fire had already taken a strong hold. A great orange wall of flame was leaping above the trees and the thick pall of smoke was beginning to turn the sun red.

“Sweet life! That fire’s going fast,” cried Tarapan. “What is that strange blue light in it?”

“Marigoth says that is the color of Mirayan magic,” said Yani, who had never been able to see it. “Mirayan mages must be down there, urging the fire on.”

“How can they bear to witness such destruction?” whispered Syndal shivering. Can they not feel the life spirit crying out?

“What is the best way to stop this fire?” Yani asked Tarapan. “Should we go down and fight at its front or can you call up a storm?”

Tarapan licked his finger and held it up in the air.

“Both are good ideas. A storm would be the quickest way to put out such a mighty fire. But there is no storm nearby and it will take some time to brew one. And if those mages are urging on the fire, it would be a good idea to stop them first.”

“Then let us divide our forces. How many will be needed for the storm?”

“Only three I think.”

“Then choose three to brew the storm. I think you should stay here with them,” said Yani. “One of you should be free to defend the others. They will send troops and maybe even mages against you. If they do send mages, attack the one in the front holding a crystal. He is their focus and without him they are weak.”

After a few more instructions about the nature of Mi-ryan magic, Yani led her four mages, Illynya, Syndal, Mathaman and Jikary off toward the front of the valley. Illynya rode excitedly by Yani’s side. “We are really changing things, aren’t we?” she said.

“If we get there in time,” said Yani.

They broke into a canter. Then great gusts of smoke moved across the landscape and slowed them down to a trot again. All along the valley soldiers leapt out of the grass at them and had to be put to sleep so that they could go on. Yani’s teeth were clenching with anxiety. The fire was traveling so fast! It leapt from treetop to treetop, great tongues racing ahead.

As they came up level with the main front of the fire, smoke lay like fog across the land. Somewhere in the choking gray cloud, they rode into and over a group of foot soldiers, dark figures whose bodies went down sick-eningly under the horse’s hooves. The Tari screamed and scrambled from their horses to help the injured soldiers. The fit Mirayans attacked them. Panicking horses and people milled dangerously around. Yani was forced to injure a soldier who attacked them because the Tari were too busy healing those they had run down to notice anything else. Then Illynya began to scream hysterically. Yani, coughing and spluttering from the stinging smoke, managed to find her. She was kneeling over the bodies of two dead Seagani children, whose throats had been slashed open with such violence that their heads were almost severed from their bodies.

“Come on,” cried Yani, grabbing the sobbing girl and bundling her up onto a horse. Unfortunately Mathaman and Syndal both saw the bodies, though Yani managed to head Jikary off. By the time she got them on their horses and out of the smoke, the three mages who had seen the bodies were sobbing and gagging. They had never seen violent death before—a realization that tilled Yani with foreboding.

“Do you understand now what sort of people they are?” she shouted at them. “They will do the same to you if you give them the chance. You must be careful. Watch your backs! Concentrate on putting them all to sleep first, then worry about the injured. We will never do this if you hang back to pick up the mess. Can’t you see that?”

After several minutes, the young Tari pulled themselves together.

“We’re sorry,” said Mathaman.

“Don’t be,” said Yani. “Just do this thing right so that we can all escape with our lives.”

She turned away, but not before she had noticed the slightly reproachful way Illynya was looking at her. Well what had the foolish girl expected? Yani thought. Something nice? Something fine and heroic?

By now they were on the other side of the front of the fire. Ruthlessly Yani half-led, half-drove her troop down the slope and into the valley beneath. It was a wasteland; a world of white ash and scorched earth, where the blackened ruins of great trees stood like burned pillars holding up the smoke-sullied sky. They began to see dead bodies, not humans but many, many animals—hopping mice, climbing bears and wombats. Tears ran down the Tari’s faces at the sight of such desolation, but there were hard looks behind those tears.

They spurred their reluctant horses back toward the fire. Soon the ground was so hot that the horses’ feet had to be magically protected and it would have been difficult to breathe without magic. It was dark here for the sky was blotted out by sheets of gray smoke. They could see the fire before them, a huge orange and black monster. The breath of the fire seared them and its roaring filled their ears. It felt as if they were walking into the mouth of a huge furnace. Movement had become heavy and slow in the burning air, but at last in that dark hell, they came upon two phalanxes of mages, driving the fire forward with great gusts of air.

There was a sudden look of fear on the faces of the Tari. Yani could guess why. Two phalanxes of mages were twenty men. It must seem like a lot.

She grabbed Illynya who was nearest.

“Hit them!” she screamed in her face. “Break their crystals. Quickly! Do it now. They are much weaker than you.”

Illynya braced herself and with a grimace of effort threw out a bolt of power toward the leading mage of the closest phalanx. It hit him so hard that he was ripped out of the phalanx and tossed headlong through the baking air into the burning undergrowth ahead of them.

Illynya screamed and pulled back her power. With lightning speed the mage, now a burning torch of screaming humanity, shot back out of the fire and then slid to a stop before them, the fire extinguished. For a moment he struggled to rise. Then he fell and lay there blackened and still. Still screaming Illynya fell from her horse and began to writhe on the ground, sharing his death agonies.

The well-trained mages of the broken phalanx had recovered from their shock, though they were crying out at the painful heat. Throwing wild bolts of power about, they began to retreat. One of their power bolts struck Illynya's horse, which ran throwing all the other horses into a panic.

The other Tari, screaming and struggling with their horses, did their best to shoot bolts of magic sleep at the attacking mages. Meanwhile the second phalanx had noticed there was a problem and was wheeling around to respond.

"Go for the front one!" shouted Yani at Syndal. She vaulted off her horse and ran to Illynya's side. A blast of searing heat hit her. Smoke filled her lungs. She could barely see. The shocked Tari had not remembered to extend their protection to her.

Using her tiny magical powers, she managed to clear her vision enough to grab the leg of a rider. It was Jikary. Thank goodness he had regained control of his horse. His leg jerked and swayed as he threw out bolts of sleep, but finally he noticed her choking at his side and lifted her up to him. A bolt of power whistled past their heads.

From beside him she could see that the second phalanx had been broken up and were fighting separately without trying to reform the phalanx. The Tari were sending them to sleep, not as easily as they had the soldiers but still with little trouble. They still did not know their own strength and kept sending sleeping mages hurtling through the air, though not as disastrously as Illynya had. Bodies littered the ground.

"Stop fighting and throw your protection over us all," Yani cried to Jikary. "That will be enough. See how weak they are. I must get to Illynya."

Her words calmed him. He took a deep breath and suddenly the smoke cleared a little.

Yani jumped down on the ground again and ran toward Illynya, stumbling over bits of charred timber.

Illynya had recovered from her death throes. She had crawled, shivering, over to where the burned mage lay, all raw and charred. As Yani reached her, she sat back on her heels and howled a terrible animal howl of pain and horror.

"I killed him," she howled. "He died in agony. It was horrible."

Yani put her arms about her. She knew well how terrible Illynya felt.

"Hush," she said. "Hush. He died quickly and returned to the great Circle of Life. It was not your fault. It was an accident, Illynya."

As she tried to soothe the weeping woman, she saw a Mirayan mage pick a crystal off the ground. She turned to call out a warning to the others, but before she could speak a blast from Syndal shattered the crystal.

"Well done!" she called, so impressed that she momentarily forgot Illynya.

"No!" screamed Illynya suddenly. She struck Yani away so hard that Yani fell over. "It was not well done. None of it is well done. This is your fault. They were right. You are evil. You have polluted me."

She leapt up, turned and with surprising speed, ran away into the smoke. Yani sprang up after her.

As she ran she saw that the magical battle was now over and Syndal and the last few mages were exchanging fire as the mages turned to run away through the smoke. Mathaman was pulling the unconscious mages back behind their own protected area lest they burn or choke in the smoke. Jikary had dismounted and was checking them for injuries. The sight filled Yani with a brief, rueful moment of amusement. What would Mirayans make of such mercy?

Then she was out of the protected area and it was hot and dark. The smoke stung her eyes and choked her breathing. At least they were moving away from the fire. With her cloak over her mouth she stumbled on after Illynya. She must find her. She couldn't be left alone in this distressed state. Yani could only hope she was still on her trail.

At last the smoke cleared enough for the world to become foggy gray instead of dark. She ran on, floundering through the thick ash, hurdling the still burning logs. Even here the smoke getting into her lungs made her cough and wheeze. Then a momentary blast of cold wind made the smoke clear. Suddenly she could see Illynya running a long way ahead of her. A party of horsemen were galloping down the hill toward her.

"Look out!" shouted Yani, just as Illynya waved her hand and the horsemen toppled over.

Yani put on a turn of speed. "Illynya," she croaked. "Stop!"

The girl hesitated briefly and looked back before she kept on running.

Then suddenly there came a gigantic blast of thunder, as if a huge sack of rocks had been dumped on the roof of the sky. Yani looked up. The once blue sky had turned heavy gray with enormous storm clouds. Gusts of chill wind were blowing back the clouds of smoke. Illynya was still running away, obviously wanting to be alone. She seemed to be able to protect herself adequately. Perhaps it was best to let her be for the moment. Perhaps Yani should turn back and see how her other mages were managing.

At that very moment three men came racing up from her right with swords drawn, so fast that Yani was still drawing as they reached her. She whirled away from the first blow so that it glanced off her shoulder armor, ducked the second and parried the third. She managed to catch the first man with a good hit so that he went down immediately, but the others came on, raining down blows, fighting hard and dirty with as many kicks as sword thrusts. There was a flurry of close, gritty combat. A glancing blow scratched her shoulder and another narrowly missed her arm. She felled the second man with a blow to the thigh only to see three more coming. Dancing quickly out of range, she snatched up a still burning log and threw it at the remaining men. Without waiting to see the result, she turned and dashed back into the smoke, toward the fire and her mages.

In the cover of the grass at the side of the valley Illynya was watching the fight, teeth clenched, a strange avid look in her eyes. She did nothing to aid Yani and when Yani ran, she threw back her head and laughed, a laugh on the cutting edge of hysteria; a laugh that went on until she began to sob. She turned and waded away into the tall grass.

Yani was running toward the line of the fire. Twice more, small groups of men came at her, but she slowed them with a few blows and then eluded them in the smoke. She came quite suddenly to the place of their first battle. The Mirayan mages lay in a neat row on the ground. The heat and smoke had diminished here as the fire had moved away. The Tari mages were gone, but already a couple of Mirayan foot soldiers were looking at the fallen. Yani sprinted past them as quietly as she could.

The front of the fire was still moving. It was impossible to tell if it had slowed. She ran on parallel to

the line of it. Several times she came upon fallen Mirayan mages on the ground with their arms crossed on their chests. Soon she saw bursts of magical fire through the smoke. At that moment, with another crash of thunder, a great deluge of rain came smashing down. Yani was almost knocked over by the power of it. The heavy rain stung her cheeks and she could not keep her eyes open.

But, oh, the water felt good on her skin!

“Thank you! Thank you, sweet air and water!” she cried, holding up her clenched fists. The cool clean rain was so welcome after the smoke and heat that she didn’t care that she was soaking wet. Clouds of steam were rising from where they hit the ground.

When at last she reached the other Tari, they were standing looking with bemusement and satisfaction at sleeping Mirayan mages lying all around. They stood in a small patch of dry smoky air while the rain fell like a veil around them. Yani could not make herself heard above the roar of the rain until she stuck her head into the clear space surrounding them.

“Do you think that’s all of them?” she cried.

“Yes!” cried Mathaman, happily.

Syndal turned. “Where is ‘lynya?”

“She ran away from me.”

“We must find her. It was awful. How must she feel?”

“Perhaps it was worth it,” said Mathaman. “The Mi-rayans are disgusting people. Look how they pushed their fire forward. Everything was out of balance and they sought to make it more so.”

“They are still living beings,” cried Yani and Syndal, almost together.

“It is important not to act on their level,” said Yani. “Otherwise all balance is thrown out. Now you’re certain they’re all gone?”

The others closed their eyes for a moment.

“Oh yes,” said Mathaman. “That’s all. That blue magic of theirs is very easy to feel.”

“And so small,” said Jikary. “You were right. They are quite powerful in a group, but separately it’s easy to defeat them.”

“Come on,” said Syndal urgently. “We have to find ‘lynya.”

“I think Illynya blames me,” said Yani to Syndal. “She ran from me.”

“How could it be your fault?” said Syndal. “It was no one’s fault. But she must be devastated. We must find her soon and try to help her. I’m sure that time in the Spirit Cave will solve things. We didn’t mean to hurt them. Surely the life spirit will take that into account.”

“I pushed her too hard,” said Yani. Her conscience was beating her. She remembered how she’d grabbed Illynya earlier and shouted at her.

“We were scared,” said Syndal. “If you hadn’t pushed us, they could have been dangerous. We thought they were like us. But they are completely different, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” said Yani.

The rain began to lighten. It became an ordinary light downpour and then quite quickly a light misty rain. Yani looked at the others with concern.

“This is as it should be,” Syndal said. “Too great a downpour would cause imbalance. Weather is very touchy.”

How strong and certain the young mages now seemed. It was as if they had grown up. On the other

hand Yani felt more full of doubt than ever. Perhaps she was evil and polluted. If only she could make people fall asleep with a wave of her hand!

Suddenly they heard voices calling Yani's name. Two men came splashing through the muddy ash. One of the men limped badly. A rush of joy filled her, washing all self-doubt away.

"Duprey!" she cried, jumping down from the horse and throwing her arms around him. Suddenly they were kissing, a full hard kiss on the lips that took Yani's breath away.

"Thank Sheval, you have come," breathed Duprey hoarsely. His fingers brushed her face. "I knew it was you when I saw the rain."

Yani felt herself blushing. Looking at Duprey felt too intense.

"It's so good to see you," she said. The words seemed inadequate.

"Yani!" cried Syndal urgently.

"We have to go. We are missing one of our group," said Yani. She climbed back on her horse and helped Duprey up behind her. Duprey's companion climbed up behind Mathaman.

Duprey twined his fingers through hers and held her hand against his good thigh. His body was warm and hard against her back. The six of them set off in the direction of the valley. Soon they could see it green and sodden through the rain. Yani turned and looked around behind them. Huge clouds of white steam and smoke rose up from the ground. There was no longer any sign of flames.

As they reached the valley, a large troop of armored riders came over the lip of the valley. Their armor looked obscenely clean and new against the blackened landscape. They came purposefully on, drawing their swords.

"Can you take them?" Yani asked the mages as they readied themselves for defense. "Good. Leave the front one awake so that we can talk." Duprey jumped down from the horse and Yani rode forward to meet the leader.

The leader, a captain from the colors on his visored helmet, was intent. He did not notice as one by one the horses behind him suddenly stopped, nor did he hear the clank of metal as several of his sleeping knights fell. His sword was raised and his shield ready. He met Yani full on with a clash of metal on metal. They had a brief exchange of blows before Yani knocked him off his horse. He hit the ground hard but sprang up shakily, ready to defend himself.

"Stop!" cried Yani. She held her sword and shield ready, but did not attack him. The captain suddenly became aware that he was the only man left standing. After a moment he pushed up his visor and looked about him with confusion.

"I have no wish to harm you," said Yani. "I wish for you to send a message to your lord. Who is commander of this warband?"

"I serve Vladek Serranus, Lord of the Northern Marches," said the captain. His voice trembled but that was the only sign of his fear.

"You Mirayans should go quietly home," said Yani. "The Tari have these Seagani under protection and will not let them be harmed. These four mages alone have defeated all your fighting magic. You are outnumbered. Now go and tell him what I have said."

"And my men?" said the captain.

"They will wake unharmed in a couple of hours," said Syndal. "It does not please us to do harm."

"Unless the people make it necessary," added Yani.

"All the natives are murderers," said the captain bitterly, but he mounted his horse anyway. "I will

deliver your message. May you rot in hell.”

“Why was he so nasty?” said Mathaman, watching him ride away.

“They hate the Seagani and accuse them of all kinds of crimes,” said Yani. She was troubled. Bad things had happened during the taking of Olbia. People had been killed or hurt in that initial fighting, and later when the slaves had broken out. She had reluctantly accepted such things because she believed in the justice of the Seagani cause. She did not think her companions could make such a compromise. What would happen if the Tari found out?

The Tari searched the grasslands all around that side of the valley but there was no sign of Illynya, although Syn-dal said she felt traces of her passing.

“Perhaps she has gone back through the Circle of Power,” said Mathaman.

Syndal looked doubtful and Yani felt the same, but neither of them said anything. Would Illynya be able to face Penterong now that she had committed the greatest wrong a Tari could commit? Yet she had paid her price and where else could she go? Would the Tari let her back in?

They rode to the head of the valley where Tarapan and the other four Tari were. The Seagani had already climbed up the cliff face from the valley floor and were clustering around Tarapan and the others, asking for blessings. They welcomed Yani and the other three with great ceremony.

As dusk fell the Tari followed the Seagani back down the cliff face into the sacred area around the head of the river. It was still green and beautiful here despite the fact that the fire had come so close. The Seagani feted them as best they could under the circumstances. Tarapan and the other Tari were fascinated and delighted with them. They were happy to heal wounds and give blessings.

“I see now what they mean when they speak of the joy of service,” said Tarapan.

“The joy of service,” repeated Yani thoughtfully. Yes that was what she had felt in Olbia and even when they were fighting the fire. But still her heart was heavy. Rescuing the Seagani from certain death had seemed so simply right—so morally unambiguous—that it had chased away all her doubts. Now this thing with Illynya had brought them all back, and ever since they had met up with the rest of the Seagani she had been on tenderhooks lest one of them reveal something that would shock the other Tari. At last she grew tired of worrying about it. She left the celebration and walked away along the course of the stream.

The dark velvety twilight was full of animals rustling and the calls of night birds. The stream gurgled away beside her. The tree ferns all had furry new shoots uncurling from their crowns. She stopped to stroke them. The way they uncurled so perfectly was a miracle of the life spirit.

“They are beautiful aren’t they?” said Duprey, behind her.

“Yes. You could almost imagine the fire had not happened.” She turned and looked at him. “You followed me!”

“You looked upset,” he said. “I’m sorry. Shall I leave you be?”

“No,” said Yani. She sighed. “Why is nothing simple?”

“I don’t know.” They stood looking at the fern. Yani found she was very aware of Duprey’s body just beside her.

“Some things are simple,” he said. “You were pleased to see me this afternoon. And I was pleased you see you. Simple!”

“Yes,” said Yani. She turned to him and simple wanting surged through her. She threw herself into it,

putting her hand on his neck and pulling his mouth down to hers. They kissed with ferocious hunger.

“I want to forget,” she whispered, pulling him down among the ferns, body to body. He said nothing but his desire was as desperate as hers. His strong hands pulled open her clothes, caressing, celebrating her bare skin and breasts.

She felt his hard manhood and ground herself hotly against it, her fingers gripped in his hair. Their bodies moved together in rhythm, rode together, rode and rode hard and fast up to the peak of pleasure.

Later, she left Duprey asleep among the ferns. Her hot, damp skin hungered for the cool water of the stream. A little farther up there was a pool deep enough for bathing. She plunged into it. It was long enough for her to swim about ten strokes. As she reached the end of the pool she heard a growling noise. She climbed up onto the bank and came upon a badly burned womba lying on the ground. A group of currah, small bad-tempered nocturnal predators, were worrying at its legs, and it was too far gone to do more than kick feebly at them. The currah scattered as she approached. She touched the womba. It was indeed too badly burned to survive, and in considerable pain. She gave it a drink of water from her hands and then broke its neck to end its suffering.

As she stood there she heard a cawing sound. She looked up and saw a raven sitting on a branch. It cawed twice more and then with a rustle of black wings it flew away. What was the death bird doing about at this time? Ravens were day birds.

She could not help feeling that this was somehow a message from the life spirit. As she slid back into the stream she was suddenly struck by the fact that death was also part of the great circle of life. Only humans could choose not to kill. For other living beings killing was just part of survival. Currah would not wait for the womba to die before they savaged it. Great cruelty was enacted every day in the world the life spirit had made. Yet these creatures were no less creations of the life spirit than she was.

Chapter 25

If Derrum was right, Jagamar was subtly preventing her from rescuing Elena. This made it even more likely that he was the one responsible for Elena’s imprisonment.

It made Marigoth’s hair stand on end. She wondered if she should find some other place to stay, but after serious thought she decided that as long as he didn’t find out that she suspected him, she should be safe enough.

Now that Derrum had showed her how to get out of Jagamar’s living place at will, who knew what she might contrive? The very night after she had been out with Derrum, when she was certain Gunidah had gone to visit Jagamar, Marigoth left her mossy bed and crept along the dark corridors to the tree using a tiny magic light in the palm of her hand. But though she was certain the white thread she had left as a marker was still in the same place, the spell that had made the gap must have faded, for try as she might she could not get into its branches. After trying for as long as she dared, she returned to her bed, almost weeping with frustration. She was achieving nothing in this stupid place! Why did it all have to be so hard? She was only a child. If only she could find Grandmother. Maybe she should go back to Penterong and get Yani to sort things out. At least that would get her away from Jagamar.

Would he let her go? Now there was a scary thought!

Then suddenly she heard movement in the darkness.

“Little girl!” whispered a voice.

The hair stood up on the back of Marigoth’s neck. She sat up and immediately someone touched her face. She jumped and squeaked, but fortunately managed not to scream.

She lit the tiny light in the palm of her hand. A shadow scuttled out of the circle of light, hissing: “No light! No light! They will see.”

“Who is it?” asked Marigoth softly.

“You should not be here. This is no place for the granddaughter.”

Marigoth got out of bed and went closer to the corner.

The shadow resolved itself into the hollow-eyed face of Wynna, the madwoman. She was trembling.

“No, no,” she moaned softly, turning away from the light and covering her face with her hands. “Hush. Don’t tell brother. Hush. It’s a secret, a secret.”

Marigoth caught hold of Wynna’s arm.

“What happened to my grandmother?”

For a moment Wynna’s mouth worked as if she were trying to find words. Then suddenly she let out a piercing shriek and darted away. Marigoth raced after her. Wynna plunged down the rows of trees, but Marigoth managed to keep her in sight. Then suddenly the madwoman ducked down and was gone. Marigoth reached the tree she had ducked beneath and searched around. Underneath one of the roots was a dark hollow. She thrust her hand into it and found an amazingly spacious hole, much bigger than it looked. She was just about to wriggle into it when she heard Gunidah calling her name. Quickly she yanked a thread from her night dress and laid it before the hollow. Then she jumped up and ducked through to a different row of trees.

“Marigoth,” cried Gunidah. “What are you doing? I heard someone scream.”

“I had a bad dream,” said Marigoth, feigning sleepy fright (and doing it rather well she thought). “Something was chasing me. Oh, Gunidah! I woke up here and was so frightened.”

“There, there!” said Gunidah, putting her arm around her. She sounded more irritated than sympathetic. Marigoth clung to her and shivered, to give the lie veracity.

After that every time Marigoth got out of bed, Gunidah spoke out of the darkness and asked her if she was all right. She stuck close to her next morning as well. However around midday, one of Jagamar’s young friends, a woman called Bela, came running up wearing a dress that looked like it was made of flower petals.

“Look what I have devised for the moon festival!” she cried.

“What moon festival?” asked Marigoth, seeing Gunidah’s warning look.

“It’s in a month’s time,” said Gunidah quickly. “Perhaps you can come.” Bela gave the two of them an amused look and ran away, down the corridor toward the library. They could hear her laughing in there. Gunidah got up and followed her and soon she, Bela and Jagamar were all laughing in the library.

Marigoth raced off quickly and after some searching around in the oppressively straight rows managed to find Wynna’s tree again. The hole was still there. Marigoth wriggled quickly down into it. She found the bottom and carefully lowered herself. Soon she was crouched in a small cave that smelled of damp earth. There was a lot of space. She wriggled into the earthen tunnel, avoiding the roots that stuck out all around. A short time later she could see sunlight coming through a small hole up ahead. Great! A way out!

Then suddenly Wynna came at her from a place where Marigoth could have sworn there was only empty shadow.

“Granddaughter,” she hissed. “Granddaughter, I will help you. I will. Come. Come with me. I will show you. Come.”

Marigoth let Wynna pull her toward the sunlit hole.

It was early afternoon, a time when many Tari lay down to sleep in sunlit glades. Wynna flitted along, staying under cover of the bushes. It seemed to Marigoth that they were circling round the same area. Then Wynna crawled in beneath a flowering bush. When Marigoth wriggled after her, getting badly scratched in the process, she found her crouched among the branches, peering into a clearing. A huge tree grew on the other side of the clearing.

“She is coming,” hissed Wynna.

Such was her excitement that Marigoth began to feel excited too. Was she going to see her grandmother? She longed to see her. Then everything would be right again.

Then a hole opened in the trunk of the tree and a woman stepped out. She crossed the clearing and took a path leading away from them.

Of course it was not her grandmother.

“My baby, my little girl,” crooned Wynna. “She was so sweet. But she is evil now. Ruined. Ruined. *He* ruined her.”

Marigoth recognized the woman as the sulky bird lady, Jindabyne.

“She is evil now,” muttered Wynna. “He made her evil. Not me. It was his fault not mine. I’m innocent. I did nothing. It was not my fault. Not my fault.”

The madwoman’s voice was beginning to rise shrilly.

“Hush,” hissed Marigoth. “She’ll hear you.” She turned on Wynna. “What about my grandmother?”

“Yes, yes!” muttered Wynna. “Yes. Quiet. Must help the granddaughter. Must atone. Yes, yes. Come. Come.” She slid away into the bushes.

As Marigoth turned to go after her, her eye was caught by a movement. Jagamar’s assistant Kintora was moving very cautiously around the tree. She put her hand on the trunk, which opened to her, and she slid silently into it.

“Come, come,” muttered Wynna, scuttling between the trees, hopping from tuft of grass to tuft of grass. After a short time, the forest gave way to a high grassy bank.

Marigoth followed as Wynna scrambled up the bank on her hands and knees. Suddenly it was as if they had entered another world. The color of the sunlight became white instead of golden, and the colors of the grass and sky seemed pale and washed out.

The land before her seemed stunningly hard-edged after the softness of Ermora. The green bank came down onto a rocky valley where two great scree-scattered slopes met. Wynna had already reached the bottom of the bank and was scrambling across the tumbled rocks and boulders with amazing speed, her feet clacking on the loose stones. She seemed to be heading for a narrow gap between the mountains.

Marigoth stumbled after her as quickly as she could, but Wynna had disappeared into the gap well before Marigoth could catch up to her. Marigoth hoped she had not gone and hidden herself in some little hole. She wanted to see Grandmother. She must see her—she would know what to do about Elena.

The wind was howling down between the rocky walls and scrambling over the boulders was the only

thing that kept Marigoth warm. The stone all over this place had the reddish tinge of iron-rich rock. Iron interfered with the flow of magic and so these rocks were uncomfortable for a mage to be near. But Marigoth's heart was light and full of hope. Grandmother!

The gap opened out into another scree-filled valley. Against one side of it was a series of flat-topped boulders forming a kind of level platform against the mountainside. Marigoth jumped in fright as a tremendous howl came from below her.

Wynna was crouched over a pile of stones in the shadow of one of the flat-topped rocks. She had her head back, howling like an injured animal. Tears streamed down her face.

As Marigoth got closer to her, she saw that the long low pile of rocks had a distinctly gravelike shape. The Tari Circle of Life symbol had been drawn on many of the rocks with chalk. Flowers, some quite fresh but many of them brown and dead, were strewn all over it. A cold feeling filled Marigoth's chest.

"Whose grave is this?"

Wynna had abandoned herself to weeping. Her face was open-mouthed, red and wet with tears. Mucus ran from her nose.

"She came for me. I didn't do it. It was an accident. I loved her. I didn't do it," she wailed. Though Marigoth tried to soothe her and then shook her, she would not stop weeping and howling nor would she say anything else. At last Marigoth let go of her in disgust and drawing up her courage, took a closer look at the grave. A small flat stone lay at the other end and something small and shiny green lay on top of it.

It was a dirty emerald ring. When Marigoth had rubbed it clean she wished she hadn't, for then she saw the tree symbol carved within the jewel. Marigoth knew that tree symbol well. It was painted in all her grandmother's magic books. It was her grandmother's personal symbol—the way she signed her name. She even remembered seeing an emerald ring on her grandmother's hand as she turned the pages of the magic book and pointed out the spells to her when she was a young child.

The ring blurred before her eyes. Marigoth sat down and put her face in her hands. She felt as if something had died inside her chest. At last she turned to Wynna who was crouching silently at the foot of the grave, peering anxiously at her through her tangled hair.

"How did this happen?" she demanded angrily.

"No, no," cried Wynna, looking frightened. "It wasn't me. I didn't. I loved her."

"I believe you," cried Marigoth. "But who killed her? Surely you know."

"Not my fault," cried Wynna.

Something in Marigoth snapped. If this damned woman wasn't going to tell her voluntarily, she must be made to tell her.

Wynna must have read the fell purpose in Marigoth's eyes for she took to her heels, scrambling nimbly away across the rocks.

"No," shouted Marigoth. "Come back."

She managed to grab Wynna's arm, but Marigoth was only a child who was too excited to remember to use magic and for all her seeming age, Wynna was a fully grown woman. She flung Marigoth away. Marigoth slid down a large rock into a pile of rubble. By the time she got to her feet, Wynna had disappeared. Marigoth could not find her anywhere even though she pushed herself into the air and flew up and down the valley several times.

Finally Marigoth gave up. With difficulty she found her way back to Ermora and then the tunnel into Jaga-mar's living space. She went in and lay on her mossy bed. A short time later Gunidah came in and asked her where she had been.

“Just been walking around,” muttered Marigoth, not really caring if Gunidah believed her or not. A black mood enveloped her. She did not feel like being bothered with either Gunidah or Jagamar so she told Gunidah she had a headache and that she did not feel like dinner that night.

After Gunidah had gone, she looked at the emerald ring for a long time. She felt as if a big stone was lying on her chest.

She would never see Grandmother again. All these years of hope had been for nothing. Who would help her now?

What about Derrum? He would want to know about the grave. Would it be any good to tell him? Could she really trust him? She knew she didn't trust Jagamar. She was sick of trying to find a Tari she could rely on. More than ever she wanted to run back to Yani at Penterong. But what could Yani do? She scolded herself for being a coward. Surely Derrum must be good for something. She must try and let him know what she had found out.

Chapter 26

Being in Wolf Madraga's captivity was easier. Elena had proper clothes, a proper room with a proper bed and a place to wash. She had freedom of movement within the several big airy rooms luxuriously decorated with carpets and hangings and with latticed windows overlooking the sea. One of the servants told her that this was as much freedom as any high-born Mirayan lady had. She was given spinning, weaving and embroidery to do. Such work gave her some escape from the tedium of captivity.

Six women lived in her quarters with her. The women were all Madraga's creatures, and yet they were pleasant company. There was gossip to listen to, games to watch and sewing and weaving to discuss. One of the women even played the harp and sang. It was not so very different from quiet times in Fleurforet. Except that Eldene was never going to come through the door, his face fresh and joyful from tracking through the forest trails. She missed him more every day.

Madraga showered beautiful clothes and jewels upon her, as if he thought such things would make a difference. Every day he came and brought a new gift and he insisted that her women dress her in these trinkets. The visitations were hard to bear for he insisted on telling her how much he cared about her. He kissed her hand. He brought blind musicians to play to her. He took her walking on the battlements after dark.

Alyx was with her. She was allowed to play with her and teach her. Alyx was safe and well. Elena could see it with her own eyes, could hold her in her arms whenever she wanted. Sometimes she had to fight not to feel gratitude toward Madraga.

For she was still a captive.

At other times great bitterness filled her. Madraga simply wanted her consent so that he might not feel himself to be a rapist. But what else was he? She had no freedom to choose. She could never forget that night—the ax—the sound of the blow on Eldene's neck. No matter how kind he was, she saw only Eldene's murderer when she looked at him.

Sometimes the tension was almost too much to bear. Sometimes she wanted to shout at him to get on with it. He was never going to get her consent. At the same time she dreaded having to admit his body and to end this time of being left alone. The thought of being touched intimately again by anyone let alone him made her skin crawl. She was as distant as she could be with him, while at the same time she strove

not to anger him. He was remarkably patient with her. She had to give him that.

The first few days she was too stunned and exhausted to do more than live from day to day. She almost tried to act and think as if she was just a body. But somehow El-dene would not let that happen. She remembered him saying, "You are a clever woman. Don't give up."

But that was a memory from the time when she had tried to change the design of Mori boats so that they would be more stable in the river rapids. The boat builders had laughed and told her she was too beautiful to bother with such things. She felt shy about being an outsider and unwilling to make enemies by being pushy. She let them patronize her. Eldene would have none of it. "Don't be discouraged!" he had said. He had helped her build an example of her craft during their first winter together. How much they had enjoyed working together, telling each other small jokes and stories. Neither of them was much of a woodworker and the resulting craft had been an ungainly-looking object. Once again the derisive laughter of the boat builders had discouraged her, but El-dene had insisted on taking the boat out and riding it through the rapids. When it had stood the test steadily, the quality of the laughter became anxious and disconcerted.

There were questions about how it was done and more respect in the eyes of the Mori when they looked at her. Soon her new design was being incorporated into new boats, though few acknowledged her. But Eldene looked at her with pride whenever they saw this new design. "You are the cleverest woman in the world, as well as the most beautiful," he said. Now his ghost seemed to say the same thing. It nudged and nudged at her despairing languor, and because it was a memory of Eldene she could not bring herself to chase it away.

So she began to formulate plans for escape and as the plans grew so did her strength. There seemed no point in waiting for rescue. The Tari woman had said her sisters were dead, and though she wished with all her heart that she might be lying, Elena dared not hope. Hope had been an enemy for too long. She must do something for herself.

Her six companions represented the best opportunity. There were three Western Seagani with tribal scars on their cheeks, two Mirayan bondservants and a Mori slave woman.

Elena had always enjoyed the company of other women. Often they were just as affected by her looks as men, but more nurturing. Occasionally a sexual element to their affection or jealousy sprang up, but these feelings were usually easily diffused with diplomatic treatment. When she had lived with Eldene, the other women of the tribe had protected her against importunate men almost as much as he had. She had had to be careful not to let them spoil her. In the past she had always felt it was wrong to manipulate those affected by her strange gift.

Not anymore. Now she was ruthless. She did not have to make them love her. It had already happened. She could see it in the kind way Flavia brought her warm drinks without being asked, in the way Tete asked to learn her favorite songs, in the way Fanchette strewed her bathwater with rose petals. She worked to turn that love to an advantage.

It did not take long to make them all sympathetic to her desire for freedom. The Mirayans were surprisingly responsive to this, but their loyalty to Wolf Madraga made them impossible to use. The Seaganis however, were easily turned because they still had the old Yarmar-ian loyalty to the Tari. Within the first day each of them had found an opportunity to ask her privately for a Tari blessing.

As for the Mori slave, Fanchette, she and Elena were allies from the beginning. Fanchette had been in captivity for over two years and wanted to escape as much as Elena did. It was wonderful to be able to speak Eldene's language again and to have someone to be open with—a friend. Fanchette was cunning. She told Elena what the other women were saying behind her back so that Elena could endear herself to each of them in the most effective way. She knew which guards could be corrupted most easily and how. She supported Elena's plans at considerable risk to herself and they agreed to escape together.

“But you must keep yourself covered, lady, lest we meet some other man who may desire you!” she said wisely.

Fanchette told her of how badly things were going for the Mori in their struggle to resist the Mirayan invasion. All land between Lamartaine and Fleurforet was now in Mirayan hands and the trees were being cleared at a shocking pace to make farmland for new settlers. Fanchette’s eyes filled with tears as she told Elena of this tree-felling. The Mori regarded trees as deeply holy and normally punished the thoughtless felling of them with death.

Elena was more upset about the fact that the Mirayans had made several sorties into the forest beyond Fleur-foret. Their land hunger seemed insatiable!

Both Queen Sonnette’s daughters, the heirs to the Mori throne, which was passed down through the female line, had been killed fighting the Mirayans. Sonnette and Alyx were now the last female members of the royal line. The Mori tribes were scattered by their lack of a leader and were fighting very ineffectually.

Queen Sonnette Mori was being held in another part of the fortress. Elena asked to see her former mother-in-law, but Madraga denied her this though she pressed him as hard as she dared. Fanchette found a way to smuggle a letter to Sonnette, telling her that Elena was nearby and that Alyx was alive and well. It was Fanchette who brought her the reply.

Sonnette Mori was not a good writer, but she got her message across.

Dear Child,

You have done well to survive and keep Alyx alive. Do not give up hope. Madraga’s love for you gives you power over him. Use it for Eldene’s people. Persuade him to make peace before the great forest is destroyed and the Mori become nothing but slaves. May Dubois the lord of the forest bless you and keep you on the right path.

The desperation of this letter made Elena weep. Sonnette was urging her son’s widow into the arms of her son’s murderer. Yet she did not blame her much loved mother-in-law for this. She toyed with the idea of trying to speak to Wolf Madraga about the Mori, but abandoned it. A brief conversation could make little difference to a war so much in his favor. She stored the letter in the bosom of her dress to take out and think about when she was free again. Perhaps then she could work out something useful to do to help Eldene’s people.

Sometimes when a person looks at the sun, though he may turn away quickly, the afterimage of the light burns at the edge of his vision afterward. Thus it was with Lev Madraga once he had seen Elena Starchild.

Now that his brother, Wolf, had ruined his chances of working for the Scarvans of Olbia, Lev had nothing to do but hang around Lamartaine. Wolf already had a full contingent of fighting mages. Anyway, all Lev wanted to do was to think about Elena. He could not seem to think of anything but Elena. He kept his obsession from his brother.

He used the demon Shub to spy on her in her seclusion in the women’s quarters. The demon’s magic

slipped subtly through the magical protections surrounding her, but it required to be fed with something of the life force in order to do this task for him. Lev sacrificed stray cats and rats to it. This was technically necromancy, but as long as he limited it to small useless animals, Lev didn't see that it was so very bad. After all he could stop if Shub asked for anything too outrageous.

He had to see Elena. He had to. The obsession infuriated him but could not be denied. Despite the risk of being found out, sometimes he used magical nightsight to watch her walk with his brother on the battlements.

He had heard rumors that his brother had not yet bedded the beautiful Elena. The jealous thought that one day he would ate away at Lev's insides. He should have had her while he had the chance—then he'd have been cured of this damned obsession.

On the night Elena escaped, Wolf sent for Lev. It was the most logical thing to do. Lev was a Golden Order Mage—possibly the most powerful mage in the whole of Yarmar, if the truth be told. Wolf had him cast the bowl of seeing with one of Elena's scarfs. The sweet scent of her still clung to it. Perhaps it was that which inspired him. There were no other mages in the room and it was easy for him to tell Wolf that she was making away inland. He even drew him a map of her possible route.

After Wolf's party had left, Lev himself made off along the coastal road which was her actual route.

Elena and Fanchette rode a good long way before they dared to stop. Then they found a neglected barn for Elena and Alyx to hide in and Fanchette went out to see if she could steal or buy some kind of boat so that they could get to Elena's island. Her slave ring was a good disguise for a Mori traveling in Western Seagan.

Elena saw to the horses and finding some straw that was slightly less moldy than the rest. Alyx settled down to sleep under it. "If you are awake and someone comes, do not come out unless I call you," Elena told her. She pulled her veil tight about her and, with her sword drawn, she settled into the shadows outside the barn door.

The moon had risen and a light mist began to rise off the damp ground. She had been waiting for some time when suddenly a robed figure came striding very fast across the field toward her. Moving at that speed the figure had to be a mage. Elena shrank farther back into the shadows and gripped her sword tighter. Aside from a lucky sword thrust, there wasn't much she could do against a mage. At least he seemed to be alone. With any luck this was just a chance occurrence and had nothing to do with her.

The figure strode up to the door of the barn. It stopped in the doorway and looked into the barn. Was he going to go in and if so what about Alyx?

Another woman might have thrust her sword into his neck then and there, but Elena's Tari upbringing stopped her from doing that.

And in a moment, it was too late. Without warning the mage swung round and seized her round the waist. She struggled but something stung her in the arm, and for a moment she couldn't move. The sword fell from her lifeless fingers. He had dragged her back into the barn before she regained the ability to struggle. Mage light flared. The mage spun her around to face him.

It was the mage from Alexis Scarvan's tower.

He did not speak to her. He simply ran his fingers down her throat, breathing heavily, looking at her in a way that she knew far, far too well. She brought her knee up with a hard jerk and he doubled up. She shoved him in the chest and then followed through with clasped hands hard to the side of the head. He crashed to the ground. She had to finish him quickly now. She lunged forward to kick him in the head. He threw up his arm.

She was in the air so fast she couldn't help shrieking with fright. She covered her head for the fall, but instead she just hung there in midair. Below her the mage lay there panting and grimacing. Elena scanned the barn desperately for some kind of weapon. The straw over Alyx stirred, but thank God the child didn't come out.

Then suddenly straw streamed up from the floor, twisting around her, forming ropes and binding her arms and legs. It was astonishingly fast. This mage must be tremendously powerful—at least as powerful as Mari-goth. The ropes tightened around her. Then with a gentle thud she fell to the ground again. The mage crawled across the floor to her.

That knee to the groin hadn't dampened his ardor. Maybe this wasn't so surprising. Since he was a mage, he could soothe his own pain. She wriggled backward as hard as she could but he simply grasped her ankle and climbed astride her legs.

"My beautiful!" he crooned.

Though she cringed away from him, she couldn't avoid his hands, stroking her neck, moving down to her breasts.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm Lev. You remember me."

Madraga had a brother, a mage called Lev, who was reputed to be very powerful. So that was where he fit in the scheme of things!

"If you're going to rape me, get it over with," she said with loathing. It had worked before.

He smiled silkily at her.

"When I've finished with you, it won't be me raping you," he said.

He sat back and began whispering and tracing runes on his palm with his fingers. All the time he looked at her with that silky, hungry look. He was going to do something that would affect her mind. Mirayans were notorious for that kind of magic.

Then she saw a movement in the doorway behind him. Fanchette? She dropped her eyes immediately so that she wouldn't give her away.

He hadn't noticed. He just kept on tracing and whispering.

Then something rustled softly behind them. He whirled around to see Fanchette was creeping across the barn with a rusty sickle in her hand.

"Ha!" he shouted.

He flung out his arm and Fanchette was thrown across the room. With a smash she hit the barn wall. She was a heroine, was Fanchette, for even as she hit that wall she flung the sickle at Lev.

He simply laughed and with a twist of his hand sent it spinning back at her. She screamed agonizingly as it hit her through the chest pinning her to the wall. The scream was cut off in that instant. She went limp.

"Fanchette! No!" Elena screamed.

The mage hardly noticed. Fanchette's pain was nothing to him. He was shaking his hand and grumbling about having to start his spell again.

"Quickly, do something!" screamed Elena. "Heal her! Come on heal her." Her arms were tied but she hit at him with her shoulders. After a moment he noticed her shouting.

"Oh, no!" he said matter of factly, not even turning around. "She's dead. I hit her through the heart. I

never miss.”

“Nooooo!” howled Elena.

The mage ignored her. Instead he began carefully scanning the barn, using some kind of magic. He strode over to where Alyx lay and pulled her out of the straw. Alyx hung limply from his hand, eyes wide with terror, hands clutched to her mouth.

“Ahh!” he said as if he had received a revelation. “This is your little girl, isn’t it? My brother said you would do anything for her.”

“Yes,” said Elena, still shocked by his callous killing of Fanchette. “Leave her unharmed and I will submit willingly to anything you wish.”

He looked down at Alyx and shrugged in a slightly bemused fashion.

“Great!” he said. He tucked her under his arm and came back to Elena.

“Only I don’t want her to see,” said Elena. “She’s just a child.”

“Do you think I’m a fool?” said Lev. “She’ll just run away while I’m distracted.”

He plumped Alyx down in the straw beside Elena. Alyx’s body was limp, eyes closed. Elena rolled frantically over and peered in her face. She seemed to simply be asleep.

“Now,” said Lev, settling down beside them. He was writing on his hand again and whispering.

Then they heard voices outside.

“Oh, what now?” growled Lev. He stung Elena again so that she could not move and, tucking Alyx under one arm, seized Elena around the waist with another. “Come on! Let’s get out of here!”

“Who’s in there?” shouted a voice outside.

Lev threw himself forward. Then they were flying, diving out the door.

They knocked someone over as they came through the door and flashed past a couple of other figures. Then they were out and gliding through the cool damp air. The moonlight and mist gave everything a strange glow. Out of sight of the barn, they dropped to the ground. Lev was an outlander mage and even a powerful one had to use his power sparingly. Unlike the life spirit, outlander magical powers could run out.

Lev began to stride along, carrying Alyx and dragging Elena, still trussed up, floating behind him on a string. He started to hum a cheerful little tune. Elena’s eyes searched for people to call for help but they met no one on that lonely coastal road. They traveled thus until the sun began to rise red in the misty morning.

Suddenly as they turned a bend in the road a man in a long green robe stood before them. The sea breeze rustled his long fair hair. The ruby morning sun made his pale high-cheeked face ruddy.

A Tari! Elena’s heart cried out for joy.

“Where are you taking Elena?” said the Tari.

“What’s it to you?” sneered Lev.

“She has a destiny to fulfill with Wolf Madraga,” said the Tari.

“Oh, go to hell,” sneered Lev. He threw a shock of power at the mage.

The power hit him with an audible thud but it had absolutely no effect. The man’s green eyes were amused.

“What the…” cried Lev, his jaw dropping.

The Tari mage lifted his hand and made the tiniest of movements with his fingers.

Lev crashed unconscious to the ground.

Elena fell with him but she was fully awake, and the moment she recovered from the shock of falling, she started wriggling toward Alyx, who was lying under Lev's arm. As she wriggled the ropes fell away from her. By the time she'd reached Alyx she was free. She pulled her child out from under the arm of the sleeping Lev and checked her. Nothing seemed broken.

A pair of legs in a green robe stood just above Elena.

"Please wake her," cried Elena. "Is she well?"

"She is," said the man, and in a moment Alyx was squirming in Elena's arms, hugging her with little cries of fright.

When Elena had calmed her down the Tari spoke again. "You must return to Wolf Madraga."

"What?" cried Elena. "Why? I hate him."

"Nonetheless you have a destiny to fulfill and we will see that you fulfill it. We will not let you turn it aside. You must bear a child to him. That child will save Ermora from destruction."

"Why?" cried Elena. Alyx began to cry again but Elena was too outraged to hide her anger even for Alyx's sake. "Who says I must do this?"

"It was prophesied at your birth," said the man. "The life spirit itself chose you for this role."

"I don't believe it," cried Elena. "The life spirit would not do such a poisonous thing."

"You have no choice. I am returning you to Wolf Madraga. Face your responsibility graciously. It is a vital one."

"No! I refuse!" shouted Elena. She scooped up Alyx and began to run.

Then suddenly the light was different. She was waking up on a bed, with strong morning sun shining cruelly in her eyes. She was in a tower room, a familiar room, back in the women's quarters, and Wolf Madraga stood in the doorway looking at her.

"No!" She screamed with all her strength, as if willing the sound of her voice to carry her far away from all this relentless reality.

But it didn't.

What was it that made her give up hope of escaping? Was it the Tari man who told her she was to be forced to stay with Wolf Madraga and who had men returned her to him with such devastating ease? Was it the thought of Lev Madraga with all his power and callousness still out there somewhere wanting her? Was it the terrible memory of her comrade-in-arms, Fanchette, staked to the wall with that scythe? What was it that made her submit?

For four days Elena shut herself in her room and would not see anyone, not even Alyx. She sat in a corner on the floor with her face in her knees. At first she was screaming inside as her entire being recoiled from reality, like warm flesh recoils from ice. She prayed to Eldene to help her, but he was just a ghostly memory. What could he do? That was the most painful reality of all.

As time went on, the desolate facts reached her just as the cold of ice finally seeps into flesh and freezes it. She was trapped. She must stop trying to find the way out and learn to lie still and accept it. Best to forget Eldene and all the hope he carried. She was destined to be just a body after all.

When she came to this conclusion, she wept long and hard. How to bear this reality?

Somewhere in that time she found the letter from Son-nette Mori in the bosom of her gown. She

unfolded it with hands that were weak from lack of food and read it again and again. At first it was only for Sonnette's praise that she read it. The idea that she had done well so far gave her some comfort.

Then, on the fourth day, the other words of the letter suddenly seemed to spring out at her, and blocked out all other thought. With them, Sonnette had shown her a way to deal with an unbearable situation. If she must entertain Wolf Madraga, she would not sell herself cheap.

At midday she called for her women to come and bathe and dress her. She had her body oiled and scented and arrayed herself in her finest gown and jewels. Then she kissed Alyx and sent for Wolf Madraga.

When he came she kneeled before him and begged his pardon for escaping. Mirayans liked obedience.

Then she said, "I could escape again if I wished."

"The Tari would stop you," he said.

"They can bring me back. But I could escape again and again. You know it is true. I will always be able to undermine the loyalty of your servants."

He sighed deeply. He knew it was true. None of the servants who came into contact with her could be trusted to stay loyal.

"I could threaten you. I could treat you like Scarvan did. I could take Alyx. Don't make me do it that way."

"I am willing to make a bargain with you," said Elena. "Under this bargain I shall never try to escape again. I shall willingly become your wife in every sense of the word. I shall run your household, bear your children and see that your servants are loyal to us both together."

She looked up at him and their eyes met. His were tired, but she could see hope in them.

"What is it that you want in return?" he said.

"A peace treaty with the Mori."

Chapter 27

In the morning the Tari mages turned themselves into hawks and scoured the land all around the Jika forest for some sign of Illynya. They overflew the Mi-ryan camp several times and reported that all was quiet there. The Mirayans had made no move either to go or to attack.

They couldn't find Illynya anywhere.

"If she is still here she must be avoiding us. She would be able to feel our presence," said Syndal.

"Perhaps she has returned to Penterong," suggested Tarapan.

"I hope they have let her in and are caring for her," said Syndal anxiously. "I hope it is that and not that something terrible has happened to her." She decided that she must return to Penterong to see if she could find her. She changed herself into a bird and flew off.

"Do you think they will exile you nine from Ermora," asked Yani watching Syndal go.

"I cannot say," said Tarapan. "It would seem an unnecessarily harsh punishment. None of us actually

swore not to leave Ermora. Not like the older people.”

He did not seem terribly worried. He was still excited by yesterday’s experiences. Yani took heart. She would ask him for help. It was now or never.

“Perhaps you could come and help me rescue my sister Elena before you go back to Penterong. It will be much easier than yesterday’s fight.”

“It will be a pleasure,” smiled Tarapan.

As the search for Ilynya continued, the Seagani had been climbing the narrow path to the top of the valley carrying their wounded. By midmorning they were all ready to march. Spirits were high. For the first time they walked without fear and as they walked, they sang hymns to Nezhrus, Earth Mother, men and women singing alternate verses.

“Should we not talk with the Mirayans?” Yani asked Duprey and Brek as they set off.

“By all means,” said Brek. “I just think it would be better to do so after we get all these people to safety in Northern Seagani. The Horse Seagani have a fortress two days walk from here, and by the time we reach it, we shall be well within their lands.”

The column had only been traveling for half an hour when Tarapan appeared at Yani’s side.

“A small group of horsemen has come out of the Mi-ryan camp,” he said. “They are carrying a white flag. What does that mean?”

“It’s the Mirayan flag of peace,” Yani told him. “It means they have come to make some kind of truce. Let’s go back and meet them.”

The group of horsemen carried a message from Vladek Serranus, offering to meet Yani and the Seagani leaders in a neutral place near the Circle of Power.

“It’s a trap,” hissed Duprey in Yani’s ear. “Vladek Serranus has no more honor than a rat. Let us ignore him.”

“I think they mean to delay us while they bring up more troops. Let us say no,” said Brek.

“Do you really want the risk of Vladek Serranus coming into the the Horse Seagani’s lands after you?” said Yani. “Raynar will hardly thank you for that. Anyway the place is good for us.”

“Yani, don’t do it,” begged Duprey. “It’s not safe.”

“I would prefer to hear both sides of this argument and to try and bring about some sort of peace,” said Tarapan sternly. “It is the Tari way.”

Yani nodded. It did seem the wisest action. Perhaps they could build some kind of beginning out of this wretched situation.

“Why don’t you continue going ahead?” she told the Seagani. “Some of our people can stay to help you. The rest shall go back for the parley. We can catch you up easily afterward.”

“Very well,” agreed Brek reluctantly. “Duprey, will you go with her to represent us?”

Duprey looked daggers at Brek before he nodded his agreement. Yani was afraid to ask what the problem was, especially in front of Tarapan. The Tari would be shocked enough when they found out about the killing of Georgi Serranus.

After some more negotiations with the Mirayan messengers it was agreed that Yani and Duprey would bring two Tari mages and ten ordinary warriors to support them while the Mirayans would have a phalanx of mages and ten foot soldiers in their party.

“Tarapan, do you think we should have an extra mage in attendance, hidden inside the Circle of

Power?” said Yani as the heralds rode away.

“I think that is fine idea,” smiled Tarapan. He handed Yani the reins of his horse and reaching into the air, became a bird and flew away.

The parley had been set for midday. A hot, white noon silence had fallen over the grass plain by the time Yani, Mathaman, Syndal and their troop of foot soldiers approached the place where the stone circle lay.

The Mirayans were already there. Vladek Serranus and Captain Callus sat on rough-hewn chairs under a canopy, drinking from silver goblets. A silver wine jug and more goblets sat on an oak chest before them.

“There is nothing but iron in that chest,” said Mathaman. “Weapons probably. But they could not pull them out without our noticing. I’m sure it’s safe. If there were any danger no doubt Tarapan would have come back to us by now.”

Nonetheless Jikary turned himself into the shape of a hawk and circled the valley, checking that there was nobody hidden in the grass. The whole troop of them rode after him just for good measure. The only other hiding place here was the Circle of Power, which was no use to the Mirayans.

When Yani was finally satisfied that no ambush was planned, they rode down into the valley.

Duprey’s spirits seemed very low. Yani assumed he had few hopes for anything being won from this parley.

“Don’t worry,” she said to him. “I’m sure we shall achieve something here.” Duprey simply shook his head glumly.

After they had dismounted, Serranus came out from under his canopy. When she held out her hand in greeting, he did not take it. He was stiff and grim and did not meet her eyes. It was to be expected—they had executed his brother. He addressed her as lady. No doubt he was offended by her gender. Remembering various stories she had heard about Mirayans and women in authority, she hoped it would not affect the parley. Good thing they had brought Duprey!

The men-at-arms and mages waited near the Circle of Power. Yani and Duprey followed the two Mirayans under the canopy. It was only now that the brutal truth was revealed as Serranus said bluntly, “We are seeking nothing more than justice for the Seagani massacre of our people at Olbia.”

“Massacre!” Yani stared at Duprey in shock. He looked at his feet. A horrible feeling came over her.

“You must at least hand over the ringleader, Monteak, to us,” continued Serranus. “We demand that he be hung for the murder of all those innocent women and children.”

“Duprey, what is this?” cried Yani, shuddering as if she had received a physical blow.

“Sir, the Tari had no part in this massacre. If Yani Tari had been in Olbia I doubt it would have happened,” said Duprey. “Will you excuse us for a moment please?”

He took Yani’s arm, led her aside and in as few words as possible told her of the attack on Reecah and the results.

“Things got out of control. People wanted blood. They... I’m sorry, Yani.”

“Sweet life!” gasped Yani. “Sweet life.” She covered her face with her hands.

“I’m sorry Yani. We should have told you before now. But we need your help.”

“Damn you, Duprey!” hissed Yani. “How could you let me come into this without telling me?” She

turned away from him.

“I begin to understand why my ancestors washed their hands of you outlanders,” she muttered between clenched teeth.

“Yani, we need you!” said Duprey. “Don’t abandon us now. These people will kill us. All of us. And many of the Seagani are innocent. They had left the city before the massacre began.”

They are innocent but only by accident, thought Yani bitterly. She remembered how it had been when she was still in Olbia, how hard it had been to hold them back from violence. Could she honestly believe that they would not have taken part in the massacre had they been there? She knew she could not. Was there any honor in people? Everything she had believed about the Seagani being the victims was suddenly called into question. Now which side had the right? Which cause was just? A wave of despair engulfed her.

“Yani, let us go back and finish the parley.”

“Why are we even bothering?” snapped Yani angrily. “With us on your side you can do anything you want. Perhaps you’d like us to kill them for you. By the life spirit, Duprey, I’m of half a mind to let them have all of you, and I’m certain the others would agree with me.”

“Then you will simply cause more innocent deaths,” said Duprey with dignity. “Monteak is already dead and Brek had no part in the massacre and never would have.”

“And did you take part in this, Duprey? How many did you kill?” cried Yani. The betrayal of his not telling her hurt the most. She knew it was unworthy of a Tari to feel so, but it was still true.

“I did not kill anyone,” said Duprey. “I tried to save people. You may believe me or not as you wish. I feel as guilty as the rest of them. I know it was wrong not to tell you.”

Yani stared at the ground, unable to think. Her heart was full of angry disappointment and humiliation at being played for a fool once again. Had this man ever seen her as more than a useful weapon?

“Please, Yani! Just help us get to safety,” whispered Duprey. “If you don’t, our blood will be on your hands.”

Somehow his begging made her desire to strike out all the stronger.

Suddenly there was a shout from the direction of the Circle of Power.

She looked up and saw a figure standing there. It was Illynya! Mathaman and Jikary were running toward her.

“Yani?” whispered Duprey.

The relief of seeing Illynya lightened the burden on Yani’s heart and reminded her of her duty to the life spirit. Humiliation and the desire to punish were small, dishonorable emotions and to act upon them would certainly be wrong. Duprey was right. She could not cause more innocent deaths by abandoning the Seagani now. She smiled and waved at Illynya, who was too intent on speaking to the other Tari to notice her. Then she turned.

“Very well,” she said to Duprey with a voice still tense with anger. “Let us see what we can save from this disaster.”

She turned and went back to the two Mirayans.

“I apologize, sirs,” she said. “I was uninformed of this massacre. But Monteak is dead—”

Suddenly a scream made her spin round. Illynya had her arm around Jikary’s neck and... Where was Mathaman?

Strong hands grabbed her from behind. There was a flash of burning red as the Seagani warriors

were engulfed by a fireball. They screamed, ran and burned. Another fireball blasted at them.

Yard fought. She twisted forward and with all her strength threw the man holding her over her head. Before she could draw her sword, there were more on her.

Chaos—shouting and men running everywhere. Duprey was already down. She struggled against the five, no six men who had her pinned.

“Good!” shouted Serranus, standing over them. “Vile witch. Now you shall see what happens to those who attack their masters.”

His face twisted with hatred, he stepped forward and hit her across the face with his gauntleted fist so savagely that she was thrown back and those holding her momentarily loosened their grip on her. Though her head rang with the blow, Yani twisted and turned and kicked, managing to drag herself away from them. For a moment she was free and then a great mass of troops fell on her, hitting and kicking her so that she fell. She hit the ground and rolled, trying to protect her head, but a boot came toward her face—

A flash of blue light. A nerve-shattering stream of pain. A hard-faced mage leaning over her, his hand on her head. A cold iron manacle lay around her neck.

“That’s enough. She’ll live,” said a voice. Then the mage was gone.

“So you thought you could be a man, did you?” the voice continued sneeringly. “Now you know better.”

“You let us go,” shouted Duprey from somewhere nearby. “We have powerful friends.”

“Powerful friends, eh! I don’t think so. This one’s an outcast. The Tari will be happy to be rid of her.”

Serranus leaned over her and spat. Something warm and damp landed on Yani’s cheek.

A woman spoke nearby. Serranus’s face disappeared abruptly. Illynya’s face swam into view above her. “You demon!” she shouted. “How does it feel to suffer? I will never be clean again because of you. Never.” Her face was mad with hatred. “I hope the Mirayans hurt you.”

How could you, Yani wanted to say, but when she moved her mouth it was agony. Everything was foggy and full of red pain, but still she could see Serranus leaning over Illynya’s shoulder.

She saw the knife in his hand, saw him lift it, tried to shout out. It thudded into the side of Illynya’s neck and suddenly Yani couldn’t see for the warm wet redness all over her face.

“Three down!” shouted Serranus.

Tied up on the grass nearby, Duprey could see the burned bodies of their warriors lying twisted on the charred ground. He could see the two young Tari mages down in the trampled grass near the Circle of Power. They were manacled in iron witch manacles and above each of them stood a man holding a loaded crossbow. Surely they weren’t going to shoot Tari! Why didn’t the other one come out of the Circle and help them?

He couldn’t see Yani. Was she still alive? They were speaking to someone on the ground. Desperate to reach her, he struggled with his captors and got kicked hard in the guts. As he lay there gasping with pain, he saw the two crossbowmen shoot at the young mages sitting on the ground.

Suddenly a great crack of lightning seemed to burst the world asunder. A violent wind wailing with human voices screamed across the clearing. Duprey’s captors were torn away from him and he too was flung head over heels through the grass.

He had only one thought in his mind. Yani. He dug his toes in among the flattened grass tussocks and as the wind dropped, he pushed himself along the ground with his bound feet toward where she must be.

He still couldn't see her. White-clad figures were gathered all around her. Others were crouched on the ground screaming with tears and anguish over the bodies of the young mages.

Someone was shouting. He recognized him. Tarapan! He was shaking the shoulders of a Tari woman and yelling, screaming at her while she stared at him with a face ghastly with shock.

“Yani!” Duprey called. “Yani!”

Tarapan noticed Duprey and letting go of the now weeping woman, leapt over to him.

“Yani!” cried Duprey.

“It's all right,” said Tarapan, kneeling down and gently taking Duprey in his arms. “Yani at least is alive.” He cradled Duprey against his chest and cupped his face. Duprey felt the golden warmth of healing magic seeping in to him.

“But the other three...” continued Tarapan. “They wanted to teach her a lesson. And then it was too late. The young ones are dead.”

Tarapan began to sob bitterly.

Chapter 28

Strange music. A beautiful Tari lady riding on a big white stag, its gold bridle jingling as it trotted along. The lady stopped and turned in the saddle, beckoning at him. She wore a mask of lyre birds' feathers. How did he recognize the feathers?

Strange music. Stranger musicians. Some kind of pointy-nosed rabbit was playing its long thin nose like a pipe. No, there were two of them. One was rose colored. Also a huge frog—its supple skin dappled with deep green and yellow, wearing a golden crown. It was playing on a pipe that let out deep croaking notes. Beside it a big hopping mouse in a gorgeous red and blue velvet coat played yet another pipe. The music was haunting and sweet, like precious memories of childhood.

Around and around this animal band flew little birds twittering their bright songs in tune to the pipes. Up above he could hear skylarks too, but when he looked up he could not see them, for the ceiling was shadowy.

He danced hand in hand with the lyre bird. Its tall tail feathers swept the ceiling as they paraded elegantly about to the music. He wore the colors of the house of Madraga, just like he had as a fighting mage for the last two years. Except that he wasn't wearing mage's robes but a grand court outfit with a coronet on his head. Highly illegal. Sweet Mir, there'd be hell to pay for this.

“What troubles, my duke Wolf?” asked the lyre bird, pirouetting gracefully.

“Duke Wolf? I'm not Duke Wolf! I'm Ezratah Karanus!”

There was a sound like the cracking of a whip. Suddenly a firebird came sweeping through the room like a comet, its long, fiery red-and-gold tail blazing out behind it. It separated the light from the darkness.

It rained rose petals and sparkling stars, and the sweet smell of briars was everywhere.

With a flick of his hands he made illusions for the admiring lady. Visions of Miraya—the land. His

home at Vaskom. The snow was deep and the slaves in their colorful holiday clothing stumped sturdily through it as the wolves howled way up in the mountains. Oh, the whispering, whispering, whispering snow.

“Where was Duke Wolf Madraga born? Show me that place.”

“Alia? I’ve never been there, lady. They say it is something like—”

There was the crack of a whip and the firebird flew past. Suddenly he was alone in a cool green darkness, with only the sound of frogs and water like diamonds dropping from his hands and...

Then he woke up and knew for certain that someone had been in his mind.

The thought was so horrible that he sat up quickly. Something sharp dug into his groin. He pawed at himself and found that he was naked, save for a little ring of prickly leaves around his penis.

He pulled off the leaves fast as he could, scratching himself abominably in the process. Oh, the pain!

He wrapped his arms around his knees. His nakedness, the feeling that someone had been in his mind, the holly; he felt vulnerable. Violated.

But who and why? He could not quite remember how he had got here. Something to do with a rainstorm?

He looked around. It was a very strange room. The walls were made of great curving wooden pillars and between them he could see some darker crumblier substance, it might even be earth. It was an odd, irregular shape, with curving walls. The pillars probably met somewhere above his head, but it was a long way up and very shadowy. Here at his level, pale silver shafts of light were streaming through some kind of opening in the wall to his left.

In the background he could hear a kind of whispering like dry leaves falling. Did he hear piping music in the distance? Or was that just a memory? Carefully he stood up. His feet sank into the soft mossy floor. He walked silently toward the source of the light. Halfway across the room he came across his clothes and his pack—they were clean and dry, spread out neatly on the ground. He dressed quickly, but somehow it didn’t make him feel less vulnerable. His genitals still stung from holly scratches and someone had been in his mind.

He knelt down and stuffed everything in his pack. Then he went toward the light source until he reached the wall below it.

It was set a long way up in the wall. He could probably reach it with magic. But did he dare use...

Suddenly something nudged against the back of his legs. He yelped like a fool and spun around.

A little white fawn, no bigger than a small dog, skittered away on tiny alarmed hooves. Across the room it stopped and looked at him. It was so white it almost shone. It had two little golden hornlettes between its huge velvety ears. Its face was soft and its eyes huge and dark. He thought he saw some kind of intelligence in those eyes. The fawn looked at him meaningfully, then it trotted a few paces and looked back again. Was he supposed to follow it? After it had repeated this looking and stopping several times, Ezratah did follow it. It led him to a staircase that somehow he hadn’t noticed before.

They both ran up the stairs and ran up them without hesitation. The staircase curved around the inside of the building, and as it grew higher it became enclosed on both sides so that soon he was climbing a narrower and narrower flight of stairs. There must be rooms, he thought, but he could see no doors. The whole place was lit with pale crystalline lights set in the outer wall, and the walls seemed to be made of one single piece of wood.

It was as if he was inside a tree, but it was enormous, bigger than the biggest fortress he had ever been in. He had lost sight of the fawn by then, but he could hear its little feet pattering away somewhere

ahead of him.

What was this place? He kept climbing and then suddenly a door opened right beside him. A figure appeared. “Quick,” it whispered. “This way.”

It was a woman. A lovely Tari woman. He was certain he had never seen her before, which seemed strange since he could remember so little. Flowers were bound into her hair. She smelled deliciously of jasmine.

“I’m here to help you get away,” she hissed.

“What...?”

“There are some who wrongly brought you into Ermora. They mistook you for another man. I shall help you to get home. Quickly.”

Suddenly it was all clear. Shuddering, he remembered the gorge and the woman with the bird-claw hands.

The lady took his hand in hers. Her skin was soft and delightful to touch. The scent of jasmine enveloped him as she moved close.

Then they were outside, running down some stairs. It was night and the air smelled freshly of dew. Somewhere crickets were chirruping. His head felt wonderfully clear—finally free of strange illusions.

Soon they were out of the shadows and onto an area of smooth grass.

It was quite easy to see here in the bright moonlight. The lady turned and smiled at him. How charming she looked.

At this he shook himself.

Charming did not mean harmless. Could he trust her?

Following her across the grass seemed the best idea for the moment. He didn’t even know how long he had been in this place.

He looked back to see what the building he had left looked like. As he did his eyes caught sight of the valley below and he was transfixed. Out there on a smooth plain of grass dotted with trees and silvered by the light of a huge full moon was a building unlike any he had ever seen before. At the bottom it was rough and craggy like an outcrop of rock, but four towers jutted from that outcrop, two thick ones coming out diagonally and another two very thin ones rising up tall between them. They looked like nothing so much as the petals and stamens of a gigantic flower, but they were definitely made of something grayish. Ezratah could see it gleaming in the moonlight. What was it... metal? Stone?

The huge full moon hung directly between the two inner towers as if suspended. The effect was so breathtaking, he barely noticed the small figures dancing on the grass below.

“Come on!” hissed the lady in front of him.

“Is this what Ermora really looks like?” he asked, still marveling.

“Yes. Yes. Come along!”

She pulled him along while he stared wonderingly back at the building. Then suddenly they went between some bushes and came to the mouth of small cave.

“Good,” she muttered. “The Guardian is gone. Come on.”

“What’s this?” he asked, worried by the darkness of the opening.

“It’s to help you get home. A side entrance, but it will do,” she said.

“What? Like a Circle of Power?”

“Something like that.”

She smiled an oddly secretive smile at him and before he could protest, pulled aside a hanging and dragged him into the cave.

His first impression was of a huge space that went on forever. His second was of whispering.

“What’s that noise?”

“The life spirit,” said the young woman. “It flows through here as a river would.”

So much for a sensible answer.

The cave was full of shadows and soft lights—little stubby candles were everywhere on the floor and in niches in the walls. Woven mats dotted the cave floor. He had the impression there were people lying on the earth-ern floor sleeping, but he could not be sure.

“Now lie down and wait. Just open yourself to what is to come. This way is a bit less comfortable than the Circle of Power, and I’ve no idea how it will affect an out-lander. If you feel it is too unpleasant for you, call for me. I will be just outside.”

“But what is your name?”

She smiled at him, her eyes full of amusement. It unnerved him.

“Jindabyne,” she said. “That is my name. Just call out Jindabyne if it’s too unpleasant. Make sure you call loudly so that I can hear you. Now farewell! And happy moon festival!”

He felt too vulnerable to lie down while she was in the room. He waited till she had left.

Once he did, the whispering increased and then he felt a tingling on his skin. The Circle of Power had felt something like this. He was not particularly alarmed when the tingling turned to pins and needles, though it was unpleasant and he hoped it would not last long. The noise worried him more. The whispering increased slowly until it was like the rushing sound of a fast river.

Then as he lay there looking at the candles, he began to have a disturbing vision. A great beam of light snaked like a river toward him. He knew it was not real and yet it was so vivid. He was lying in its path. Then it was flowing all around him. The cavern was obliterated by the golden light and the rushing sound. The tingling pins and needles got stronger.

“There is nothing wrong,” he thought a little desperately. “This must be the transport...”

Very scared, he lay there with his eyes wide open. Was he moving somewhere? He couldn’t tell. There was nothing to see but golden light that brushed against his skin.

Someone was shaking Marigoth’s leg. With difficulty Marigoth fought free of sleep, as if fighting off a sticky cloth. She realized hazily that there was magic involved and with that realization she managed to come fully awake.

How dare some one bespell her to sleep!

“Little girl! Little girl!”

“Wynna,” she hissed. Marigoth had not seen her for a couple of days. “You old hag! Where did you go?”

“Come! You must come, little girl! There will be trouble for my baby! Trouble, trouble, always trouble! Quickly. Quickly. You must help. An outlander! An out-lander! Trouble, trouble.”

Marigoth sat up. Everything felt heavy. A sleep spell. Why?

“Why should I help you, you rotten old hag?” she muttered. But she got up and went after Wynna, half-intending to take the opportunity to catch hold of her and search her mind. There was no sign of Gunidah in the outer room. The place did seem very empty. Hadn’t there been some talk of a moon festival? Was that why the sleep spell? Of all the outrageous...

How dare they?

The spell had left Marigoth sluggish. Wynna was more agitated than usual and too fast for Marigoth. By the time they had reached the hole into the outside world that agitation had communicated itself clearly to Marigoth. She no longer had any thoughts of mindsearching Wynna. Something was wrong!

Outside it was dark and crickets sang, but a bright full moon in the sky cast a silver light over everything.

From a distance came sounds of singing and dancing. Everyone must be over at the gathering hall.

Marigoth couldn’t help stopping briefly to admire the way the moonlight fell silvery through the trees and onto the grass, but Wynna would have none of that. She ran up to Marigoth, yanked her hair and darted away before Marigoth could grab her. “Quickly, quickly,” she cried. “The outlander! The outlander!”

She scampered away through the trees and half-afraid of losing her again Marigoth ran after her.

The ground began to rise and then suddenly they were at the mouth of a cave.

It was one of the openings to the Spirit Cave.

Things became worse. The pins and needles turned to a numbness.

The light was entering him! The edges of his body were blurring. Blurring? It had begun at his feet with a kind of pressure and now it was rolling slowly but surely up his body, leaving a warm feeling where it had penetrated. He felt like it was dissolving him and yet... that wasn’t possible. It must be an illusion. He tensed and curled over into a fetal position, but it didn’t make any difference. The light kept coming into him. He didn’t want this to happen. He didn’t like this. He couldn’t see his feet or legs or hips.

No! Stay calm. Don’t be a coward. He was terrified! Stay calm. You don’t want her to think you’re afraid.

His body was disappearing. The light—he could feel, could see the light coming up through his torso, illuminating the dark cavity of his chest and... he didn’t want it to come through to his head. Not there. No! No! No!

“Jindabyne!” he cried. “Help me!”

He struggled desperately to push the vision away, to push the light out but as if stimulated by his resistance, it surged forward.

Boom! A blast of light filled his head and brain and mind and soul and smash! It burst through him, burst him asunder, screaming like a burning fireball, engulfing him with terror and pain. He lost control and screamed and screamed and screamed as he had never screamed before.

He screamed for Jindabyne again and again. Then he screamed for Mir. The pain stopped but the terror didn’t. It went on and on.

He struggled to regain control, managed to stop screaming.

Oh Mir! He couldn’t feel anything. He couldn’t see his arms and legs. Oh Mir, Mir! He had cracked open—he was melting—he was going to die.

“Jindabyne,” he screamed. “Jindabyne. Jindabyne, help me, help me.”

But no help came.

He managed to get control of himself.

He couldn't see or hear anything. He couldn't see or feel his body. Was he dead? How long had he been screaming for? He was no longer mindless with terror yet somehow this was worse. He had no sense of time and place. It was all just golden light within—it was him and he was it.

He was dead. He must be. But if that was so why was he still aware? Thoughts were running around in his head like terrified mice. And something was changing still. He felt something slipping away. It was like falling asleep, only worse, because somehow he knew he really wouldn't exist once...

He struggled to stay conscious, clutched at it.

“Jindabyne, Jindabyne,” he screamed again. “Help me.”

He was a little dark fist shape in this sea of light. He must focus on that little fist. Otherwise he really would die.

How small the little fist looked in this giant sea of light. How unimportant. And this was Ezratah. Mirayan, aristocrat, man of honor. This was all he amounted to. All those things meant nothing within this sea of golden light.

Regret for all the things he had done or left undone filled him: the limited, self-seeking way he had loved parents and sisters who deserved more; the acts of cruelty, big and small, that he would not have wished enacted against himself; acts of oppression to the bondserfs; acts of meanness toward his school friends and regimental colleagues; acts of exploitation against the natives—how he had left his mistress! Of course she had cried when he had handed her over to one of his friends. He felt her hurt and her shame at being treated like a thing. He felt the hurt of all of them. So much hurt. Like a weeping wound full of salt.

And his attempt to enslave Yani. How small, how malicious had been his actions that day. All founded on hurt pride. Weak! Ugly! Petty! How hateful he was and had always been.

And all the feelings that had made him act so: Suddenly he saw those feelings for what they were—rationalizations of nasty emotions. All the things he had thought mattered, the family estate, the family honor, his Mirayanness, his manhood, his religion—how utterly meaningless they were. Nothing was valuable but this endless golden light. He had thought he was the top of the tree. Now he saw there was no tree, only this endless golden lake. He had been wrong about everything. Agony filled him, not the agony of body but the far worse agony of mind, as everything that had mattered to him peeled away.

Oh Mir! This death was going on forever. Every moment he was losing pieces of himself and yet this torment, this feeling of his own worthlessness, went on and on and on. Now he wanted death—wanted oblivion. He was nothing and had no right to live. But still the light moved around him soft and whispering and he, Ezratah, a desolate black cinder of a man, lay there surrounded by its beauty. Oh Mir! What if this was death? Maybe it would never end!

“No!” cried Marigoth, pulling up in front of the opening. “What are you playing at?”

Wynna pushed at her. “In here, in here, quickly! An outlander in the Spirit Cave. Trouble, trouble. Quickly! Go and get him.”

“This is some plot of your brother's to keep me here, isn't it?” cried Marigoth. She didn't want to go in there. She didn't know how it would affect her. What if she did get stuck in some kind of blissful dream?

Wynna pushed her. They struggled at the cave entrance.

“Quick! Quick!”

“Why don’t you go yourself?...”

Then she heard a scream of terror and anguish inside the cave cry out, “Jindabyne!”

“Jindabyne! Jindabyne!” it shouted. A man’s voice, and not a Tari.

Surely it couldn’t be... Ezratah?

All fears forgotten, Marigoth charged through the opening and into the cave. She found herself in a warm, dim space. As suddenly as if a door had been flung open, golden light flooded over her like beautiful music, and she felt herself full of the most perfect song.

The huge dim space was full of candlelight. It was warm and beautiful; a soft singing filled the space. The life spirit. All her life it had been there whispering in the background, and now she saw it up close. It was as wonderful as...

No, it was more wonderful than she had imagined. For the first time it truly touched her and she could see and feel everything about it. She wanted to sink into it, to know oneness, to become the golden light, to become part of everything.

An animal howl of terror cracked like a black lightning bolt through the golden haze.

She saw the big cave again, saw people lying around and a little way off saw someone writhing and struggling on the floor.

Ezratah!

It was him!

He stood out starkly in the golden light, the only really definite shape in here. Marigoth moved toward him. The bliss of being in the Spirit Cave made her languid and slow-moving. How deliciously the golden light smoothed against her skin. She wanted to melt into it like honey melting into honey, into joy, bliss and freedom. But she had a purpose here. She must not let herself melt yet however much she wanted to.

Then suddenly someone rose out of the floor before her. She knew it was an elemental—the life force given shape. Yet at the same time it was...

“Grandmother!” cried Marigoth, knowing full well this was not her grandmother. Marigoth was filled with love for the grandmother/elemental and for the first time in her life she did not feel embarrassed by the soppieness of the emotion.

The figure reached out to Marigoth. She clasped the hand and their bodies blended—hand melting into hand. And where the blending came it felt wonderful. A feeling of being fresh and keen and alive. The grandmother/elemental reached out its other hand, touching Marigoth’s chest, clanking against something hard like metal. Something at odds with the life spirit. Though the grandmother/elemental did not speak, Marigoth understood perfectly that it wished to take the thing away. It was a place the life force could not flow through, a hard irritating thing that would keep her from communing completely. It stuck out like a piece of burnt wood in honey. Yes, she did want to be rid of it. It was in the way.

But as the elemental reached forward to take it, Mari-goth was suddenly afraid. She cringed back, clutching at it.

“I don’t want to,” she cried. “It will hurt.”

The grandmother/elemental understood her fear. It stroked her face with her grandmother’s hands and looked at her kindly with her grandmother’s eyes. Mari-goth saw that she must let that hard thing go. She had let it rest there for too long as it was, and it would only get harder and bigger with time, cutting

more and more of her off from the life force.

“Yes,” she said, even though she was very frightened.

The grandmother/elemental took firm hold and pulled.

Marigoth howled. She felt as if her very heart was being yanked out. The force knocked her backward and she fell to the floor, clutching her chest. She felt a brief moment of emptiness then suddenly golden light washed over her. In a moment she was completely at one with the life spirit. She saw her grandmother/elemental smiling down at her, holding a black thing with long spindly roots in her hand as she faded away, to become part of the light.

Suddenly she was back in a large dimly lit cave full of golden candlelight. She was winded and her mind felt tender, but was full of joy and satisfaction.

A horrible shriek of despair echoed right in her ear. Ezratah, howling, eyes blind with terror writhed just beside her.

She crawled quickly to his head. Could she wake him without harming him?

Ezratah screamed again. Please let it end!

He was nothing. Let him become nothing.

He saw a hand come down through the shining horror and clasp him. A huge face swam into view above.

The thin dark-eyed face of a child. Marigoth!

He turned his head away. He could not bear to have her see him in all his awfulness.

“Come on, Ezratah! Come back to us.”

“No!” He just wanted it to end. He did not deserve to live.

He turned his head away and closed his eyes.

“Ezratah,” she called, catching his arms firmly to shake him. But the moment she touched him she could feel his hell—an anguish that ripped like a howling desolation across him. There could be no waking him from this terror.

As he turned away from her, she put her hand on his face and made him sleep. Then she picked him up and using magic to help her, carried his unwieldy adult body in her child’s arms to the entrance of the cave.

Wynna seized the two of them.

“They will be here any moment,” she cried. “Come on. Come on. Wake up, we must run.”

“He’s in too much pain to wake.”

“Yes-yes-yes,” muttered Wynna impatiently. She seized Ezratah, slung him over her shoulder as if he was a sack of potatoes and scampered away with him.

“Stop!” cried Marigoth.

Wynna turned back briefly. “Come on,” she said. “They are coming.”

Her fear caught at Marigoth. She scampered after Wynna. She didn’t know who was coming, but if they had been the ones to put a non-Tari in the Spirit Cave they must be very cruel.

Chapter 29

Moon festivals were all very well, but there were plenty of commonplace people to celebrate it adequately. Jagamar had important things to attend to.

He slipped back to the library and took another look at the last few days' nectar dreams.

"No visions of fire," he gloated, turning over the transcripts. Not that it was conclusive proof—the fire visions had sometimes disappeared before. But it was a hopeful sign. It was only a few days ago that Elena Tari had truly become Wolf Madraga's wife, and that connection was certainly significant. Soon there would be a melded child. He did not really care much for melds, but with the right organization the meld could be used to create Tari dominance of Yarmar.

"I have done it," he murmured triumphantly. "I have saved Ermora."

What a pity no one else could know of his success yet.

The library door was flung open and Gunidah rushed in.

"Disaster!" she cried. "That crazy fool of a niece of yours has—"

The door of the library swung open again and two figures came in.

The sight of Guardians of the Spirit Cave always filled Jagamar with unease, though he admitted this to no one. What if they carried a request for attendance from the life spirit? An invitation to commune had to be accepted or people started to suspect you of wrongdoing.

He was certain that the life spirit did not know the small moral compromises that he made on its behalf. Occasionally he had wondered if it might even welcome them. The Tari ban on violence had made them weak in the world.

But melding? He could not commune now!

One of the Guardians, a woman called Tjalparra, was calm and looked straight ahead. Derrum's gaze, however, flitted all about the room and the walls.

"My, how straight everything is here," he said. "It makes my skin curl."

Derrum! Contempt relieved Jagamar's anxiety. The man was an idealistic idiot. He actually wanted the Society of Travelers resurrected.

"Worthy Guardians," he said rising and bowing in greeting. "You are welcome."

"Worthy councillor," bowed the two.

Tjalparra spoke. "The life spirit has perceived a grave disturbance in the Spirit Cave. There was one there who was not Tari and should not have been there. The name of your niece Jindabyne was spoken in this disturbance. We ask that she come and commune with the life spirit so that it may understand better what was happening. We hope you will be able to tell us where she is. As always, this is merely a request, but it is the wish of the life spirit nonetheless."

Sweet life! What had the girl done! She had become willful, but this? Was this malice to get back at him for disciplining her? It was her mother's craziness coming out in her. She would ruin everything just when he was reaching his goal. He must buy some time.

"Of course!" he said to the Guardians. "But my niece is in another part of Ermora at the moment, and I do not know exactly where."

“I hear she often is away,” said Derrum. “I’m surprised she does not miss her beloved uncle more.” He smiled at Jagamar.

There was something unpleasantly knowing about that smile. “I shall send an assistant after her,” said Jagamar. “I shall have her brought back and brought to you as soon as possible.”

“Thank you,” said Tjalparra. She bowed and turned away.

“So cooperative,” purred Derrum. “Who would have thought it?” He turned to go and then turned back. “By the way Jagamar, one of the young ones told me you had been discouraging them from melding. Why is that?”

Jagamar was suddenly aware of how easy it would be for someone who cared to do so to find out about the activities of his little Defenders. He had just never expected anyone to care enough. He must not panic. He was the Savior of Ermora. He must stay calm. By earth and air, let him live up to the task.

“I... I... don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t you? Then I’ll just have to ask around some more.”

The door closed behind him with an ominous bang.

In that moment, Gunidah turned on him: “You should have kept better control of her. Now she has ruined everything.”

Her anxiety made him feel stronger.

“Be calm,” he said in measured tones. “Tell me about this incident.”

“Kintora tells me that Jindabyne brought an out-lander—a Mirayan!—into Ermora for study. Last night that stupid creature must have put him in the Spirit Cave. What can she have been thinking of? Of course his little mind couldn’t bear it. He screamed out to her for help. It was the festival of the full moon and there were very few Guardians on duty, but the life force felt his fear and knew that he was not one of us. All kinds of people heard him screaming her name. This is a disaster, Jagamar! A disaster. She will meld with the life spirit. Soon everyone will know everything she knows. Everything!”

Jagamar did not show his shock openly, but even he was silent for a moment. Gunidah had no idea how much there was to be revealed.

“Where is the man now?” he said at last.

“He’s gone from Ermora, and that’s not the worst of it. So is Marigoth. Perhaps she is involved in this. Perhaps Jindabyne has spoken to her. You told me she was loyal, but you were too hard on her.”

Jagamar’s blood froze. What if she had spoken to Marigoth? Would she have? She had always been loyal before.

“What are we going to do?” cried Gunidah. “If she communes we may all be called to account.”

Jagamar began to recover. If Gunidah or the others melded, it would not be so bad. They didn’t know more than his tinkering with destiny. And that task was almost finished with now. But Jindabyne?

“What about Marigoth? What if she knows?”

“Do not panic,” said Jagamar. “It is quite possible she knows nothing that matters. She may just have given up and gone back to Penterong. You must return to Pen-terong and see. And if she comes back there, prevent her from coming back in.”

“But Jindabyne?”

All anxiety had disappeared from Jagamar’s face now. He was the Savior of Ermora, and the way was clear to him. Jindabyne would have to be dealt with. Luckily he’d always planned for that

contingency.

“Be calm, Gunidah. All is not lost. I know how to make sacrifices.”

“Then you can do something about her?”

“Of course,” said Jagamar. “Go now. And, sweet life, Gunidah. Try to stop acting as if you are guilty. We will get through this crisis with no problem at all.” He pushed all Derrum’s insinuations out of his mind. Derrum was not popular here in Ermora.

When Gunidah had gone, he called out for Kintora. As always she was lurking behind the door. His mind was so fixed on Jindabyne he did not notice how upset Kintora was.

“Do you know where Jindabyne is?” he demanded.

“She is hidden nearby. I warned her when all had gone bad. She wants to see you, but I told her you could not now. Has... has it ruined everything for us?”

Jagamar opened a great chest beside his reading table and took out a small carved box of Mirayan design. Taking a key from around his neck he opened the box and took out a couple of small crystals.

“No, my dear. I have everything under control. But be nice to her. We must not upset her at this point. She must leave Ermora until I have settled things down. Tell her I wish her to take you with her to one of her hiding places just outside Ermora. That way it will be easy for me to find her when all this blows over. When you get there use this.”

He held up a crystal. “You open it with your own power and make sure the spell is directed at her. Contact with her skin is the best way. Be cunning how you use it, otherwise she will resist you and it will not work.”

“I do not know what the spell is, sir,” said Kintora resentfully.

“But you soon will, my dear. Be patient. Remember you are working to defend Ermora. And do not be frightened by the spell’s effect. Jindabyne will be unconscious for a time afterward. While she is unconscious, use your pendant to summon me. Go now. You are my best assistant and I know you will do it right. Otherwise all our hopes shall be ruined.”

Chapter 30

Sunrise came golden across the scree slopes, Marigoth peered out of a gap between some rocks. Several times during the quiet night she had heard Tari flying overhead. They searched most of the night but after several passes, finding nothing, Marigoth lost her fear of them.

Wynna’s hiding place was a small cave made by a gap between several tumbled boulders. The iron-rich rock seemed to shield them from magic. It must have been the place in which Wynna had hidden earlier because it was very near her grandmother’s grave; if Marigoth got out of the cave and stood up, she could see the grave clearly.

Marigoth was waiting for Wynna. In theory the old madwoman was finding supplies and getting a message to Derrum, but Marigoth did not have high hopes. A short while ago there had been a worrying detonation of magic in the distance, but there seemed nothing much she could do at this stage but wait and see.

Ezratah crouched beside her staring silently into space, white-faced and trembling.

There was a clattering of stones. Marigoth moved back from the gap.

Wynna appeared, carrying blankets and a couple of loaves of bread. Marigoth was relieved to see that the blankets were much cleaner and fresher smelling than Wynna herself. She sat down, wrapped a blanket around herself, pulled a hunk off one of the loaves and handed it to Ezratah. He took it absently but made no attempt to eat it.

Marigoth made an exasperated sound.

“Look at him,” she said. “A perfectly good Mirayan— mean, arrogant and bossy—and your people have ruined him.”

He didn’t even react to her insults. It was very disturbing.

“Your people also,” said Wynna, who was sitting chewing another hunk of bread at the other side of the cave.

This morning she was more lucid than Marigoth had ever seen her. “Humph. So is this where you hid that other day?”

A cunning look came into Wynna’s face. “Maybe.”

Then the cunning look was replaced by a more disturbed look. She pulled a blanket over her head.

Marigoth made a disgusted noise, crawled over to Wynna’s blanketed shape and poked it.

“Did you see Derrum?” she asked. “Did you tell him?”

The old woman cringed.

“She was like a mother to us,” she whispered. “A mother! Our mother was dead. She was like a mother to Shara and me. We used to meet here.” A skinny hand snaked out from under the blanket and gripped Marigoth’s. “It wasn’t my fault. It wasn’t. He said...”

She groaned despairingly.

“You are talking about my grandmother?” asked Marigoth, without much hope. Wynna cringed away. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to say her name. I just wish you could tell me what exactly happened.”

Suddenly Wynna pulled the blanket aside and placed Marigoth’s hand on her temple. As Marigoth looked at her questioningly, she reached out shakily, picked up Marigoth’s other hand and placed it on her other temple so that Marigoth’s hands were placed in the position of a mindsearcher.

“You want me to search you. Are you sure?” asked Marigoth.

Wynna’s red-rimmed eyes were wide with fear, but she did not push Marigoth’s hands away.

Marigoth bent her head and let her inner sight travel through her body and into Wynna’s mind.

“Mathinna,” she said softly to the shuddering old woman. “Tell me about Mathinna.”

A storm was raging inside Wynna’s mind. There was noise and darkness and confused animal sounds—moaning, whining, shouting and whimpering. Old snatches of song. Faces came and went, but Marigoth could not recognize any of them. They had evil masks instead of faces, and their fingers were long and clawed. They tore away at the darkness inside of Wynna’s mind, leaving great bleeding scars. The scars were red—bloody with pain that could not be comforted. Their rawness jarred Marigoth’s nerves. All around the terrible people were digging their claws into the scars and the shrinking cringing flesh.

Suddenly there was light. Everything was still whirling and squealing, yet now she could see through the haze and noise.

A child. A child holding a man's hand. She knew the man—Jagamar. His eyes grew cruel and his nails grew long and he bit into the side of Wynna's mind with his falcon-sharp beak. There was tearing and shouting and screaming. Everything whirled around in a red haze.

Then there was light. The man was holding the hand of a child. Jindabyne, Jindabyne, Jindabyne! Jindabyne! Jindabyne! Stretching out, longing, yearning. The child looked back at Wynna with recognition but with doubt as well. Doubt and mistrust. The man said something to her and she smiled up at him with hero-worship eyes. He put something in her hand.

Marigoth was flung toward the object, focusing on it, closer, closer down, to the thing, the magic thing, the magical crystal that Jindabyne was now holding. It glowed with blue magic. Why blue? That was not Tari, but Mirayan. It was one of Jagamar's crystals.

Jagamar, JAGAMAR! JAGAMAR! JAGAMAR! JAGAMAR! YOU BASTARD, JAGAMAR!!! I WANT TO KILL

YOU! Claws were tearing at Jagamar and ripping at his smiling, villain's face. Red haze, tearing, ripping until it all came off in bloody strips revealing the bone beneath, and still he smiled and smiled and smiled, grinding, tearing, ripping, killing, Jagamar, JAGAMAR!

"Wynna! Mathinna!" cried Marigoth.

Light and suddenly Jagamar was shouting at a woman. The woman was tall and graceful and surrounded by golden light. Her face did not shift to evil. Wynna felt a sick, sad love for her. Wynna's gaze could scarcely bear to stay on her.

"It's not my fault!" screamed a voice. "It's not my fault!"

"But it is, Wynna. Mathinna came here to meet you. The place was on the scree slopes. Where you always meet Mathinna. It is your fault! Your fault!"

A black mask swam into view and a long-clawed finger dug with cruel precision into Wynna's shrinking mind.

"It is your fault. You told Jagamar you were going to meet Mathinna."

"I didn't know!" cried a voice.

"You told him!"

The vision was beginning to redden.

"Stop it. It was nobody's fault. Tell me what happened! What happened next?" Marigoth heard herself demanding. She was both outside and inside Wynna's mind at the same time.

The place is on the scree slopes. Jagamar is shouting. He wants those babies—those little children. Such dear little babies. Such a heavy burden. Surely there's no need for little children to have such a heavy burden. Jagamar is so cruel and hard. He is so hard on Jindabyne. Mathinna. Oh, Mathinna. She is like a mother, a real mother. Dear little granddaughters. Mathinna's granddaughters. Must help. I must help you and be absolved for Jindabyne. Jindabyne. Jindabyne! JINDABYNE! JINDABYNE! MY BABY!

"Focus!" cried Marigoth. "Tell me what happened."

"We are focusing. We are telling Marigoth everything. Everything. Everything."

"No, I don't want to."

"Everything."

"Tell me what happened next," ordered Marigoth. She was having difficulty not being swept away in Wynna's inner turmoil.

Jagamar and Mathinna are shouting at each other.

“You will never find them!” shouts Mathinna full of fury. “You shall not force them into some warped destiny! Even if you follow me. They are safe with friends.”

Here is Jagamar. His face keeps becoming the face of a demon. His fingers keep turning into claws. A red mist covers him, but he remains Jagamar. Always Jagamar. He turns to Jindabyne.

“Do it!” he orders.

Jindabyne’s face clenches and she throws the blue thing. All her force is behind it—all her magic. All her magic. Too much magic.

It is a Mirayan crystal. It contains a spell. An evil spell. A spell to stun Mathinna. A Mirayan spell. The life force could not be used for such a hurting spell, but it is brought to life by Jindabyne’s magic and Jindabyne is young. She panics. It wasn’t her fault! She was young! She panicked!

She puts too much force in the spell. Mathinna sees it coming and jumps aside, but she doesn’t jump far enough. The spell hits the rocks behind her. There is an explosion of light that knocks everyone off their feet. The rocks fall and roll. They must have hit Mathinna. When they sit up she is lying under the rocks and blood is spilling...

At this point Wynna began to scream and thrash, knocking Marigoth’s hands away from her temples. Marigoth reeled back, feeling like something had been pulled out of her skull. She fell to the ground and Wynna leapt up, ran screaming from the shelter, treading painfully on Marigoth’s arm as she did so. Marigoth lay on the ground, breathing hard and shaking.

Ezratah had moved. He was hunched against the side of the cave, looking at Marigoth with fearful eyes.

Marigoth sat up, rubbing her face with her hands.

“Jagamar, the man whose living place I have been staying in, the man who claimed to be helping me find someone to free my sister, Jagamar *my very own uncle*, killed my grandmother,” she told him. “Or rather he set Jindabyne...”

At the sound of the name, Ezratah let out a shriek and put his hands on his face.

“Oh, no! Not another name I can’t mention!” cried Marigoth.

The day passed. There was no sign of Wynna. Ezratah trembled and stared into space, looking dazed and sick. Sometimes for a change he shuddered. She tried insulting him. She nudged him with her foot and elbow. He hardly responded at all, which took the fun out of it all. What had happened to him in the Spirit Cave? It was such a beautiful place, and she had felt so complete within it. What had Ezratah found so terrifying? It was said that the minds of outlanders were unsuited to communion and could not blend properly with the life spirit. It must be true.

Finally, she sat down next to Ezratah to keep warm and told him of her experiences in Ermora, avoiding, of course, all reference to Jindabyne. He said nothing, but at least talking to him helped her to sort things out. She felt like a fool for falling into Jagamar’s hands, but she could not see how she could have avoided it. It was almost as if he’d known they were coming. Which meant... was he the one behind Elena’s captivity? As for finding out what had happened to Grandmother—she felt numb about it. Perhaps that was for the best. There was still Elena to rescue. She mustn’t let herself be weakened by grieving.

She had already known that Grandmother was dead. Knowing how didn’t make it any more real. Yet all day the vision of her body beneath the rock and that rich red stream of blood came unwelcome into her uncertain mind.

She heard the Tari still searching for her and peeped out once to see two young men clattering across the slopes. She recognized them from Jagamar's library. She lay there all day wondering what to do next. Wynna did not return. Not surprising really. Finally she decided that after dark she must try to get back into Ermora undetected and see if she could find Derrum. Till then she might as well try and rest. She persuaded Ezratah to lie down with her at the mouth of the cave, where the moonlight would wake her at moonrise. She was surprisingly tired.

As she lay there she became aware that her chest was sore. It must be a strained muscle. Lifting Ezratah around perhaps, though how could you strain a muscle using magic? She rubbed herself. Was that a swelling above the heart? There was another on the other side just around the nipple. What had she done to herself? An insect bite? Something she ate? She rubbed the spots for a bit but they didn't get less sore.

At last she fell asleep.

She woke knowing something was wrong. It was dark but an almost-full moon had risen. By its bright light she saw that Ezratah had gone. She could hear the clattering of rocks from the direction going away from her grandmother's grave and Ermora. Part of her said impatiently, "Let the pest go!" but some presentiment of danger made her set out in the direction of the noise.

She followed the clattering sound down the slope into the valley, where another smaller valley opened out. She could see Ezratah standing at the other end of it silhouetted against the moonlight. He seemed to be looking down at something. What? Since there was nothing but dark sky beyond him, she figured there must be a drop-off there.

He must have heard her. It was impossible to walk softly on the scree. Why didn't he look round?

"Ezratah," she called.

He did not turn. Instead he spread out his arms and threw himself forward.

Marigoth screamed and rushed to where he'd been standing. A huge drop yawned under her feet. For a moment fright made her teeter on the brink. Then she threw herself after him.

He was way ahead of her but fortunately it was a very long drop. She changed the nature of the air before her so that she fell faster. She stretched, pushed, threw herself down toward him. The ground came rushing up at her. Ezratah was just below. She grabbed at him but missed.

Suddenly blue light sprang out all around him. He stopped falling and she hurtled past him. She let out a shriek of panic as the ground flew up to shatter her.

Suddenly her arms changed into big white wings. She beat them desperately in the air and her fall slowed, then stopped. Now that she was not falling anymore, the panic left her and she remembered to change the air beneath her so that it was thicker and held her up. Clumsily flapping her wings, she floated down to the ground, which was now just below her feet. She collapsed there panting. As her fright receded, it changed to furious anger. Where was that bastard Ezratah? She was going to tell him a thing or two!

He was curled up on the ground nearby.

She got up, her wings trailing behind, and stomped over to where he lay facedown on the ground.

"What did you think you were doing, you stupid man?"

His shoulders were shaking. He was sobbing. All her hot anger turned to ice.

Jumping over the cliff was just showing off, but if Ezratah was crying, he must be in a bad way. Oh, dear! Letting her wings change back to arms, she crouched down beside him and patted him tentatively on his back.

“I am a worm,” he sobbed. “I cannot even kill myself.”

“Do you expect me to disagree?” she said bracingly. His crying made her feel like crying herself, and she wasn’t going to give into that! She felt like an idiot for jumping after him. Of course his magic had saved him at the last minute. It was almost impossible for a mage to intentionally kill himself.

He kept sobbing.

“Oh, Ezratah,” begged Marigoth. “Stop it, can’t you? What’s wrong with you?”

“I am nothing. I don’t deserve to live.”

“Well, who does, you foolish man? Life is a gift, not something we can earn. Look, Ezratah, don’t hold me to this, but you’re not so bad. You’re no worse than most, and a lot better than many. Now, please! Cheer up! We have things to do.”

He just lay there crying. She patted his back as patiently as she could, while all around the night was passing and chances of getting to Derrum were fading away. Ezratah seemed unable to stop sobbing.

“What am I going to do with you?”

“Put him to sleep!” said a woman’s voice. “That’s what you do with people in shock.”

Marigoth and Ezratah yelped, clutching each other in terror as a hooded figure stepped out of the shadows laughing ironically.

“Fear has the power to move,” she said, pushing her hood back. “I’ve been looking for you.”

It was Jindabyne.

“No,” shouted Marigoth, clutching Ezratah tighter. “You’re not taking him back there.”

“Do you recognized me, Mirayan?” said Jindabyne silkily.

Ezratah nodded. “You brought me into Ermora.”

“Nothing more?”

The question obviously puzzled Ezratah. “Nooooo.”

“Good!” said Jindabyne.

Suddenly Ezratah pushed Marigoth away.

“Run, Marigoth, run!” he shouted. He leapt at Jind-abyne, throwing out a blast of blue magic.

Jindabyne smiled and he crumpled to the ground. Marigoth sprang over to him. He was asleep.

“You should have done that much earlier,” said Jindabyne.

Marigoth turned on her. “You’re not taking him back to the Spirit Cave.”

“I never put him there in the first place,” said Jindabyne.

“I—” Jindabyne turned sharply and looked up behind her. “Quickly they’re coming.”

Now Marigoth could sense nearby magic too. “Who?”

“The other Defenders. Come on,” she lifted up Ezratah. Marigoth flung herself at the woman. “No!”

“I didn’t put him in the Spirit Cave! They did!” hissed Jindabyne. “And they will again if they catch him.” Lugging Ezratah quickly across the rocks, she made for the low scrubby bushes farther down the slope.

Marigoth wasn’t sure why she believed her, but the way Jindabyne wasn’t using magic was persuasive. She followed Jindabyne, crouching beside her in the bushes, watching as a Tari mage came

gliding toward them. He was changing the nature of the air under his feet into something harder so that he came down lightly but quickly, much as if he were sliding down a kind of spiral ramp. They could see him quite clearly in the moonlight.

Marigoth recognized him as the young friend of Jaga-mar who had been searching for her up on the slope.

“Hey!” hissed Marigoth. “How come...”

Jindabyne put her hand on Marigoth’s mouth. Another mage was coming down the cliff in much the same way. She didn’t recognize this one. The first mage was looking around among the rocks where they had just been. The second dropped down nearby and came over to the first.

“Any luck?” he asked.

“I scent magic here, and recently too,” said the first. “I knew the bitch would get us into trouble. Giving herself airs because she’s the leader’s niece.”

“Not any longer.”

“What?”

“I’ve just come from the leader. He’s fiery mad at her. Says she is no niece of his now. She’d be wise to go away and never come back.”

“Yes,” said the first mage. He stood looking at the ground for a moment.

“How bad is it?” he said suddenly. “Do you think the Guardians are going to invite everyone to meld? There are things I’ve done—”

The second mage clapped him on the shoulder. “But in a good cause, my friend. None of this weak doubting now. You need to be strong. Anyway, the leader’s great vision has come to pass. Now that woman has given in to the Mirayan, the melded child will be made soon, and everyone will recognize what a great thing we have done. Now, come on. Let’s try that way. There are trees down there. You know how she likes birds.”

Marigoth turned to Jindabyne, her mouth full of questions. “Wha...”

Jindabyne was weeping. She sobbed silently with her lip between her teeth and her hand over her eyes, but the moon shone on the tears on her cheeks.

Marigoth stared at her in amazement. Then she lifted her eyes to the heavens.

Give me strength, she silently exhorted the moon.

“What is going on here?” she hissed at Jindabyne. Is *anyone* right in the head?

Jindabyne turned away and got up. “Come on.”

She picked up Ezratak, slung him over her shoulder and, keeping as low as she could, picked her way down the hill in the opposite direction from where the Defenders had gone.

After a while they came to a bushy place where an overhanging rock made a deep shelter.

Jindabyne had barely laid Ezratak down in the shadows under the rock when Marigoth pounced on her.

“Listen you! I want to know some things! What are they talking about when they say that woman? Are they talking about my sister and Wolf Madraga? Your uncle gave her to him, didn’t he?”

“Maybe,” said Jindabyne dully.

“He used you to do it, didn’t he? Now I know where I’ve seen you before. It was Olbia, wasn’t it? You were there.”

“Perhaps,” said Jindabyne.

“How much of what happened did you make happen?”

Jindabyne shrugged.

“Stop it,” hissed Marigoth. “I want answers not ‘maybe’ and ‘perhaps.’” She seized Jindabyne’s shoulders and shook her. “Tell me! Tell me, or I scream until those others come and find us.”

Jindabyne pushed Marigoth away.

“Leave me alone,” she snapped.

Marigoth was tempted to leap on her again, but remembering what had happened to Yani, she didn’t. “You are the bird-clawed woman, aren’t you? The one who attacked Yani on the road to Olbia.”

“What if I am?” said Jindabyne.

Marigoth sat down on a rock and contemplated her thoughtfully. Jindabyne seemed hard-shelled yet she had been crying earlier.

“If you didn’t put Ezratak in the Spirit Cave, who did?” she asked at last.

“I don’t know,” said Jindabyne. “Probably that bitch Kintora. She’s trying to steal my uncle away from me.”

“From the sounds of those two, I’d say she’s succeeded.”

“No!” cried Jindabyne. “I am his niece. We share things no one else can.”

She put her face in her hands and burst into tears.

“I can’t believe he sent Kintora to harm me,” she sobbed. “It was her idea! I know it! She stole one of his crystals. He’ll be mad at *her* when he finds out.”

This woman must be ten years older than me, thought Marigoth. Yet she talks like a baby. But then, Ermora Tari *were* rather childish.

“What exactly happened?” asked Marigoth, in a sympathetic voice.

(A rather clever strategy, she thought.)

Acting, so she claimed, on Jagamar’s orders, Kintora had attacked Jindabyne with a magical crystal.

“She meant to do me harm but I destroyed the crystal.”

“A Mirayan magical crystal,” said Marigoth. Only Mi-rayans used magic crystals to store spells. The technique had been unknown before they came to the Archipelago. It was a quick and easy way to deliver a spell, and since most crystal spells were destructive, it might be very useful for Tari, who would not easily use life magic to harm people. The fact that it was unexpected magic would make it all the more effective. Jagamar was a very clever man. “So where did she get it, do you think?”

“My uncle bought home several from Ishtak when he went there to study the Mirayans. He keeps them in a box on his desk. Kintora must have stolen it from there. She is a horrible woman—always sneaking and telling tales.”

Marigoth felt cold thinking of Mathinna’s death, and the crystal involved in that. But that had been an accident. Would Jagamar purposely kill someone inconvenient?

“I always thought that Kintora was a nasty thing,” she said sympathetically. “Did she bring Ezratak into Ermora to get at you?”

“I brought him in,” said Jindabyne. “I played into her hands like a fool. But I was... lonely. I found him in the gateway. No one knew he was there. I wanted to know how Mirayans think. I thought my

uncle would be pleased with the extra knowledge. They're not as awful as he says they are. I thought if I found out more about Ezratah I would understand Duke Wolf... He seems an interesting man."

"Is that why Duke Wolf had to marry your sister. Because you liked him?"

"No," snapped Jindabyne. "My uncle..." She shot a vicious look at Marigoth. "It is your sister's destiny to bear a child to a Mirayan. Anyway, is she not better off with a kindly man like Wolf Madraga than with that pig Scarvan?"

"He killed her husband," shouted Marigoth. Then remembering the searchers she stopped.

"Don't worry," muttered Jindabyne sarcastically. "They are looking for signs of magic. There is a slight possibility they may not have heard you."

"So this is the destiny that would have awaited us if Jagamar had brought us up! Sweet life, I'm glad our grandmother took us away." She put her hands on her hips. "I mean, pardon my innocence, but I don't recall that prophecy saying anything about Elena having to be raped by one Mirayan after another."

"Wolf Madraga wouldn't..."

"You did like him, didn't you?" sneered Marigoth.

"Ermora needs that melded child. Wolf Madraga is young enough to father children, and he has made your sister his wife—which means that the Mirayans will be able to accept her child as a ruler. This way the Tari can get control over them and train them to respect the life spirit. It all makes sense."

"Does it?" said Marigoth with heavy sarcasm. "I was under the impression that with outlanders the oldest child is the heir. Doesn't Wolf Madraga have three sons already? What does your uncle plan to happen to them? Are they going to die... ?" She had almost said *like my grandmother* but stopped herself just in time.

Or had she?

Jindabyne went white. This was obviously something she had not considered. Perhaps she too was thinking about Mathinna's death. She groped for words for a moment, then said: "Destiny takes care of itself."

"Then why did you have to push it? Why did your uncle have to interfere? Why couldn't you just let Elena go free?"

"Ermora needs that melded child. Demon fire is coming. The prophecy says it, and the nectar dreamers say it. I think the life spirit knows it too."

"I don't care about destiny. All I care about is my sister, and Jagamar has done her a great wrong!"

"I don't know what you are talking about," said Jindabyne stiffly. "My uncle has done nothing. I acted entirely on my own."

"Why are you so concerned to protect him? He has thrown you on the scrap heap."

"He has always taken care of me. He was more a mother to me than my own mother."

"So that is why he set Kintora on to harm you!"

"No!" screamed Jindabyne. "He didn't. He wouldn't."

This time it was Marigoth who felt the searching mages coming and pulled them back into the shadow of the rock.

"Say," said Marigoth after they had passed. "Since you can't go back into Ermora why don't you come and help me free my sister Elena?"

Jindabyne gave her an astonished look for a moment, and then suddenly threw back her head and

laughed. There was an edge of hysteria to her laughter. "Thank you for your kind suggestion, but no."

Marigoth hadn't expected her to agree but anything was worth a try.

"Why not? Scared to?"

Jindabyne looked at her coldly. "I have no doubts about my courage, little beast. I am now going to sleep. I am tired of talking to you. It only makes a lot of noise and endangers us."

"But..."

"Go to sleep," said Jindabyne. And she refused to talk any longer.

"Tell me about the woman who put you in the Spirit Cave," growled a voice behind Marigoth.

"I... I don't want to talk about it," cried Ezratah.

"Tell me! Or I'll mindsearch you."

Marigoth sat up. It was daylight. Jindabyne was crouching over a shuddering Ezratah, her hands around his head.

"Leave him alone," cried Marigoth.

"Stay out of it, Marigoth," gasped Ezratah. "I'm all right."

"You leave him alone, you bitch," shouted Marigoth, leaping up.

Jindabyne made a hissing noise and threw out her hand. Marigoth hit something hard and invisible as the air in front of her changed to the consistency of rock. She staggered back, holding her nose.

"Don't, Marigoth!" said Ezratah warningly. "She's bigger than you. I will try to tell you what you want," he told Jindabyne. "I just don't want to be mindsearched. I can't..."

"This woman who put you in the Spirit Cave. Did she stink of flowers? Did she wear them in her hair?"

"Yes," said Ezratah trembling. "She wore jasmine in her hair and the smell was strong."

"Good," said Jindabyne. "Now you will be able to tell my uncle so."

"What?" cried Marigoth. "You can't be serious. He's already tried to harm you once."

"That was Kintora," said Jindabyne calmly. "My uncle had nothing to do with it."

"Oh, yes," sneered Marigoth. "I really believe that. Those crystals were very tightly locked up. He would have known immediately if Kintora had taken one."

"Then he will be angry at her already," said Jindabyne. "Now shut up, you nasty little creature."

"You're an idiot!"

"Marigoth leave her alone," said Ezratah. "You have things you must do. Go and do them."

"I'm not leaving you!" shouted Marigoth.

Jindabyne reached easily through the thick air that held Marigoth back and grabbed her by the throat.

"I think you should come with us," she said.

"You don't need her," cried Ezratah, clutching at Jindabyne's robe.

"You shut up or I'll put you back to sleep." She looked down at Marigoth who was standing on tiptoe so as not to be strangled.

“You are a very annoying little girl,” she said. “But I think you can be of use.”

Jindabyne was indeed very strong, and had no problem keeping both Ezratah and Marigoth under control. She asked Marigoth where their previous hiding place had been and when Marigoth, ignoring Ezratah’s advice, refused to tell her, she simply plucked the knowledge out of her mind. What she did could not be described by any term as crude as mindsearch, but it still hurt.

Then she took Ezratah and Marigoth’s wrist in either hand and suddenly they became baby eagles. Just as instantly she became a mother eagle, a great gray and black predator with a mighty wingspan. She carried the two of them in her claws up to the top of the cliff close to where Marigoth had hidden.

By the time anyone could follow her magical traces, they were safely hidden in Wynna’s little cave in the rocks.

Will I be so powerful when I grow up? thought Marigoth breathlessly. *Exciting!*

In baby eagle form Marigoth’s mind had been filled with savage baby eagle thoughts. When the desire to peck things finally left her, Marigoth went over and patted Ezratah, who was huddled in the back of the cave shuddering. To her surprise he put his arm around her.

“It’s not so bad,” she told him.

“Right,” he said, though he was obviously lying. “But have you considered what they will do with us after they have finished with us? You must try to escape.”

Marigoth shrugged. As far as she could see, the eventuality would not crop up. Jindabyne wanted Marigoth to go to her uncle and bring him back to the hiding place. This would give her an excellent opportunity to contact Derrum. Surely he would be able to do something to help them!

She was still feeling pleased with this plan when Jindabyne called her over.

“Marigoth! Look out!” shouted Ezratah.

It was too late. While distracting Marigoth by handing her a note in one hand, Jindabyne pressed a pink crystal to Marigoth’s neck. Since she was not expecting it, the charm spell within the crystal easily overcame Marigoth, and suddenly she was utterly enchanted by Jindabyne.

It took a little time to get to Jagamar. Several times Marigoth had to hide from other people. But Jindabyne had said no one must see her but Jagamar, and Marigoth really, really wanted to do her very best for her. Jindabyne was such a wonderful special person.

Marigoth had tried to tell her that her uncle wasn’t trustworthy, but Jindabyne had insisted. She knew best. She was Jindabyne after all.

Still Marigoth could not help being worried as she stood in the dusty, smelly library watching Jagamar open a box and take out one and then, after a sideways glance at her, another small yellow crystal.

“Are you going to hurt Jindabyne?” she asked belligerently as he followed her from the library. She would make sure to tell Jindabyne about those crystals.

“Of course not my dear,” said Jagamar. “Are you fond of Jindabyne, then?” he asked, looking at her closely.

“I think she’s wonderful,” said Marigoth, though part of her cringed at such sappy remarks. But there was no point in being embarrassed. Jindabyne *was* wonderful.

“And you’re entirely right, my dear,” said Jagamar urbanely.

Marigoth didn’t trust Jagamar one bit, and kept her senses tuned for a magical attack. It never

occurred to her after they left Ermora, but before they came into view of Jindabyne, that he would hit her on the back of her head.

“What happened to the child?” asked Jindabyne, watching Jagamar place Marigoth gently on the ground. She had come out of her hiding place to meet him, dragging Ezratah with her.

“The charm spell wore off,” said Jagamar. “Those Mi-ryan spells are not all that reliable. I had to put her to sleep.”

“I see,” said Jindabyne. She looked at Jagamar uncertainly.

His eye fell on Ezratah, who was crouching on the ground beside her.

“What’s this Mirayan...”

“Uncle, I found the Mirayan from the Spirit Cave. He can tell you it wasn’t me that put him in there, but Kin-tora. You can look into his mind and see it.”

Ezratah gave a cry of protest, which both Tari ignored.

Jagamar looked startled and then relieved.

“Do you know, my dear, I’m not at all surprised? I found out that Kintora had stolen one of my crystals. And...”

“She tried to attack me with it,” said Jindabyne. “It was awful, Uncle.”

“My dear, Jindabyne! This is appalling,” said Jagamar. “She is a great disappointment to me. I can’t imagine you being capable of such things. You’ve always been much too sensible. I shall have to send her away.”

“Oh, Uncle,” said Jindabyne. “I thought you were angry at me.”

“My dear,” said Jagamar fondly, spreading his arms wide. “I was wrong to doubt you.”

Jindabyne ran to him and was enfolded in his clasp.

Anyone watching could have seen Jagamar’s hand twisting around and the flash of something shiny there. Certainly Ezratah did. He let out an involuntary cry of warning and jumped forward.

Even as he did, a ragged figure sprang out from among the rocks and lunged forward to save her child.

Jagamar yelped as teeth dug into his hand,

“Mother, no!” screamed Jindabyne. She swung around and as she did, Wynna hit Jagamar in the belly with her fist. Jagamar howled with anger and pain, and flung Wynna away from him. She screamed as she hit the rocky ground.

“Mother!” cried Jindabyne.

“Your uncle,” croaked Wynna with a trembling voice. “Your Jagamar.” She held up a crystal.

Jindabyne snatched the crystal from Wynna’s hand.

“This is the crystal Kintora tried to use against me,” she cried.

Jagamar’s guilt showed clearly on his face. He put his hands quickly behind his back.

Jindabyne looked at him. All hope, all life, all chance of happiness drained from her face. Howling with anguish, she came at Jagamar. With rage-clawed hands, she dragged his hands from behind his back and forced them open. He tried to resist but his magical strength was no match for hers. A crystal of the same color was clenched in his fingers.

“After everything I did for you!”

“No, no,” he shouted. “It’s just to make you forget. So that you will be safe from the life spirit. You know you will go mad if you meld. I’m your uncle, girl.”

“To protect *you* from the life spirit you mean. If I melded now there would be many things I would want to confess to the council afterward and you know it. I did all those things for you and I did them gladly. I killed for you! And now you would just throw me away. Very well, then. Let’s see what this really does, shall we?”

She pushed the crystal in her hand onto his bare palm and watched him flinch away.

“No,” he cried. But she was too strong. He couldn’t get free of her.

“Oh yes, you demon!” she screamed. She squeezed the crystal and there was a detonation of white light and magic.

The air around Jagamar and Jindabyne rippled. Both Tari fell senseless on the ground.

Ezratah had been crawling across the ground toward Marigoth. Now he leapt up and ran to her. She was unconscious and he rubbed magical power into her skull to bring her around. Then he went to see what was wrong with Wynna, who was still groaning on the ground. He gently pressed healing magic into her broken hip.

Using magic made him feel a little better, though it was still hard to focus. He was alive, at least. And although he didn’t see any reason why he deserved to be alive, he was being useful to someone and that was good.

The sunlight was so intense today. Was it real? What was real? Confusion settled on his mind, and not knowing what else to do he crouched beside Marigoth and waited for her to regain consciousness. Jindabyne and Jagamar had come to their senses and were sitting up, both looking dazed. The man began to weep fearfully. Jindabyne looked at him questioningly. She tried to say something, but all that came out of her mouth were baby noises.

The crystals had both contained mindblast spells. Ezratah recognized the signs and the lemon-colored crystals on the ground beside them. Mindblast was a well-known spell in Miraya. It was beloved by necromancers, and all young mages were taught how to protect themselves against it. It destroyed the memories of those afflicted by it so that they forgot who they were. In extreme cases, the victims were like newborn babes and had to learn to speak all over again.

Ezratah could empathize with why Jindabyne had used the crystal on herself. He envied them the forgetfulness. Had the crystals not been empty, he would have considered using them on himself. He felt so pointless.

Taking care of Marigoth was useful. She was coming to now. She didn’t seem badly hurt. Soon she would be up, swearing and kicking the ground because she had missed the fight. Then she would gloat shamelessly over the mindblasted Tari. Things would be normal. Normal and balanced. The thought comforted him.

Chapter 31

The injuries Yani received at the Jika forest were slow to heal. For many days she was unable to sit upright without a blinding pain in her head.

“Try to relax,” said the healer. “Your anxiety is slowing you down.”

But she had to get better quickly. She had to rescue Elena.

Her anxiety for her sister was what kept her alive. There seemed no other point in going on living when she had failed so horribly. Life was like a blasted wasteland.

The thought of taking up her sword again filled her with loathing. Swordcraft was just the brutal politics of power. There was never a just side in the game of violence and she had been fool to have ever thought otherwise. When Elena was free she would go back to the island and never touch a sword again.

Duprey visited her every day, full of anxious inquiries. She answered him in monosyllables until she found the strength to ask him not to come again.

“Can you not forgive me?” he asked, eyes full of pain.

“You followed your conscience as best circumstances allowed. I am the one who let herself be guided by foolish ideals. I cannot bear to see you because you remind me of how wrong I was.”

“It is not foolish to believe in right and wrong,” cried Duprey.

“Please don’t argue,” said Yani turning her face to the wall.

“I love you,” he said softly. “Please don’t send me away.”

His words cut her. She knew he was telling the truth, yet how could she believe anything he said. It was all too complicated. Everything was too complicated.

“Go back to your people,” she said. “You are a wise and subtle man, Duprey. They will have need of your council in the time to come. The woman you loved is gone forever.”

Tarapan told her exactly what had happened at the Circle of Power.

When Tarapan had entered the Circle, he had found Wynnbyng, Tarwon and a whole host of other Tari hidden there, watching everything that went on outside. They had not cast Illynya out. Instead they were there to witness her retribution against Yani. The whole negotiation had been Illynya’s idea. She had agreed with the Mi-rayans that she would disable Yani’s Tari mages in return for the Mirayans capturing and punishing Yani.

“She was full of a pain that made her vicious and vengeful toward you, and obsessed with justifying herself,” said Tarapan. “I begged Tarwon and Wynnbyng not to be led by her. Wynnbyng told me that it was not for real, that they would rescue you before anything terrible happened, but that you needed to be taught a lesson about violence. She was avid to see you punished, Yani. They all were. I never thought to see such hatred in Tari.

“I told them I wanted no part of this impiety, that it was for the life force to judge and punish you. I tried to come and warn you. They... held me back.”

He began to weep as he spoke those words, for the fact that his own people had restrained him against his will shocked him to his core. It took some time before he finished the story. When he did, he told Yani that Syndal too had been in the Circle of Power, also restrained. In agony the two of them had watched events unfold. They saw Illynya overpower Mathaman and Jikary with iron mage collars. They cried out as the outlander men-at-arms burned and screamed under the fireball and as Yani and Duprey were overpowered and beaten.

“Stop it now before it’s too late!” they cried.

“She has not suffered enough,” Wynnbyng had cooed, almost as if she was savoring a delicious sweetmeat.

“The lesson must be harsher before it can be properly learned,” intoned Tarwon righteously.

Their eagerness was the most horrible thing of all.

Then suddenly it was too late.

As Illynya leaned over Yani to gloat, Vladek Serranus had stabbed her in the neck, killing her instantly and at the very same moment the men standing over the iron-collared Tari mages with loaded crossbows fired. Mathaman and Jikary were also killed instantly.

All the Tari flew themselves out of the Circle of Power. But there was nothing they could do—the three young mages were dead.

“Why did the outlanders do it? Wasn’t Illynya helping them?” asked Tarapan as he sat by Yani’s bed.

It took Yani a few days to work out the answer. Concentrated thought was like trying to force her way against a raging surf.

“The Mirayans were frightened of the Tari’s power,” she told Tarapan finally. “They must have thought the mages who fought at the Jika forest were alone, and sought to destroy them before they could become more of a danger. They probably thought they were teaching us a lesson.”

“Thus both sides have learned more bitter lessons. Oh, Yani! They have decided to keep the borders of Ermora more closely guarded than ever. They don’t want anymore losses after this. I did my best to argue otherwise but... everyone is shattered. Wynnbyng, Tarwon and the other witnesses have gone to the Spirit Cave, and I do not think they will ever come out again. Those who went north with the Seagani learned of the massacre at Olbia, and they want nothing more to do with outlanders. But I do not think I can live among my people anymore. And Syndal feels the same. Will you take us with you when you leave?”

For the first time a ray of light pierced the numbness in Yani’s mind. “Will you come with me to rescue Elena?”

“With all my heart,” said Tarapan.

“I will send for you when I can get up,” she said, and from that day on she began to get better. After four days she managed to sit up without pain. As she sat on her bed trembling with relief, a woman came to the door of her room.

“There is no pain today,” said Yani defensively, for the healers discouraged her from sitting up.

But the woman was not one of the healers. She wore white robes embroidered with golden leaves.

“I am Tjalparra. I have messages for you from Ermora,” she said. “Last night your sister Marigoth disappeared, taking the outlander Ezratah with her. The council wants to know where she is gone. She may have information about some serious imbalances in Ermora.”

I do not care about any serious imbalance, thought Yani. Let them deal with it themselves.

She was glad that Marigoth had gone. She was almost certain that she was safe, probably at the island. She was not going to tell this Tjalparra anything about their island. She was done with the Tari.

“I have no idea where she might be,” she lied.

Tjalparra smiled.

“I am also to give you this,” she said.

She held out a black feather as straight and sharp as a sword. A raven’s feather. Such things were seldom seen in Ermora, for the raven was believed to be the ill-omened bird of war and violence.

As Yani looked at the feather, a voice spoke,

“The warbird flies at your command.”

A shining light filled the room, Suddenly the woman and the room itself were gone. Shining beings

came over a hill, their hands intertwined. Yani knew this was the Circle of Life.

“Did you think we had forgotten you? You will always be part of us and we of you,” said a voice that was many voices, and sounded like golden sunlight.

Yani bowed her head and wept.

Light flooded over her, filling every part of her being, and as it did so all the dark corners were made bright. Painful things were illuminated there, the assassination attempt on Queen Sharma, the ruins of Fleurforet, the fall of Olbia, the dead bodies in the grasslands around the Jika forest, the execution of Georgi Serranus, the flashing of a sword, the joy of swordplay. She remembered that joy. How could she have seen it as so innocent when it was so dangerous and bloody?

Yani jangled with the harsh discordant music of her failings and mistakes. For a time she hated herself.

Then, as slowly and smoothly as the petals of a flower unfurling, everything began to make sense again. Without the gloss of emotion, she saw how her past had really been and how it should have been. How her life was and how the life spirit would have it be.

She had been like a pattern worn hazy by hard usage. Suddenly the pattern was refreshed, bright and clear, the lines sharp and well denned. Suddenly she found herself balanced, a perfect part of the great Circle of Life, flowing smoothly forward along its sweetly singing path. Now she knew right and wrong.

And yet she saw how small her knowledge was, for right and wrong blur naturally together. The border between the two is unclear, and that blurred area is where the life spirit is strongest. It is the place where harmony dwells, where the world is balanced and all music is born. In that indefinable meeting of right and wrong is great energy—a place where true courage, true wisdom and indeed truth itself exists. Such things cannot flourish in hard, sharp, defined places.

I want that blurred place, she thought. I want to know it. She reached out.

Then smiling golden beings were all around her, full of a love that was smooth without seam or fault. For a moment she let herself be bathed in it. But it was all too easy. Her mind turned back to that fascinating place where right and wrong met. That was where adventure lay.

She felt a sadness in the golden beings around her. One of them held a raven—a black blot in the golden light. The warbird. The bird of ill-omen and destruction. All Archipelagans believed it so. Yet she saw that it too had a place in the Great Circle of Life. The shining ones, the life spirit, held it toward her.

In its beady black eyes she saw the sword and sword-craft, the joy of physical power, a mischievous instinct for trouble and destruction, the sharp kiss of death.

She also saw at last what the life spirit intended for her, what it had made her, with her great strength, do.

For a moment the sense of adventure deserted her.

“I am afraid.”

“You do not have to take it.” But still the beings offered the raven to her.

She knew she could turn away if she wished... But the other path was so pale, so defined that it was a half-life. Who wanted to go where everything was known and easy?

There was need for a raven, and to become it would be the most pure way to serve the life spirit. By taking its darkness into her she could become one with that golden light.

She put out her hands toward the raven.

“You will be changed. You will be made the perfect tool of the life spirit. But the path will be hard and narrow.”

“That is what I wish,” said Yani.

And as she spoke the raven spread its wings and flew at her, claws outstretched. They gripped her chest and forced forward into her flesh. Pain pierced her and she fell backward. Blackness blotted everything out.

* * *

Coming anxiously into the Spirit Cave, Derrum had the impression of black feathers filling the darkness. He heard the crisp beating of bird’s wings. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he saw a strange Tari woman sprawled facedown near the cave entrance. Tjalparra had warned him that he might find something strange here, but still he was shaken by the sight. How had this woman got here?

He took a candle from one of the shelves. Such a sprawl was the sign of a hard communion and usually betokened oncoming madness. But this was different.

The woman was naked from the waist up. Her bare back and shoulders were covered in dark lines. He knelt down and peered at them. The black outline of wings were etched across her back and spread out along her shoulders and upper arms. They seemed to be permanent—some kind of tattoo, or brand.

Whatever it was, it must have been painful. He touched her very carefully to see what the nature of the injury was. Suddenly his mind was filled with the frightening vision of a great black bird. Its cruel black eyes looked at him from above a hard black beak. A raven. The warbird! He gasped. The vision was more terrible because he knew why he was seeing it. Trouble was coming.

The woman stirred with a groan. Tendrils of golden hair spilled softly over his hand. Her eyes opened. Wearily. The muscles of her arms rippled beneath her skin as she tried to raise herself. She held a single black feather in her hand.

Derrum pulled off his outer robe and laid it across her back, wrapping her in it as she sat up. He tried to wipe away some of the grime that covered her face.

“Who are you? What has happened?” he asked.

“I am the warbird,” said the woman.

She turned to Derrum, her face full of joyful wonder. “The life spirit will always be with me. I thought they wanted me to give up the sword. But they do not. They want me to become a warleader. Why should they want such a thing? And who shall I lead? Surely not the Tari?”

“I don’t know,” said Derrum. “But I cannot help but fear what it portends.”

Tjalparra was sitting on a stone outside the cave with food and drink for the woman. Derrum was relieved to see she seemed to know what was going on. She told him that the woman, Yani, was one of the Miracle Sisters and that the prophecy was coming true. This must all have been arranged while he was busy tracking down Jaga-mar’s Defenders of Ermora. Obviously it was the will of the life spirit but still he felt fearful.

“I know that the life spirit has made me so that I can carry out its wishes, but I do not know what those wishes are,” Yani said later, once she had eaten, bathed and dressed. “How can I know?”

“You will be able to change into the shape of a raven,” said Tjalparra. “Perhaps in that shape you will know its will better. Simpler creatures are closer to the life spirit. At other times you will examine your conscience. Of all the Tari, you Miracle Sisters are the most suited to such a task as this. For growing up separated from Ermora and the Spirit Cave, you have had the chance to develop your own sense of right and wrong as the outlanders have, instead of always turning to the life spirit to solve dilemmas as the Tari do. Such questions only show your fitness.”

“It made me for this task, didn’t it? I have always been so strong and quick.”

“I think it did.”

“And part of my making was my grandmother’s flight from Ermora?”

“It seems likely.”

“And my sister’s captivity and rape—was that too planned by the life spirit?”

“No,” cried Derrum. “Surely that must have been the work of Jagamar alone.”

“Perhaps it was the will of the life spirit. Perhaps not. It rarely moves to interfere in human affairs,” said Tjal-parra calmly.

Yani saw that she had come to that blurred gray area. Could evil acts sometimes serve the purpose of the life spirit? It didn’t matter now.

“It is time Elena was freed,” she said.

“Yes,” said a voice from the doorway. “What’s kept you so long?”

Marigoth stood there, grinning.

Chapter 32

Elena kept a lamp burning by her bed. She had become sensitive to people entering the room while she was asleep. Wolf Madraga had not yet retired for the night, but he would arrive soon enough. He was a considerate lover, but she hated him for being there at all.

She must have drifted off to sleep because suddenly two figures, one tall, one small were coming across the room.

Elena sprang up, ready for a fight but joy filled her when she saw who they were.

“Mari... Yani,” she cried, clapping a hand over her mouth as soon as she spoke.

Marigoth and Yani jumped on the bed and the three sisters embraced silently.

“Oh, sisters, I feared you were dead,” whispered Elena. Tears ran down her face.

Tears were running down Yani’s face too. Even Mari-goth’s eyes glistened suspiciously.

She was the first to recover.

“Come on now. We have to get out of here. Where’s Alyx?”

Elena leapt out of bed.

“I’ll go get her. Stay here. Hide.”

Her white silken robes trailed behind her as she ran from the room. Yani and Marigoth closed the bed curtains around them. Peering through a gap, they listened anxiously to the voices talking in the next room.

A moment later Elena was back, carrying her daughter and shutting the door firmly behind her.

“Here,” she said. “Take her. Take care of her.”

“Come on. We’ll fly through that window,” said Marigoth. “I’ve started growing up, Elena. You’ve

no idea all the amazing things I can do now. I can get through Mirayan protections easy as pie.”

“I’m not coming.”

“What!” Yani and Marigoth were so horrified they spoke at full volume.

“Hush! I have to stay here. I have made an agreement. But you must take Alyx to safety. She must be brought up by the Mori.”

“What are you talking about?” hissed Marigoth. “We’re not leaving without you!”

“You must. I can’t come.” Elena kissed the sleeping Alyx. “Goodbye my dear. I hope you remember how much your mother loved you.”

She thrust the sleeping child at Yani who was so amazed that she took her before she knew what she’d done.

“Do you know what we went through to get here?” hissed Marigoth.

“You can’t want to stay here,” hissed Yani.

“Just go! For Alyx’s sake,” urged Elena, trying to push them toward the window.

Then suddenly Alyx awoke and found herself in the arms of yet another stranger. She let out a terrified wail of protest.

The door flew open.

“Madam, is everything—” The Mirayan woman in the doorway saw the two strangers and let out a startled cry. “Who...”

“Damn!” cried Marigoth. She threw a sleep spell at the woman and she crumpled to the floor, but someone started screaming behind her.

Marigoth seized Elena. “Come on.”

“No!”

“Yes! This is stupid. You can’t stay here!”

A figure came barreling through the door. There was a detonation of spells and suddenly Marigoth found herself battling magically with a very strong Seagani woman. Now that she was growing, she had become powerful enough to slip through warding. But she still hadn’t reached her full potential and struggled to overcome the woman. Alyx screamed and struggled in Yani’s arms as Elena tried to push them toward the window.

In another part of the castle Wolf Madraga had been bidding farewell to his brother, Lev. Through go-betweens the two men had become reconciled, but Wolf was firm in his decision that Lev must leave Lamartaine.

“Forgive me, brother,” said Lev. “Please, let me stay.”

“I forgive you already,” said Wolf. “I understand perfectly why you acted as you did. If I’d known you’d already seen Elena, I would never have let you stay in the first place. But that is why you have to leave. I know you are an honorable man, and that it is just the effect she has on people. Now go. Try to forget her. I have given you letters for Ishtak, and Prince Pirus will welcome you.”

He took his brother’s hand and they shook.

The bitch, thought Lev. She might have kept her mouth shut.

I could almost hate her for dividing me from my only brother, thought Wolf.

He knew it was unjust of him. Elena had not sought Lev’s favor. There had been no mistaking the

hatred in her eyes when she spoke of him.

He motioned for the attendant to open the door.

The moment it swung open, he heard the sound of women screaming down the hall. The guard from the door of the women's quarters raced in shouting.

"My lord, intruders in the women's quarters."

"Elena!" cried Lev and Wolf, and they started running.

Marigoth had defeated the woman mage but she and Yani were still arguing with Elena when Lev Madraga came charging through the door and caused the whole room to fill with bright light with a wave of his hand. Yani, still carrying Alyx, ducked back behind the bed curtains.

Lev aimed a blast of power at Marigoth that knocked her off her feet and followed it quickly with a stream of fire.

Marigoth threw out her hand and diverted the fire onto the floor, where it began to burn the floorboards.

Lev began to put the fire out, but as he did so he moved between Elena and Marigoth. Elena seized a candlestick from the table.

"Send for a phalanx, Wolf," shouted Lev. "This little girl isn't so tough."

"That's what you think, chaos mage," shouted Marigoth.

There was a detonation of magic as both mages threw power. Both of them jerked backward as the power hit them. Wolf ran through the door with his sword pointed at Marigoth.

"No," shrieked Elena, swinging at him with her candlestick. Wolf ducked her blow.

Yani, having put down Alyx, leapt unexpectedly from behind the bed-curtain, drawing her sword. She hit Wolf in the side of the body with her shoulder, knocking him back against the wall, making him drop his sword.

Before he could get up she was above him, sword at his throat.

"We're taking our sister back," she said with deadly calm.

"No!" shouted Elena. She went to the bed and gathered up her child. "I'm not coming with you. Please! Take Alyx and go! It's not safe for her here."

"I'd never hurt your child," protested Wolf.

"We're not going without you, Elena," shouted Yani.

There was another detonation of magic and Marigoth and Lev both staggered backward again.

Lev laughed. "When that phalanx gets here you're roast meat, little girl."

"You dream," said Marigoth, and threw such a blast of magic at him that he almost fell over. Elena kicked at him as he staggered near her.

With a booted foot, Yani kicked the door shut and with her other hand she threw the bolt. Not for one minute did the sword point waver from Wolf's throat.

"Lev Madraga, refrain from killing my sister for the moment and I will not kill your brother. What do you say about that?"

In answer Lev threw a blast of magic at Marigoth, who was ready for it.

“He’s not the kind of man who cares about his brother’s welfare,” said Marigoth. “He’s a chaos mage. The lowest of the low.”

“Why will you not come with us, Elena?” asked Yani.

“There is a peace treaty,” said Wolf. “I agreed not to attack the Mori in return for Elena’s hand in marriage. If she leaves I swear I will destroy them.”

“You agreed to this, Elena?”

“Yes,” said Elena tensely. “Please Yani, Marigoth. Just take Alyx and go. Go before the phalanx gets here.”

“Do you want to stay with this man? This man who killed Eldene?”

“The Mori are Eldene’s people. I love them and they have no chance against the Mirayans as things stand.”

A darkly jealous look passed across Wolf Madraga’s face.

“I see,” said Yani. “I don’t think I can agree with this, Elena. It’s too great a sacrifice.”

“I shall take care of your sister,” cried Wolf. “I will protect her. I love her.”

“Love!” retorted Yani. “Love! You take away my sister’s freedom and turn her into someone who buys favors with her body like a prostitute and you call that love?”

With the hilt of her sword she hit Wolf in the temple. He slumped unconscious against the wall.

“Hey!” cried Marigoth in approval. She sent another detonation at Lev, but it barely touched him. Sweat stood out on the brows of both mages. Yani strode toward him.

Lev sneered at her.

“Time is on my side, bitches.” He waved his hand and suddenly Yani couldn’t move. Marigoth lunged at him, but was thrown back again.

“You didn’t think I had any left, did you?” gloated Lev. “But I’m a Golden Order Mage. I can keep you busy till the phalanx gets here and when it does, it’ll be the pyre for you ladies.”

Marigoth threw power at him again, but it bounced off with a thud.

“And I wouldn’t be too devastated if my brother died and I was left in control of the lovely Elena either. So don’t bother threatening me with that,” he said.

“I wouldn’t be devastated if that happened either,” said Elena suddenly. She went to Lev’s side. “Your brother is a good enough man, but I see now that you are much more powerful than he,” she purred. “There is something very exciting about power, Lev.” Smiling, she leaned toward his face until she saw a hopeful look in his eyes.

Then she brought the candlestick in her other hand down on his temple with a crunch.

“Fool!” she said contemptuously as he crumpled to the ground.

“I’m sorry Elena. We can’t leave you here,” said Yani. “We will just have to find some other way to help the Mori.”

She gripped Elena’s wrist just as a ball of fire came bursting through the closed door.

As the fire cleared, the phalanx leader came crashing through the door ready to fight.

But there was no one to fight. Apart from the unconscious bodies of Wolf Madraga and his brother Lev, the room was empty.

Chapter 33

Ezratah sat staring into space. He was having trouble concentrating on anything.

All around he could hear soft rushing, a sound like a distant stream. He was not sure if it was outside or in his head. He would have been more worried about it if he had been able to focus enough to worry but it was so much easier to sit and just let the soothing, rushing sound fill his head. Who wanted him anyway?

He leaned back against the tree and looked at a green leaf he held in his fingers. How intricate were the veins that ran along it! The leaf was made up of tiny sections. He had seen lots of leaves before, but this was the first he had really noticed. What a glorious, soft texture it was. How amazing the color green was! Why were leaves green and not some other color? How wondrous it was!

“Ezratah!” shouted a voice nearby. He looked up and saw a man. Marigoth had called him Derrum. He wore white robes embroidered with golden leaves. Leaves!

“Did you not hear me?” he said more gently.

“Sorry,” said Ezratah. “Thinking of something else. Is there a stream near here?”

“Let me take a look at you,” said Derrum, putting his hand on his shoulder. “What can we do to make you feel better?”

He leaned down and peered into Ezratah’s eyes. His words brought Ezratah back to himself. With anguish he remembered who he was. A creature more unclean than manure.

“Don’t look,” he cried pulling away.

“Hmm. Curious,” said Derrum. He must be some kind of healer. Ezratah had felt the brief touch of his mind on his own.

“It has been decided that you should return to Pen-terong,” said Derrum. “Ermora is too intense a place for outlanders. But a great wrong was done you by a Tari, and so we will take care of you until you are better.”

“You can never heal me,” said Ezratah bitterly. “I will always be this... dross.”

But it was hard to concentrate even on bitterness with that rustling, rushing noise in the background. His hand had fallen on the stone seat beside him and he could feel the grittiness of the stone on the palm of his hand. Amazing to contemplate all those little grains of dirt that held together somehow to make this piece of hard stone. The wonder of it all filled him.

“Yes,” said Derrum. “Self-knowledge can make us hate ourselves. But you must be kind to yourself. You are no worse than... Are you listening to me?”

“What... sorry, sorry. It’s so hard to concentrate with that noise. Is there a stream nearby? Can we go somewhere else?”

Derrum stared at him in amazement. “Noise? Is it a rushing, rustling sound?”

“Yes! It’s nice but too loud. I can’t concentrate.”

Derrum looked into Ezratah’s eyes again, probing his mind a little more strongly.

“Well,” he said at last. His voice was full of delighted laughter. He clapped his hands. “That is

amazing! I think we should not try to talk again until we are at Penterong, my boy. The noise will be much quieter there. Then I will teach you how to block it out and we will see what else you can do.”

“Why?” cried Ezratah. “What is that noise?”

“Your experiences have changed you more than we thought,” said Derrum happily. “Gifted you. That is the life spirit you can hear. Even though it flows strongly here, outlanders usually can’t hear it, but something in your being has been peeled away in the Spirit Cave. Now you too will know the life spirit firsthand.”

Kintora was bereft. She longed to go to Master Jagamar, but he was with the Guardians of the Spirit Cave and so was Ezratah, the outlander she had put in the Cave. Though she no longer wore jasmine in her hair, she was still afraid he would recognize her and tell the Guardians what she had done.

Not that things could get much worse. The Guardians had already extended an invitation for her to come and commune in the Spirit Cave. She had refused, as was her right, and now nobody would speak to her. She knew how they reasoned. If she had refused a direct invitation to commune, she must be guilty of some terrible wrong that she dared not face the life spirit with. She didn’t care! Destruction to all of them! She would keep the faith with Jagamar. He had been a great man before that bitch had destroyed him with that Mirayan spell. Now they said he was like a baby, barely able to feed himself.

His ideas... She still read what he had written. She still saw clearly that the Tari’s proper future was to rule Yarmar, the Mirayans and the Archipelago.

She tried to keep the Defenders of Ermora together too, but they were fools and would not recognize her authority. With relentless inevitability they all accepted invitations to commune, and afterward they lost interest in the Great Task or told her they no longer agreed with Jagamar’s ideas. After all the care the master had lavished on them! Weaklings!

But she kept the faith. She kept his living place and his books just as they had always been.

Even Gunidah, who had had the good fortune to share the master’s bed, could not be faithful to him.

On her way to commune, Gunidah had come to see Kintora. She had had the gall to be wearing her white melding robe and the cheek to try and persuade Kintora to give up her resistance to the life spirit.

“You are going to the Spirit Cave because you lack the courage to stand alone,” Kintora told her.

Gunidah had the decency to look uncomfortable. “I have always enjoyed being Warden of Penterong. I would be sorry to have to give that up.”

Her meaning was clear. The council would not let such an important position be occupied by someone who refused to meld. She had betrayed the master for worldly position.

“They asked you to come and speak to me,” accused Kintora.

“I am sorry, my dear,” said Gunidah. “But you know it would be better if you did meld. You are not happy like this. You know you are not.”

“What happiness can there be when the destiny of Ermora is at stake?” cried Kintora, quoting directly from the master.

“My dear,” said Gunidah. “I do not deny that Jagamar was a great man, but the way he interpreted the prophecy was never a definite future. And now Elena Mori has left Wolf Madraga without conceiving. So you see destiny will have to follow another path.”

Kintora looked aghast at this news.

“My dear,” Gunidah went on, “the life spirit is very wise, and I have come to believe we are foolish to

try and manage without it. There were times at the end, when that little miracle child Marigoth was here, when I wondered if... if Jagamar were not a little misguided.”

“Misguided?” screamed Kintora. “How could you!” And she screamed at the faithless bitch until she left.

Then she pulled the big doors of Jagamar’s living place shut behind her and barred them so that no more of these pathetic footlickers could come in. She sat down to read Jagamar’s writing, but she was too upset to concentrate.

Elena Tari had left Wolf Madraga without giving birth to a child. Disaster! The only comfort she had had in all this was that even though the master had been destroyed, his work would live on and people would one day recognize that he was a great man.

Now even that hope was gone. There would be no melded child. The destruction of Ermora would go ahead and no one would know how the master had worked and suffered. She sat up long into the night weeping and thinking on this matter.

Then somewhere just before dawn she thought of a way Jagamar’s plan could still be carried out. Yes! It might just work. The melded child could still be born. If nothing else the master would be avenged.

Wolf Madraga sat bleakly in his wife’s empty bed chamber. As well as the clean pain of loss, a creeping sickness of shame afflicted him. Now that she was no longer before him, he began to understand how much Elena must hate him and how much he had deserved that hatred. If only things had been different. But how could they have been?

The sound of women screaming brought him back to reality. He rushed to the inner door that connected the chamber with the women’s quarters and flung it open. His thirteen-year-old daughter, Stasia, ran terrified into his arms crying, “Father! Father! Look!”

The still body of a woman was sprawled on the floor. In the twilight he could see her fair hair and green robes.

Elena! he thought, and rushed forward, but even before he had turned her over, he knew it was not Elena.

“Stay there, Stasia. Nurse! Here, quickly!” he shouted to his daughter’s nurse, who was also a healer. The Lady of Birds stirred.

“Jindabyne,” said Wolf softly. “Lady of Birds. What are you doing here?”

The woman opened heavy eyes and looked dazedly up at Wolf.

“What’s happened? Tell me, Jindabyne,” he said. She sat up and threw her arms around him. She spoke but it was in a foreign language.

“Jindabyne. What are you saying? I can’t speak your tongue.”

But he had already guessed the truth. Something about her eyes. He had seen this kind of thing before, when he was a child in the civil war in Miraya.

“Mindblast?” he mouthed at the nurse.

The nurse shrugged. Only a mindsearch could tell for sure.

“Those bitches,” said Madraga softly. “They have had their revenge, then.” The thought that Elena might be capable of such a cruel act made it a little bit easier to accept his loss.

They must have done it some time ago, though, because Jindabyne could now speak some kind of language and probably she could walk too. But she seemed to have no real idea who he was, though she clung to him and it soothed her when he called her Jindabyne. Naturally she was extremely frightened. Perhaps there was some Tari version of the mindblast that was cruder and more subtle. He had heard how Vladek Serranus had been sent mad after he had killed some Tari in Northern Seagan. Tari were a frightening people. He hoped he would never have to deal with them again.

From his room in the mage's tower Lev Madraga brooded angrily. He was a Golden Order Mage, dammit! He wasn't about to put up with being defeated. Especially by a woman's tricks.

How smug Elena had looked as she had hit him in the head. He'd like to teach her some respect. He'd like to have her body under his hands this very minute. And that little girl. It had been bad enough being defeated by that pale-haired man he had met on the coast, but at least he had been a man. And grown-up!

These Tari were fiends. Dangerous, sneaky fiends.

"You're in a miserable state," whispered Shub from the mirror.

"Shut up," snapped Lev.

"You will never have her now."

Lev ignored him.

"I could defeat a Tari mage without any trouble," whispered the demon. "I am much, much stronger than they are. You could have your revenge and enjoy Elena Tari at the same time. Of course there would be a cost."

"Exactly," snarled Lev. "Your kind never do anything for nothing, do you? I would never pay such a price." He kept staring out the window. How he hated being defeated like that! He felt such a fool.

"But tell me anyway, demon," he said casually. "What exactly would the price be?"

Elena stood on the beach. It was the gray dawn after another night of bad dreams. She had felt the grip of Scar-van's hands on her neck again, and had woken in fright as she always did. A sleeping draft was no good against those horrible memories. Why could she not remember Eldene this clearly? Why could she not dream of him instead?

It was wrong to take your own life, but Elena was sick of living, worn away by the relentless clarity of unwanted memory. Alyx no longer needed her. She played all day with her aunts and their foster parents, and though she came to Elena often, Elena could tell that her depression worried the child.

Why wait to see it drive her away? There was no reason to go on. She would never be clean again.

She had filled a large bag with stones and now she slung it over her shoulder and waded out into the sea. Soon she would be with Eldene again. As parts of the Circle of Life they would meld and be as one, even though they would not know each other.

The seawater tugged at her nightdress and caressed her skin. She felt sand and sharp shells under her bare feet. She could see the island where she had first met Eldene. She could remember that moment when she had looked into his eyes and felt she could tell him anything. But she could not hold on to that memory or any other memory concerning Eldene. They were all fading as memories do. And since he was dead, there would never be anything to replace them.

When the water reached her chin she pulled the bag to her chest and let herself slide backward into the water.

As she dropped through chill green water a picture of Eldene bending to kiss her as he rose early from their bed to go hunting came to her. She felt the moment with bright clarity: the touch of his hand on her cheek, the pressure of his lips on hers. How handsomely his dark hair had curled over his forehead and round the lobes of his ear. The memory was so real she opened her eyes to see him.

The salt stung them for a moment and then she could see everything—the dim green water around her and up above the silvery surface of the sea.

Light broke through the surface of the water and came slanting down. How beautiful! The golden beams fell on her as she lay there on the sand with the bag of rocks on her chest. Illuminating her. Illuminating everything. She heard the whispering of the life spirit then. Its gentle voice began to seep into her.

Suddenly the rocks began to come out of the bag and roll or float away through the water. She felt the water cleansing her. Or was that the life force. Whatever it was, it refreshed every soiled part of her. “We are lucky to be alive,” Eldene had said to her that morning, and suddenly she knew that this was still the case.

As she watched the rocks float out of the bag, she was suddenly certain that in time the horrible memories would go. In time there would be newer, better memories. To give up her life now would turn the victory of her escape into defeat. It would give victory to Alexis Scarvan and his like. No! She would not let those toads win.

No matter what happened to her body, she would always be one with the life spirit. She had a strong clean place that those beasts could never touch. A gift that they would never have. And her life was a gift too, not something to be easily thrown away.

She pushed the empty bag aside and only then did she rise up through the golden shaft of sunlit water to break the surface and gasp in a lungful of fresh, damp air. The sky had become blue. It was a new day.

REBECCA LOCKSLEY was born in Melbourne. She spent her early life studying classical singing, only to eventually abandon it to become a vocalist in local rock bands. Rebecca held down a variety of careers, including traveling fruit picker and Occult librarian, before running away to Europe to work as a journalist and writer. After a decade abroad, she has once again returned to Melbourne, where she now lives with her lead guitarist and a garden full of birds.