



FIREBLOOD
(A LEGEND OF THE WHITE DRAGON NOVEL)

A legend exists among the tribes of the Caveshi Plains, a legend of horses blessed by the Creators for their service in a war against a terrible Darkness. Thousands of years later, the servants of Darkness have returned and prepare to reawaken their master. The horses remain in hiding, except for one.

Alo is a special stallion and his rider, Ayali, knows it; but when Alo insists on rescuing a strange man fallen in a dragon attack, no one understands the horse's purpose. Ayali's only clue is the magic she feels within the man. Over time, her abilities have weakened. Without magic, she cannot fulfill the expectations of her family and her tribe in becoming the next priestess. Ayali desires to gain that knowledge from the stranger, but with his memories gone, he can tell her nothing.

To fulfill her destiny, Ayali must face a growing darkness within her before it consumes their world and destroys her life. Alo may hold the key to her redemption but will he reveal his secrets before it's too late?

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by
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Introduction

It is said in the legends of the Caveshi that at the beginning of time, the Creators battled a great Darkness. In their final battle, they rode special horses, which they blessed for serving them. After they defeated their enemy, these horses were turned free. No mortal can touch them. Their gifts are a mystery. They are the *Ferdrai*, the Blessed of the Creators.

Their existence has passed into legend, but sometimes, at the edge of dawn or dusk, when the sun glares, you catch a glimpse of movement. If you are fast enough, you may catch the toss of a mane or the flick of a tail. They are real, but they are elusive.

It is said they will recognize the children of the Light, the mortal descendants of the Creators, the sacred *Majera*.

It is also said that the Darkness will return to destroy the world. The *Ferdrai* helped save it once. Will their descendants recognize the descendants of their masters? Will they return when they are needed?

~ Opati
elder priestess of the Neni'ohi Caveshi

The dragon roared and strode forward. Its sinewy body covered the ground on two strong hind limbs with claw-tipped wings for balance of its front. The long tail flicked with the beast's agitation. Yellow eyes regarded them with insatiable hunger for the Rivon Cavalry in line before it.

From a distant position, Ayali watched the battle.

She lay on her belly next to her father, Taima, the leader of their interception group.

Her mother, Nori, had sent her with him for protection, although why, she didn't understand. She might be a capable warrior, but so was her father. Like her mother, Ayali might have inherited the telltale blue eyes of the *Lumathir*, but unlike her mother, her abilities to use magic were weak. Her father would have been better off bringing her mother, a full priestess, than his daughter, who could barely use magic, despite all the training. Fully trained priestesses made strange decisions sometimes, but their wisdom was not to be questioned.

The fair-complexioned stranger riding the dappled gray stared transfixed by the angry red beast. His gear didn't match that of the Rivon. Rather, his blue tunic bore a rearing white horse with five stars around it. The Rivon wore leather chest plates with only a white horse standing proud.

"*Nai!*" Prince Narkov Farolkavin, firstborn son of the Sovereign of Rivonia, let his horse loose with three hundred cavalry soldiers accompanying him.

The stranger followed his host's lead and let his gray run. The stallion needed no urging and stretched his nose out. Narkov's chestnut slipped back. Struggling against his horse's panicked run, the stranger guided his stallion nearer to the prince.

"That one is different." Ayali pointed at the golden-haired stranger. She didn't mean his pale complexion either. Something radiated from him, touching her at her core.

Why would one of the northern people from across the sea be riding with Farolkavin's heir outside the capital city of Chavali?

"He is one of them."

Her father's stern reminder shoved aside but not out of mind her curiosity of the stranger. Despite the harsh tone, she couldn't shake the odd feeling about the stranger and his horse.

The almost white stallion acted as intelligent as her mother's old stallion, Alo, who had no equal. Kassar's greed and desire of the stallion had inflamed the Caveshan-Rivon conflict in her mother's eighteenth summer. Not even the sons and daughters of Alo the Rivon had stolen from their warriors had satisfied the Sovereign.

The horse ridden by the stranger resembled many of those halfblood *Ferdrai* lost to Rivon greed. *It must be.*

The cavalry soldiers spread as a spray of fire chased their tails.

Another roar erupted from the red dragon and it flapped semi-transparent leathery wings and took to the air.

The shadow of its enormous size drifted over the riders. The gray stallion swerved from the shadow. After searching around him, the stranger fixed on Narkov, who raced away from him with the cavalry scattered.

The dragon roared and the squeals of horses and cries of men followed as it landed amid a tight group of soldiers. The pile of bodies beneath the claws of the grounded red beast revolted

Ayali. Her stomach twisted and she looked away, struggling to keep her food down. Never had she seen such carnage, not even at the hands of the Rivon.

Further squeals from the horses choked her. *Blessed Trinity have mercy.* She swallowed the lump in her throat and turned back to see if the stranger had survived.

The gray stallion ran full out, but the stranger guided him back toward Narkov. The remaining soldiers followed.

The yellow eyes of the beast fixed on him.

Her heart raced in his chest. *No! Run!* Her breath caught in her throat, her fingers digging into the grass and soil beneath her. The red dragon had picked him as its next target. Her spirit carried her with the stranger as if she could help him escape.

He turned the gray away and urged the horse faster. The stallion's legs pounded the earth beneath them, his nose stretched ahead. The wind whipped gray mane against the stranger's face.

The red beast flapped into the air, its eyes fixed on the pair. They'd never make it. She almost couldn't watch, but had to. She couldn't look away.

Pulling hard on the right rein, he steered the stallion's race into an arc. Quick maneuvers were impossible at their speed, unless he could collect the stallion within a couple strides.

The wyvern stayed with them, gaining fast. Not three horse lengths behind, the dragon folded its wings, its jaws opening.

Ayali stared, not daring to blink.

Those open jaws hovered a breath behind the stranger.

The horse and rider tumbled to the ground, narrowly avoiding the snap of the dragon's jaws. While the rider rolled for a short distance and fell still, the horse struggled to its feet. Despite that it favored its right foreleg, the horse rose up between the dragon and the fallen rider.

Such loyalty can only be. No ordinary horse would stay, but no pureblood *Ferdrai* would allow bridle or saddle.

While the red dragon roared its damnation, the horse reared up and struck out at it. Frustration raged in the large yellow eyes of the beast.

"That one *is* special."

At Nodin's words, a hint of a smile touched Ayali's lips. Her younger brother knew the story of their mother's and Alo's partnership as well as any in the tribe. That same loyalty showed in the stranger's horse. He might not have any hint of magic, but Nodin had an intuitive sense that rivaled her connection with magic.

When the jaw of pointed teeth snapped at the horse and caught it by the neck, her stomach twisted. Ayali wished it had survived, but the dragon ended its squeal of pain. *May the Trinity guide you home.*

The dragon tore the horse's head and neck from its body and swallowed it, before taking to the air. It chased the cavalry that had run back to the northwest, in the direction of Chavali, Rivonia's capital city. It wasn't hungry but chasing for sport.

The carnage left upon the hills sickened Ayali.

As if understanding that the threat was gone, the white stallion came up behind them. His presence shone as brilliant in Ayali's second sight as the beast had been dark. Despite her trouble *using* her magic, she could always *feel* it around her.

She looked over her shoulder at the proud, unbridled grace of the stallion's pose. His ears nearly touched at the tips, perched on the top of an arched neck that blended perfectly at the withers to a strong, round back. Gray-edged nostrils flared, taking in the scent that blew from the battleground.

Do you understand?

The horse had demonstrated many times his uncanny intelligence in aiding her mother. At the age of twenty-eight summers and still strong and healthy far beyond the age of any ordinary horse, he had enough experience to understand this. Had that been why her mother had suggested Ayali take the stallion to accompany the group?

Or had it been because Alo's power had helped her mother access hers as a young woman and she hoped the same for Ayali?

Alo pawed at the ground and let out a resounding call.

A glance at her father's face made her wince. He knew the stallion's powers, but by the tightening of his cheek and the narrowing of his eyes, she realized he wasn't happy with the noise.

Nothing stirred in the distance, however.

A scrape of hoof on her bare shin drew her attention again to Alo. The blue and red beads in her black hair clicked with her movement. Alo lowered his head and nuzzled the leather ties of her shoes.

"Fine. Let's go."

As she rose to a sitting position, a firm hand grasped her arm. Ayali turned to her father's face. She answered his unspoken concerns with a smile. "He'd let us know if danger lingered."

With a nod, he released her arm. "We all go."

Needing no further command, the others followed Taima to their feet. Ayali stood beside Alo and grasped a shank of the long mane as the last warrior stood.

With the flexibility of her youth, she threw her bare leg over his broad back. The others walked to their horses, which had stayed away from the crest of the hill in a group. As the warriors respected her father, so to the horses seemed to follow Alo's will.

With a shift of her weight and a touch of his neck, Ayali asked Alo to wait. The warriors swung into their saddles and picked up their reins.

Ayali touched her legs to Alo, the only cue he needed to move on. Together, they led the group to the gory mess left by the dragon.

Horses lay dead and injured. Their riders had been less fortunate. Most had been crushed by the winged beast or their own horses.

Ayali's attention focused on the corpse of the gray stallion and his fallen rider. Alo stopped next to them and lowered his muzzle to the man's golden hair. When he nibbled her toes, Ayali patted his neck.

"He's dead too."

At her words, Alo took a hold of the leather of her shoes, narrowly missing her toes with his teeth, and tugged.

With a grimace, Ayali realized what he tried to tell her—he wanted her to dismount. As she had long ago learned to listen to his unspoken ways, she leaned sideways to look him in the eye. "You can be a real pain sometimes."

Despite her aversion of the gory body of the horse nearby, she slid from Alo's back. She knelt by the stranger with the golden hair as Alo shoved his muzzle against the man's shoulder.

Then Ayali saw it—the rise and fall of his back.

"He's alive!" When she turned to Alo, he watched the man with his ears forward in expectation.

Ayali rose to her feet and tried to catch the eyes of her father. However, he faced away from her, examining a gouge in the earth left by the dragon's claws.

"Epaiyi!" she called.

He turned to her at the formal title. The braids of hair slapped against his neck with his sudden movement.

"This one's alive!"

Taima turned his chestnut with the white legs and sides. In a few seconds, he stopped the horse before Ayali and swung from the saddle. He knelt beside the man who lay facedown. "He's unconscious."

"Shouldn't we take him with us?"

Cold brown Caveshi eyes turned up to her in answer. "He was with the enemy, Ayali. Do not forget that. He's not welcome."

"We can't leave him for the scavengers." Ayali frowned as she said the words, uncertain why she felt the need to protect the man. Had it been his presence? She wished to learn why he had earned the loyalty of the horse and why she sensed a connection to the same power she learned to control. Still, something else she dared not acknowledge lingered at the edge of truth.

Her father stood up and gazed down at her with a scolding frown he wore too well. "You're old enough to understand. Leave him."

She knew better than to argue with her father, but she didn't have to. Alo shoved his nose against her father's chest. Taima wouldn't argue with the horse, if she could trust her mother's stories and what she had often seen with her own eyes.

When he pushed Alo away, the stallion pinned his ears flat to his neck and bared his teeth in threat. Taima stayed his ground, but the horse had other ideas. He used his head to shove the man off balance. Taima stumbled over the stranger and fell on his butt.

"Napi ilkia!"

The curse would have brought a fight to the death from any warrior, but Alo wasn't human.

Instead, the horse ignored him and nuzzled Ayali's hand, then the stranger's torn sleeve.

Her father climbed to his feet as Nodin rode up.

"Tie him, but we can spare no horses!" Her father stomped away to his horse and swung his leg up. With one dark glower, he turned to finish his examination of the carnage.

"You know better than to argue," Nodin said.

Ayali winced. She had argued herself out of a marriage to the son of a priestess of another tribe, a man who possessed the gift of the Majera as she. Her father had been upset afterwards. Or was it disappointment? In either case, he had been unhappy with her, as he was now.

"Help me, please?" she asked her brother.

"Who will carry him?"

With a smile creeping out, Ayali turned to Alo. "I think he wants to."

Nodin shrugged. "He's never been wrong."

She patted the white neck. Alo had always been right in his instincts. At least, she hoped he never was wrong.

Ayali laid a wet cloth over the stranger's purpling forehead. He had bruised his face in his tumble and broken his arm.

While Ayali tended the stranger's cuts and scrapes, her mother tended his arm.

It had taken until past sunset to reach the camp, with the stranger's added burden keeping them to a walking pace. By then, the stranger's face had swollen and a section on the left side of his forehead and cheek had turned into a purple blotch.

Her father had said nothing to her since returning, but her mother had smoothed things out. Nori had only to see the stranger laying across Alo's back and the care with which the stallion stepped to realize what it meant. She offered her assistance as if the stranger were one of their own.

With Nodin and her mother helping Ayali, they had carried him into their family tent. Her mother had spread blankets out on the hardpacked dirt and rolled another for under his head.

Working together, they had undressed his upper body from the odd clothes he wore, a sleeveless leather cover that laced up tight over a loose garment. The embroidery on the leather had been done with greater skill than the best Caveshi. Her mother said she had seen such clothes on foreigners of his kind in Chavali, but only those who stayed at Moravay Palace as guests of the sovereign.

"He will sleep, but I know not how long," Nori said as she examined the arm. "You say he fell?"

Ayali set the cold, wet cloth on his swollen cheek with its rough stubble of an emerging beard. "He tried to escape the dragon chasing him, and his horse stumbled."

Nori nodded her head but focused her attention on the arm. "Near the wrist. I need a splint. Must have tried to break his fall with his hands."

While her mother stood and searched to find what she needed, Ayali looked down at the stranger. The stubble on his jaw made him look older than he had when she first found him. How old was he? Could he use magic? Or had she been wrong?

"*Mashea*, can you not heal him? You've done it before with magic."

"No, Ayali."

"But—"

Nori turned, stopping her objections. "Time is the best healer for these wounds."

Before she could object, the flap of the tent opened. She turned and cringed.

Taima looked in, vexation across his face. "Why are his wrists unbound? He'll wake and escape. We have questions for him."

Before Ayali could speak up, her mother stepped between them. "He'll go nowhere; his arm is broken and he's unconscious still. I had to untie him so I can tend the wounds."

The anger on her father's face looked from the stranger to Nori, but he said nothing. Without a word, he whirled and stormed off.

"He hates me." Ayali choked on the words.

Her mother turned with a gentle smile. "No. He loves you, or he wouldn't be angry. Don't think that he hates you."

"He's mad because of me." That much her mother couldn't deny. Ayali could never please her father.

Nori shook her head and exited the tent without a word.

Alone with the stranger, Ayali brushed away the layers of golden blonde hair that barely covered his ears. Who was he? His features matched nothing she had seen in her experience. He had not the slenderness of the Rivon or the sinewy build of the Caveshi. Rather, he had a strong jaw and thick strong arms attached to shoulders broader than any man she had seen. And he had the pale skin of the northern men.

Her mother and father had described them from their escapades into Chavali in their younger years, when her mother rode Alo and fought as a warrior; before the first child came, Ayali's older brother Sakima.

Running her hands down his shoulder and arm, she realized how thick with muscle they were. Were all men of the north like this?

He had worn a saber, or what the Rivon called a sword, belted to his waist, a long, unwieldy blade. She found it cumbersome and tiring to swing, unlike her knife. Perhaps that was how he had built such muscle.

Ayali smiled as a thought ran through her mind. *It'd be a sure bet you're stronger than anyone here.* She would enjoy watching a match of strength.

At the sound of voices outside, she pulled the blanket over him.

Her mother entered alone with the leather straps and sticks she needed to splint his wrist. She frowned as she knelt next to the injury. "As soon as he's conscious, I must question him."

Ayali nodded. She had expected that. Better her mother than her father, who had no patience for the Rivon and their allies.

In the silence of the tent, her mother worked. Ayali helped to support the arm while her mother wrapped the finger-thick sticks into place, so he couldn't move the wrist but could still use his fingers.

"When we're finished, the elders would like you to join them."

Ayali stared at her mother, who finished tying the strap in place. Her heart thumped against her chest. Had she done something wrong by showing mercy on the stranger that the elders wished to judge her for it?

"Relax." The warm smile on her mother's face soothed away some of the anxieties creeping into Ayali's mind. "They only wish to know more, to be better prepared when he awakens."

Ayali grimaced. "Are you sure?"

"You trusted Alo. They respect the *Ferdrai*. They want to know what you saw, what you felt. You are *my* child, gifted with the same power. You must have seen something in the magic. Tell them everything." Nori stroked Ayali's beaded hair as she had many times in her young life. "You're an adult member of this tribe and a priestess in training. They'll stand by you."

The calm of her mother's voice and touch, as well as the vivid colors of magic around her provided some comfort. An adult, yes. A fully trained priestess, no. But she had listened to the magic.

"They're waiting for you," her mother said. "I'll stay with him, and Nodin stands guard outside."

Ayali gave the stranger one last look and exited the family tent with its warm fire.

Outside in the cool night, she shivered from her bare arms and legs. In the distance, a mare whinnied to her foal. Alo was out there, somewhere, with his herd. He hadn't given up his duties as the lead stallion, despite his affinity for their family.

All this because of him. Had he not insisted they bring the strange man back to the tribe, they wouldn't have this trouble. She hoped he was right.

Ayali reached through the forces of magic to touch the brightness of his presence.

A reverberating call cut through the dark, moonless night. She recognized the depth of that voice; like every human, each horse had its own voice. Alo had heard her and sent his support.

With a smile, she peered through the dark between tents in the direction of his call. "Thanks, Alo."

Ayali glanced aside at a smile on Nodin's face and walked away beneath the canopy of stars with renewed confidence. The well-worn ground outside the family tent gave way to the trampled grass of the Sehe'an's summer camp. In a moon cycle they would pack up and move south, to the lands where rain fell aplenty in winter, a journey made every five autumns to visit their sister tribes after the convocation of tribes at the sacred gathering place.

On her short walk, her thoughts shifted to the coming of the cooler season. Although the Chajapah River never froze, the grains wouldn't grow. Already, the season changed. If the stranger came from the north, he must have been accustomed to worse than she had seen.

Lost in her thoughts, she arrived at the large council tent near the center of their camp in less time than she expected. From inside, a single voice drifted out, one of the warriors who had accompanied them.

Through the open flap, she saw him standing in the center of a sea of faces. The elders sat on one side of the circle, listening intently from either side of the age-lined face of *Epaiyishel* Dopata, the old leader. The intricate work of his beaded chestplate stood out from the basic clothes of the other four.

Her heart leapt into her throat. They had opened the meeting to anyone and it seemed half the tribe had turned out to hear of the incident with the dragon.

Ayali clenched her teeth and balled her fingers into fists at her sides to keep from fidgeting. She had to go, whether she wished to speak in front of everyone or not.

The knowing eyes of Dopata flicked to her and he gave a nod before returning his attention to the one currently speaking. He awaited her.

Ayali took a deep breath and forced her feet forward. When she reached the back rows of observers, she halted. However, Dopata motioned her forward. She stepped around friends and family crowded together.

Raga watched her, hesitating for a moment in his story. From his description, Ayali knew he was at the end.

When she reached the free space in the center, she noticed a friend of hers and sidled close to her. Raga concluded his story as she sat down close to Fenahi. Her friend nodded in silent acknowledgement.

"We thank you," said one of the elders, an old man named Seno, her grandfather. After Dopata, Seno was the next most respected individual, kind and fair in his judgments but keen in his observations.

Raga found a place near the front and sat.

"One more have we to hear, then we will make our judgment. Ayali." The depths of wisdom in Dopata's eyes invited her forward.

Her face burned hot at being called to speak, but Ayali stood before the council. Her mother's words ran through her mind, calming her heart from its race.

Seno smiled in a way that reassured her of their good intentions. The council was fair, she read in that gentle expression, and she had seen it in the wisdom of their decisions; but she had never stood before them. It could also have helped that her grandfather was much gentler than her father, at least with her and her brothers.

"The others say impressive things about the stranger and Alo's reaction. Tell us what you saw. Why did you show mercy on the stranger who rode with the enemy?"

With a deep breath, Ayali told them what she saw. She told them about the gray horse that had shown courage to protect its rider and the energy she felt in connection to him. She also described Alo's insistence. The more she spoke, the easier the story flowed.

They asked no questions for details but nodded as they listened.

When she finished, Seno thanked her as he had Raga.

"Now, all have spoken," Dopata said. "You heard the stories. Go now. We will make our decision about the stranger."

He looked directly at Ayali when he added, "We'll send for you when we reach agreement."

Ayali nodded and rose to leave with the others. A few paces from the tent, she paused and turned back as a couple of warriors closed the tent from outside eyes.

That was easy...too easy. A new worry shot into her. Had she told them enough? What had the others said? What if they decided the stranger should be secured or worse—sent back? What would they decide to do with him?

Ayali hurried to her family tent, needing to distract herself tending the wounds of the stranger. While logic screamed to return the man to the Rivon, another part of her was curious about him. She wanted to know more.

Pain tingled through him, starting at his head, which pounded as if it would explode. When he tried to move his hand to it, his arm ached with a pain that sent everything spinning. His stomach twisted with nausea. He rolled onto his side, wincing at the incredible stabbing in his right wrist and the side of his face.

What happened to him?

He opened his eyes, but found his left eye swollen almost shut. From his right eye, he made out blurs of color.

"Ayali! Api gahano."

He frowned at the strange voice and the fact that he couldn't understand. He blinked to clear the unfocused blurs of his vision but recognized nothing.

What was familiar?

Where was he?

Who was he?

He tried to push himself up with his good hand, but his head was too heavy.

"Vi. Uwe ki'al ahe."

He wanted to sit up and see them. Whoever they were. But when he sat with his back humped over in an effort to lift the massive weight that was his head, multiple hands pressed him back to the ground.

"Uwe nego. Hatanko bega ahe."

As he lay back down, the pounding in his head subsided. He rested with his eyes closed until the vertigo passed again. He opened his eyes, and two shapes moved over him, shapes that slowly gained definition and transformed into faces.

{"Who are you?"} The dryness of his mouth allowed only a whisper of his voice.

After a pause, they exchanged a flurry of words too fast to comprehend as more than sounds, especially since he knew not what they said.

The faces came into focus. Two women gazed down on him.

Women?

They brought something close to his face. Wetness trickled down his cheek—water. He opened his dry mouth to welcome the cool refreshment, which distracted him from the pain.

He gulped it down, each swallow intensifying his awareness of thirst.

When he had enough, he lifted his pain-free hand to brush away the source. {"Enough. Thank you."}

The woman on his left smiled and set the pouch aside. He noted the smooth tightness of her dark skin and realized she was younger than the other.

"Hi'op se'a ahe?"

He frowned. From her tone he understood that she had asked him a question. However, she spoke a language he couldn't understand.

{"Where am I?"}

The woman on the right looked down a moment and moved her lips as if practicing sounds. A couple seconds later, she leaned over and asked, ["Who are you?"]

He blinked and stared into the blue of her eyes. Although the language wasn't the one he spoke with ease, he understood her. In reply, he shook his head. Not a good idea—the slightest

movement brought back the throbbing. He winced and put his good hand to his head as if he could stop the pain.

["You fell,"] the woman said slowly. ["Your horse fell. Your head hit ground. Day slept you. Broke your wrist. We healed you. You...*ge'antam?*"]

Guessing at what she asked, he nodded, moving his head as little as possible to respond. ["Who are you?"] he asked.

The woman glanced away, then to the other. He followed her gaze to the bare-armed, younger woman, who nodded.

["I called Nori. She called Ayali. Your life saved she."]

He smiled at Ayali in spite of the dull ache in his cheek. ["Thank you."]

After a moment, she flashed a quick smile. By the hesitation on her face he knew she hadn't understood the words.

"Api owan, 'Tiowankashe i'mo'," Nori said.

At that, the young woman's smile grew. *"E'uat'ahai."*

["She says, 'Service blessed.'"] With formalities aside, the smile dropped from Nori's face. ["The others want know why you ride with enemy. They have questions."]

He frowned. Enemy? Rode with them? What had happened to him? Who had questions? ["I know nothing. Tell me who I am."]

At that, the woman sat back. If her dark complexion couldn't pale, a miracle happened.

"Yipai owan api?" the younger woman asked.

"Api hepahi vioshana." She shook her head. *"vi' doshan ogai api."*

The younger woman looked at him with the same disappointment that he heard in the older woman's voice. However, he thought he recognized a glint of relief in her face. He could have been mistaken, but was she glad that he couldn't remember?

"Nori. Ayali."

Both women turned to the deep, authoritative voice that snapped their names.

He followed their gazes.

A tall man stood with the light of day behind him where the dark fabric had been. He wore his black hair tied with leather straps from top to bottom in two long tails, one over each shoulder of a light, sleeveless top decorated with stitching and beadwork with leggings below that. An ivory handle jutted out of a leather sheath at his waist.

The look on the man's face hardened when his dark eyes fixed on the stranger, and the man stepped into the tent.

Nori stood up, the beads in her long, black hair clicking faintly, and stepped between them, her hands to his chest blocking him. She whispered something to the man. He studied her, his hands on her shoulders, and muttered something back.

Nori nodded. The man pushed her aside with a surprising gentleness.

"Epaiyi..." Ayali said. A stern look from the man silenced her.

"Api owien Rivon."

The man looked back at Nori, who remained standing, then to the stranger. ["Understand you can? Your life we decide will."]

["Yes."]

"Taima—" Nori said.

The man turned to her and spoke too low to hear. When Nori put a hand to his clean-shaven face, the man smiled. Ah! Now, it made sense.

While the two exchanged words, he closed his eyes with a sigh. Nori and this Taima, if that

was his name, were a couple. Something inside him said Taima would be watching him closely, not just for the reasons the man gave him with his words.

Just as well. He wanted answers, to return to whatever home where he belonged.

When a cold wetness touched the left side of his face, he looked up at Ayali. She laid a cold cloth on his cheek. Why had she rescued him? What had happened to him?

He wished he could speak to her directly, but it would have to wait, unless Nori could translate for him.

As Ayali dipped the cloth into a basin of water and wrung it out, Nori and Taima finished their discussion. After a long, dark stare, the man exited the tent.

Nori rejoined them, her expression downcast. She avoided his eyes by examining the splint on his wrist.

After a long silence, Ayali spoke up. "*Vipai Epaiyi owien?*"

Nori let her breath out and looked up. "*Narkov adage nawi setant ke'ia nagawehoshe avi weha'eshashe.*" She paused and focused on him. Her throat flashed with a swallow. By her hesitation he knew it wasn't good news.

["The others—some others—say risk are you to stay. They... send you back when healed. Many days back to Sovereign. Dragons may return. They afraid are that you bring dragons to us. I said you need much time, not ready until after market."]

Who was this sovereign? Where would they send him back? What were these dragons? And ["What is 'market'?"]

["Tribes gather for convocation. All meet at market to trade, before finish travel to winter camp. This year to travel."]

So much to consider at once. The information stirred up questions with no immediate answers. The frustration topped his annoyance with not knowing any of his past.

When light streamed into the tent, all eyes turned to the intruder. "*Moe madahe leko'ai ne mehan aha.*"

Nori and Ayali smiled as the young man handed them large flat-bottomed bowls of food. "*Tiowankashe,*" they both responded.

An expression of thanks? It stuck in his mind.

"*Avi apo?*" the young man asked.

Nori took the third bowl and thanked the young man, who flashed a smile and departed from the tent.

When the young man was gone, Nori returned her attention to him. ["Can you eat?"]

He strained to pull his head up to check the contents of the bowl. A strip of cooked venison lay next to some sort of yellow grain and an odd green plant cut into short strips. Although he knew not whether he even liked such foods, his stomach grumbled its demands. He needed to eat. He reached out with his good hand to take the bowl, but Nori set the food aside.

"*Ireto mie?*" As she extended a hand beneath his head, Ayali did the same from her side.

Uncertain but curious of what they planned, he let them do as they wished. They pulled him up to sit. Despite the slowness with which they helped him sit up, his head still throbbed. He winced but waved off any further help. ["I am fine."]

["Eat. You feel much good will."] Nori handed him the waterskin they had used earlier and climbed to her feet with her bowl in one hand. She waved Ayali to join her.

When they both stood over him, she said, ["Eat and rest. We let no one disturb you."]

["Thank you for your kindness."]

Nori translated his words and both smiled at him before leaving him alone in the tent.

As long as he sat still, the throbbing stayed to a minimum. He ate everything they gave him, including the bland greens, which satisfied his stomach.

While upright, he examined the interior of the tent around him, but it contained few personal items, none of which triggered any memories. Animal pelts covered the ground in places, although he noticed they had placed a blanket beneath him. The blanket covering him bore intricate woven patterns of squares and triangles of reds and tan.

Strange items hung from the poles supporting the tent, including the center pole. Other blankets lay rolled up along with some sort of reed mats and basic utensils.

Through the tent flowed a gentle breeze carrying the perfume of flowers. With it came a variety of voices from outside speaking the same strange but gentle language that he couldn't understand.

He felt something else in the loneliness, something he could only compare to the warmth of light. Like an inner glow to banish darkness, it brought a contented feeling and a smile. Despite the harshness and warning of Taima, he knew these people valued the gifts of land and life.

He wished he could leave the tent and see more, but common sense told him to stay. Until his head settled, he could not go far. If sitting up was difficult, standing would be futile.

Hopefully the women would return soon. He needed answers. Questions swam in his head; topmost of them was where he was and how he had gotten there.

After eating with her mother, Ayali excused herself to check the horses. She needed to see Alo. Although he couldn't speak, she had to ask him why he had insisted on bringing the stranger. At least he could listen. She knew he understood.

Also, the elders had decided last night to question the stranger when he could at least walk and speak. He could speak, but he spoke in a tongue none of them had heard before. Luckily, he also spoke Rivon quite well, or so her mother had said. That wouldn't put him in the best graces of the others, but her mother and father could communicate with him. They had learned Rivon in their adventures when they were younger.

The elders had decided that the stranger hadn't lured the dragon. He couldn't have brought such darkness into their lands. From her description and an in depth examination of his spirit by Shenal—her grandmother and chief priestess—they learned he was *Lumathir*, a child of Light. While he was human as anyone, Shenal claimed that a strong connection to the Light flickered within him that would not allow him to intentionally cause harm.

The elders accepted her word and so had ordered that he be cared for as if he had come from one of their allies.

Many of the warriors who had fought the Rivon in the last thirty summers found no comfort in the orders, but they respected the decision. With many summers and experiences behind them, the wisdom of the elders rarely proved wrong.

Much like Alo.

As the sun slid to the horizon, the horses moved closer to the camp and the security of forty family tents of various colors and embroidered designs. Alo grazed at the edge of the herd opposite the warriors who stood watch.

When Ayali approached, the white stallion lifted his head, ears pricked forward at the top of the thick, crested neck. He let out a deep nicker and approached her.

Ayali smiled at the way the setting sun made his coat glow, despite the tell-tale signs of his rolling in the dirt that dusted it.

When they met, Alo lowered his head and nuzzled her hand for treats. When he discovered nothing, his rough tongue scoured across her palm. She knew not what he tasted, but let him lick.

With her other hand, Ayali reorganized his split forelock into one long section of hair down the center of his face almost to his nostrils. The rest of his long mane she adjusted so the loose pieces all lay on one side of his thick neck.

When Alo finished with whatever he had enjoyed on her hand, he shook his head and threw everything back to disarray.

"Fine. I'll leave it alone." Ayali sighed and stroked the soft coat along the crest of his neck and shoulder. "What do you think, old man? Why did you want the stranger brought back here?"

Alo lifted his head, ears forward, watching the activities of the camp. Some of the children laughed and raced around the various family tents.

"Ignore me, will you?"

For a second, one of the gray-tipped ears swiveled back toward her. A few seconds later, he dropped his head to graze.

Ayali let out a sigh and laid her head against his ribs, listening to the tearing of grass and the gurgling sounds of his belly.

In the quiet of the time before sunset, she found the place within her where the magic resided. It shone brighter than when she was alone; it always did in contact with Alo. Somehow the *Ferdrai* could enhance the abilities of the descendants of the Trinity of Majera.

Her mother had found her true power while in battle astride Alo as a young woman. He had shown her the way.

Ayali had yet to find her true power. It frustrated her when she strained to use it, and she tired quickly of simple tasks like lighting a fire or moving an object. Her grandmother, the elder priestess, had taught her the language of the Trinity and the ways of the *Lumathir* of the far city of Narethal. However, Ayali had not the strength of her mother or grandmother. Alo had not given her more as he had for her mother.

"What's wrong with me?" she asked to no one in particular as his tail snapped her like a whip.

Alo lifted his head to bite at a fly on his opposite shoulder and resumed his grazing.

At least you listen, if you can't answer. Part of her was glad he couldn't tell her, especially when she doubted she wanted an answer.

She wished she could be like her brothers without any signs of being able to use magic. However, she wouldn't be able to ride Alo, since he had never permitted them on his back. For that she was grateful.

Ayali gazed over the wide back to the hills sprinkled with flowers vanishing into the horizon.

Alo had let the stranger on his back, but would he also let him ride?

Curiosity flashed images before her. They merged with memories of the stranger's gray stallion.

Through the grass waving in the breeze, she saw something else. A vision as real as the sunset superimposed over the hills. The stranger sat upon a galloping gray horse without restraint, leading a herd of horses ranging from black suckling foals to white mares and stallions covering the land to the horizon. In greater numbers than all the peoples of the Caveshan Plains they thundered across the land.

Her heart caught in her throat.

Alo lifted his head to stare into the distance as the vision faded.

Ayali blinked away the images and wiped the moisture that had accumulated in her eyes. A soft nicker and the tickle of whiskers on her upper arm chased away the rush of emotion and pulled a smile to her lips.

"I haven't ignored you." She rubbed his forehead and gazed into the soft, brown eyes.

As if nothing had happened, Alo returned to his grazing. What had she seen? Had it been the *Ferdrai*? A vision or a dream of hope?

Did Alo know? The questions burned in her mind but he stepped away while tearing at the grass. At times Alo showed signs of an intelligence far superior to other horses, but most of the time he acted like no more than an ordinary animal. Was there more to his choosing to save the stranger than seeing the gift of Light in him?

Had she truly had a vision of the *Ferdrai* or was it a daydream?

Until she knew more, she would keep it to herself.

Ayali stepped back from the stallion. When one of the larger foals nibbled on her shirt, she pried the teeth away and scratched the muscular back. The bay filly stretched her nose out in pleasure until Ayali stopped. With a snort, the filly tossed her head and pretended to spook at something only she could see, kicking her heels out at whatever imaginary predator chased her.

Ayali giggled at the antics, forgetting for a moment the troubles of the last couple of days. A

trip to the horses had been exactly what she needed to lift her spirits.

"Ayali."

She turned at the familiar voice. Her brother Nodin strode toward her, a crooked smile on his face. Suspicion gnawed at her thoughts.

He stopped a stride away. "*Epaiyi* says you still have unfinished work."

Confusion furrowed her brow, until she recalled the task she had left undone. The river fed a large grove of fruit trees upstream from their camp. She hadn't returned to finish picking the ripened apples, plums, and myriad berries. A couple of her married friends had been assigned with her to the job. Apparently Nashi and Alin hadn't finished either.

"I'll return to the grove tomorrow." As much as she wished to speak with the stranger, she had duties to her people, which included gathering food in preparation for the upcoming journey. Her friends had the excuse of tending to their children. She had nothing else that gave her a reason to be elsewhere, not even the rank of priestess, but she wished to learn more about the stranger as soon as possible.

When Nodin failed to leave after passing on the message, she frowned.

A conspiratorial smile crept up his face. "The stranger asked for you."

"He did?"

"According to mother. She speaks with him now. I think she'd like you there to answer his questions."

His tone suggested more, which infuriated her. Ayali narrowed her eyes in a scowl as his smile grew.

"Alo chose to save him. I did nothing." She stomped away.

He followed but not fast enough to keep up. However, she heard him mutter, "Nothing at all."

Although she liked Nodin better of her two brothers, his teasing sometimes went too far.

When she reached their tent, voices from within stopped her. She recognized the stranger and her mother conversing in the Rivon language. Pushing Nodin's suggestion from her thoughts, Ayali ducked inside.

Both turned to her.

The stranger smiled, or at least attempted to. The swelling on the bruised side of his head prevented him from using any fine control. She noticed he wore his shirt now, the one her mother had cleaned.

He said something as she joined her mother.

"I don't know who I am," Nori translated. "But I'm told that you know what happened. Please tell me."

Ayali described watching the Rivon cavalry riding toward them when the dragon appeared. She paused occasionally to let her mother translate. Although Nori could speak Rivon, more than fifteen summers had passed since she last used it. She had some trouble, but managed to convey the meaning, or so Ayali assumed by the attentive gaze of the stranger.

When she finished, he asked a question. "What will happen to me?"

Ayali and her mother exchanged looks and shrugged. The elders wouldn't discuss it again until after he was well enough to move around on his own.

Although Ayali couldn't understand Rivon, she guessed that her mother probably told him of their decision.

He dropped his eyes and was silent for a while. When he spoke, her mother answered his questions without translating.

Ayali sat and listened, wishing she could understand Rivon. Afterwards, she took a cue from her mother, who stood up to leave.

The stranger smiled and said a word she had heard him express before. In a hesitant voice, he also said, "*Tio...wankashe?*"

Ayali smiled, pleased that he would thank them in their own language. For someone who had no memory of his life, he learned fast.

When Ayali exited the tent with her mother, the stars in the sky sparkled, although a section of clouds blotted out some of them.

"We will have rain tonight," Nori said. A cool wind flapped at the tent fabric.

Ayali shivered, wishing she had grabbed a blanket. With the coming of dusk, the day had ended. The evening activities would begin, music and dancing and stories to distract her from thinking about the vision and the questions she wanted to ask.

At a warm touch on her shoulder, Ayali turned to her mother.

"Before then, we'll enjoy ourselves," her mother said.

Ayali smiled and walked with her to the open fire in the center of the camp.

At least the stranger wouldn't be strong enough to go anywhere for a while, perhaps another moon cycle. Hopefully she could find out more about her vision in that time. If she was lucky, he would end up traveling with them to the winter camp. That would give her more time to learn about him and satisfy her curiosity.

Seven days passed and the swelling was down to nothing. The pain of his broken wrist still bothered him, but the splint stayed secure and prevented him from moving the joint. A few moon cycles would pass before he fully healed, according to Nori.

He stepped outside the tent of the priestesses, clean-shaven and full. He marveled at the activity of the people around him. A few paused to stare before continuing on their business, but no one made any threatening moves.

The family had left the tent in early dawn, their activities rousing him enough to realize they left, but they had let him sleep. He awoke to a plate of flatbread and fruit.

Now, he stood outside in the warmth of the rising sun over the chilly land.

The sounds and smells of the tribe surrounded him as they had while he recuperated inside. Dogs chased children or followed women working outside. Everyone worked, he noticed, except the very young children. However, even they took turns grooming the horses picketed outside most of the family tents, the *mankaiyashe* as Nori had told him. Although he knew not why, he found their whole lifestyle strange. Without any memories of what he had left, he had nothing to compare, but it struck him as gentler and simpler than he expected.

In the distance, the mares and foals grazed. The stallion Nori had described, the same Ayali had said she rode the day she saw him attacked, watched over the herd from a distance. He wanted to see this special horse, which Nori had told him she raised from an orphan colt, up close. This horse that wouldn't yield to bridle nor saddle. The same horse admired by the Rivon enough to inflame a conflict more than twenty years ago that continued to this day.

He had ridden with the Rivon prince Narkov, Nori had said. He knew not why, particularly if the Rivon were as selfish as he understood from Taima's descriptions. Until he learned more, he wouldn't return. He wished to be prepared when the day came.

"Ashi."

He turned, knowing they meant him. In their last few encounters, Taima had often referred to him by *Ashigiba*, which they told him meant "yellow mane", but most had cut it down to simply *Ashi*. Without any other name, he could accept that one, at least temporarily.

One of the young men stood nearby, his long hair wrapped in several tails with leather straps. One of Nori's sons, he recalled, although the name escaped him for the moment.

The sharp, brown eyes studied Ashi as if uncertain how to act.

Ashi held his hands up, palms outward, in conciliation, or at least his left palm, since his right was bound.

"*Awiani mie*," the man said with a firmness that allowed no room for argument. He stepped forward, gesturing for Ashi to follow next to him.

Not wanting to upset the man, Ashi followed him through the camp. Of course they wouldn't leave him alone, he realized. From the tone Taima used to address him and what they had told him of how they found him, he expected they trusted him little.

They walked among the people without bother. Several of the younger women smiled as they passed, and a few of the older boys asked questions of his escort, but no one interfered. If Ashi wanted, he could escape at any time, but curiosity and a lack of familiarity with the area, on top of his injured and splinted wrist, kept him bound to the camp. They had only treated him well.

They stopped at a large, tan colored tent bearing a pattern of stitching that resembled a group

of men around a central figure. In another place on the large tent a man and a woman stood on either side of a taller, obscure figure with stars around them.

Through the open flap, he recognized Nori's face. The man with him pointed inside. "*Nawi e'aifasho ahi.*"

Ashi frowned but understood by the gesture and Nori's motion from inside that he was expected to enter. He ducked inside.

A line of five older men sat in an arc on the opposite side of a clear, central area. The center man wore a fancy chestplate separating him from the others, who wore plain or beaded shirts with various necklaces. Nori had described the council to him. The center man was their leader, Dopata.

The elders watched Ashi without reaction.

["They are our elders,"] Nori said as he sat next to her. ["They heard from many that find you. Now they want hear from you."]

He nodded, recalling what she had told him about having to face the elders. ["Did you tell them I can't remember?"]

She nodded, her beads clicking softly in her hair. ["They pass judgment after talk to you, decide to help you will, maybe end conflict with Sovereign."]

["I'll do what I can, but I know no Sovereign."]

A grimace twisted her lips for a moment but she erased it before turning to the council.

The man with the chestplate spoke first.

Nori interpreted when he paused. ["He says you look better than he expect. You tell them what remember."]

Ashi shook his head and shrugged, meeting the gaze of the elders without flinching. He had nothing to hide and no reason to lie.

["Nothing. I remember nothing before waking with you and Ayali tending my wounds. I know not how I was injured, nor where I come from, nor my name. I know not my past."]

They waited while Nori translated, nodding without any hint of approval or disapproval on their weathered faces. After she finished, they spoke to each other.

In the days since he had awakened, he had stayed mostly inside the tent of Nori and Taima but had heard enough of their language to recognize repeated words. The term *ashigiba* came up a few times along with glances his way. He also recognized Ayali's name in their conversation and the name Alo, which he knew to be the stallion they revered. Why was a horse so important? Why did it stir feelings of longing within him?

When they finished their discussion, the man seated to the right of the center spoke. He asked a question.

["Want you to return to Sovereign Farolkavin?"]

Ashi glanced aside at Nori. Were they offering him a choice? He stared, puzzled by their generosity. From what he had heard of the battles between the Rivon and the Caveshi from Taima, he had assumed he would be considered a prisoner.

["I have a choice?"]

["Many days they discuss this. You are not part of war. Journey is many days to Chavali and dragons may attack. You may stay until better, but to southern camp we leave in moon cycle; long journey south, farther from Chavali."]

Ashi looked from her to the waiting elders, who sat with quiet patience. If he returned to this sovereign, perhaps his memories would return. However, from the stories he had been told of the man, he wasn't certain that he liked that option. He also feared a return of whatever beasts had

attacked him; Taima's words had indicated he was lucky to be alive. And his memories might not return as he hoped, no matter his circumstances. In that case, he preferred the Caveshi.

Despite Taima's initial animosity toward him, Ashi liked these people. He wanted to learn more, and he wanted to be strong enough to fight if he faced one of the dragons again.

["You have much to consider."]

Something in Nori's eyes made him frown. He couldn't identify what he saw, but suspected she hid something or had more to say. If he understood her meaning, he knew his answer.

["I need time to think."]

She smiled, obviously pleased by his answer. After she translated his words, Dopata nodded and said a few words.

["You leave may anytime, but you alone if stay after we leave."]

He almost chuckled at the response. Either their leader had a sense of humor or meant it in all seriousness. No matter the case, Ashi replied in their language, "Many thanks."

The elders smiled and rose.

Nori stood up with them and pulled Ashi's arm in an indication that he should show the same respects. He stood with her and watched them leave.

In the empty tent, she said, ["You have wisdom."]

He followed her out, where she said something to her son. He looked at Ashi with a hint of suspicion, like his father, in his eyes.

["If you stay, you must work,"] she said with a glance to his right arm. ["We need all to help, but not to hurt wrist again. Sakima give you easy task will."]

Ashi looked from her to the warrior and shrugged. Why not? At least it might keep him occupied or perhaps might even loosen some memories. He wished he could remember something, anything.

After a quick word to Sakima, Nori excused herself. Sakima, who stood a bit shorter than Ashi but a hair taller than his brother, motioned him to follow. "*Awiani.*"

Ashi walked next to the man, but his eyes scanned the tents of the tribe and the activities. He wanted to know who he was. What was his home like? They said he had come from the north. What were the people like there? Did he have friends, family? What had he left behind?

Despite his confusion, he liked this place enough to stay, at least for a while; long enough to consider the elders' offer. By the time the tribe left for their convocation and market he might know something about himself, or at least he hoped.

Sakima led him to a plot where half a dozen young boys and girls and a couple of older women in colorful dresses dug holes in the ground; or, rather, dug up roots from the ground. At their approach, one of the two women, her long gray hair braided back with a variety of decorative beads, met with the warrior.

Ashi tried listening to Sakima's words but couldn't follow the strange tongue. Rather than continuing with the futile effort, he watched the children.

They looked up and waved at him but at a word from the other woman, returned to their digging using tools made of some strange bone-like material. The word "antlers" popped into his head and he frowned.

While he puzzled about the images of antlered creatures springing into the air with grace and speed on four long, scrawny legs, Ashi never heard Sakima's call.

A nudge on his shoulder shattered the odd visions. "*Ashigiba.*"

Ashi blinked and turned to the warrior.

"*Nakaia'lashi...eh...Lashi.*" Sakima pointed to the old woman.

She put a hand to her chest and smiled. *"Lashi itanke'o shi ohine ai'ana."*

Ashi smiled and bowed his head, not sure what to say. Was Lashi her name or a greeting of some sort or perhaps a title? When Sakima nudged him in the ribs with his elbow, Ashi turned to him.

The warrior leaned near and in a low voice said, *"Ahe e'uate mie."* He flicked his eyes to the old woman and put his palm up in a gesture indicating the woman.

When he failed to respond, Sakima straightened and spoke in a slower voice to Ashi. *"Ahe e'uate mie."*

Was he supposed to repeat the phrase?

When the two watched him in silence, he spoke the words.

The old woman smiled. The endless cracks in the leathery skin of her face lengthened and smoothed out with the gesture.

Upon glancing aside at Sakima, he caught a nod.

Sakima and the woman exchanged a few more words, with the warrior pointing to the splint on Ashi's wrist. The old woman nodded.

After the brief exchange, the woman excused Sakima. From the dropping of his eyes the warrior gave her, Ashi realized she held some authority.

He stood alone with the old woman, who put a wrinkled hand out toward the patch of holes and freshly turned soil in which the children worked.

"Ashigiba. Mio Tiowankashe i'reto ga'aihi ti hata."

Although he had no idea what she said, he guessed by the expression of thanks that she appreciated his help.

The children giggled as she handed him a wooden rod with a stone carved flat stuck in the end and wrapped at the connection with rawhide. The woman explained in her language and made gestures with her hands.

When he dug at the earth, a couple of the children came up and spoke to him in words too fast. He smiled in amusement at how they helped him.

The girl on his right, her black hair hanging in two braids, pushed the blade tool deep into the dirt around a plant of wide leaves and pulled back. She did it a couple more times until he uncovered a large, thick root.

"Ga'aihi," the boy said from his left and stuck his dirty fingers deep into the soil to pull out the root. He brushed the dirt off the fine root hairs of the white tuber and held it toward Ashi. *"Ga'aihi,"* he repeated and waited.

Ashi smirked and repeated the word. If he understood correctly, the word referred to the root they had helped him dig up. Now it made sense.

The boy smiled brightly and nodded. In a quieter voice, he repeated the word and tossed the root onto a pile of them.

Understanding now what they intended him to help with, Ashi dug up the next in a line with the two children watching. The older women smiled and whispered to each other. Although the heat of the day brought sweat to his brow and down his back, Ashi enjoyed the simple task. Being out in the warm sun fulfilled him more than the cooler shadows of the tent.

Occasionally a couple of the children would start a song or giggle at something one of them said or did. At times like that, he realized how much he was an outsider and wished he understood their jokes.

As the day wore on, one of the older girls brought a skin of water out to them. The cold water cooled him from the inside, but he wished for a swim in the river, which trickled past so near that

he gazed at the cool water.

As if reading his thoughts, the horses splashed into the river, their muzzles down. A few laid down in the shallow edge and rolled until water dripped from every part of them. Horses of all ages and colors paused to drink before splashing out on the opposite bank.

The white stallion, however, stood watch. Not just watch, as he realized, but watching him. Was that Alo? Nori had mentioned that the stallion Ayali had ridden when they found him had shown a special curiosity about him.

The magnificent horse looked familiar, but he couldn't be. Ashi had set foot outside the family's tent for the first time that morning. He had heard descriptions of Alo but had never set eyes on him, at least not from that close.

"Ashigiba."

The name roused him from his confusion. He turned and recognized a look of concern on the old woman's face. She turned to the horses.

"Alo."

Ashi returned his eyes to the white stallion, relieved to know he was right. The stallion nickered to one of the mares passing close to him and followed after her. Her black colt trotted at her side.

Something intelligent and kind had touched him while caught in the stallion's gaze. As sure as the sun dipped from its pinnacle in the sky, he swore it. What was it about the stallion that he had felt?

Perhaps later he could ask Nori about her horse.

In the meantime, Lashi directed the children, who responded by loading the harvest of the large, white roots into baskets piled nearby.

When his stomach grumbled, he understood why they quit, despite the arcs of sunlight left in the day. He helped load the baskets with his good hand as a thought crossed his mind.

Where had Ayali and Nori gone?

Her mother said little about the stranger since joining her. Ayali wanted to ask what the elders had said in their brief meeting, but dared not for fear of attracting unwanted attention. She was curious, nothing else, but her friends and brothers teased her about her interest in the stranger.

Instead of letting her curiosity eat away at her mind, she watched her grandmother carefully. Shenal wove an intricate pattern of dyed reeds into her basket. The harvest had begun, and before they finished, they would need many new baskets to replace the old ones or those they had sold or traded. Ayali hoped to master the skill like her grandmother and the other older women of the tribe, just as she hoped one day to master the power of the *Lumathir* inside her.

The thoughts agitated her. Ayali fumbled with the reeds, her mind lost on her frustrations. Before she realized, strong hands settled over hers and tightened until she couldn't move her fingers.

Ayali looked up to the face of her mother.

Nori made a good priestess; she wore a face as gentle as a mother should have for her child but as stern as any leader bearing the burden of respect.

"You should practice your lessons. Recite the Legend of Narethal...in the tongue of the Majera."

Ayali frowned and looked from her mother to her grandmother. With a face of unblemished beauty, Shenal smiled and dropped her eyes to the colorful basket she had almost completed. Ayali would find no mercy there.

Reciting the story of the city in which the priestesses of the *Lumathir* lived would take a good arc of the sun, if not more. Telling it in the language of the Creators, the name the priestesses used when referring to the Trinity of Majera, would take longer. She had trouble speaking Gairdran; some of the sounds were difficult for her to form, like their pronunciation of *Narethal* and *Lumathir*.

"Practice, Ayali."

With a heavy sigh, she did as her mother suggested. The words came slow and hesitant at first, starting with the formation of the city. The Ancients had used a magic unlike anyone had known since. They commanded rock to flow like water to form graceful arches and noble pillars and just as simply commanded it to solidify in place.

The words came easier as Ayali told of the deeds of the Ancients and the coming of terrible wolfmen that almost defeated them. Only the *m'athêrred rî Lûmea*—known also as the *Lumathir* or magi—had the power to stop them.

In a few places, Nori corrected her, but mostly she listened while weaving her baskets. The words flowed as Ayali continued through the abandonment of Narethal for reasons not understood to this day. However, the *Lumathir* had made it their home four thousand summers ago. To this day, they trained there to use their gifts from the Trinity.

When Ayali finished, the sun had fallen from its peak in the sky. Only her mother and grandmother smiled. The other four women shrugged and whispered among themselves. They had not been taught the sacred language.

"You have mastered the tongue," Shenal said. A variety of baskets circled her.

"And remembered your history."

"What has that to do with learning to use magic? How will that help me?" Ayali knew the answer before she asked the question, as she had asked it on several occasions. She had come to realize that understanding the history and the language were part of being a priestess. However, the core lay in the powers of her heritage. She hoped that each time she asked, she might find a clue to unlocking the full potential she knew resided in her.

Her mother put a hand on her shoulder, a gentle smile on her face when Ayali turned to her.

"When the time is right, the power will come."

"As it did for you?"

The *Ferdrai* had helped to open Nori to her latent powers. The same hadn't yet happened for Ayali. Alo hadn't helped her and she doubted he ever would.

"Give it time."

Pain thrust like a knife through Ayali's emotions, bleeding her frustration. She threw aside the half-finished basket she had worked on.

"I have waited nineteen summers. I won't grow younger giving it more time." Grimacing, she shook her head. "I may never have your level of magic."

When she stood, a touch on her bare leg made her look down at the pleading on her mother's face.

"Never give up, Ayali."

With a nod, Ayali turned and strode away, uncertain where to go. She knew only that she wished to be alone. Her mother's calm diffused the storm that had threatened to explode within her.

At least they respected her enough to leave her alone. She needed some time to escape the expectations burdening her. Perhaps things might have turned out better had her mother sent her to Narethal as she had done with her younger sister, Nasi. Then she would have learned in the strict ways of the true *Lumathir*, not informally with her grandmother and mother.

Ayali stopped at the riverbank, listening to the song of the prairie. A black and white bird ran from her along the ground, its broken call piercing the air. Foals ready for weaning and trading at the market whinnied from their dams' sides on the other side of the river. Wind brushed through the grass at her feet and rustled the leaves of the trees along the river bank a few steps away.

She added her own sound in a heavy sigh and folded her legs beneath her to sit in the shade of the trees. The shallow river flowed past, trickling over a few large rocks around which eddies swirled to disrupt its current. She studied the calm waters along the sandy shore on the opposite side and the ripple effect left in the sand. Many songs had been sung of the gentle Chajapah River and its life-giving waters. They praised the Trinity for providing the riches of the plains to sustain them.

The Trinity.

Ayali grimaced. If the Creators had gifted her ancestors with their power, why couldn't she use it like her mother? Why could she feel a connection to that power in the stranger stronger than her own? Could he use it?

The idea burned inside her with jealousy to think that a stranger who had lost his memories might have easier access to the power she had grown up learning.

"It's unfair," she muttered while pulling blades of grass out and tearing them into pieces.

"Ayali?"

She jumped at the voice. Her heart thumped against her chest. How had he found her? Where had he come from? She knew from her grandmother that magic could be used to make things invisible, but how had he done it? As far as she had seen, no one had been near when she sat

down, much less him.

Or had she been that distracted?

Still frozen by the shock, Ayali made no move to turn. Instead of waiting for her, he sat down beside her. She couldn't look at him, nor could she understand the words he spoke.

If only she could understand him! She had so many questions she wanted to ask but dared not in the presence of the others.

The surprise of his presence faded as he spoke the nonsense words of his tongue.

When she could take no more of the jumble, she shook her head and waved her hands in the air. "Silence, Ashigiba."

He quit talking and looked at her with calm confusion on his face. Although he understood nothing of the command, he recognized the name they had given him.

The understanding bloomed into other ideas. Perhaps the lack of understanding each other's language, or even her lack of understanding the Rivon tongue, had no bearing on communication. He had learned a couple words of Caveshi. Perhaps he could learn more.

Ayali studied his face, not a particularly handsome face by Caveshi standards, but not unattractive. In his expression she read confidence and patience. He had the look of someone of great wisdom, which followed from knowledge and learning. She could only imagine what he knew but didn't know he knew.

It might work, she realized as a new excitement filled her. She would teach him Caveshi, and she would have the answers she sought.

Ayali decided to test him. She held up her hand and pointed at it with the other. "*Wahe.*"

At the frown on his face, she switched hands and repeated the word. This time he repeated it.

A smile crept out with the encouragement of his trial. Ayali grabbed his good wrist and pulled his fingers open. Pointing at his hand, she repeated the word. When she curled and uncurled his fingers, he said the word.

"*Du.*" Yes, he had said it right! Ayali turned to face him and held up both of her hands. "*Waheshe,*" she said.

He flexed his fingers on both of his hands, or as much as the splint and soreness of his injured wrist allowed him, and used the word for more than one hand.

Her heart raced with excitement and his enthusiasm showed in his smile. They moved onto other objects. She taught him words for anything around them—the sun, the sky, the horses, the river, anything he could comprehend—which he picked up quicker than she would have expected.

By the time her mother came, the stranger had learned the Caveshi words for more than a dozen objects around them. Ayali had forgotten her problems with the short time spent with him.

"Ayali, time for dinner. Bring him along." A light glinted from her mother's eyes before she turned and headed to the camp.

Ayali put her fingertips to her mouth and made a motion like eating to try to show him what her mother had said. "*Leko'ai.*"

Without any further prompting, he repeated the word for food.

He put a hand to his middle with a grimace and said some words in his strange tongue with a nod.

She forced a smile to humor him and waved him along with her, using the word meaning "to follow".

As they walked, he pointed at different objects and she said the words for each. He repeated every word several times. A few words he mispronounced and she corrected. They continued

through the camp and activities of the late summer evening, past people who looked up from their work.

By the time they arrived at her family's tent, he had added another ten or twelve words to his vocabulary.

A start, she thought with some relief. At the pace he learned, he would have a fair vocabulary built up by the end of harvest.

During the meal with her family, the stranger listened to the conversation more intently than she had ever noticed of him before. He said nothing unless asked in Rivon, and then responded in the same language. However, since he still remembered nothing, he had nothing to add to his story.

After the late meal, Ayali sat with her grandmother to work on using her magic, but she couldn't concentrate. She thought of the stranger and teaching him her language so she could speak to him without her mother or father translating.

Her father had taken Ashi out of the tent with him into the quiet night, no doubt with the hopes that he might remember something. Ashi had been as cooperative as anyone raised in the tribe but her father still distrusted him.

"You are too distracted."

Ayali snapped back to attention at her grandmother's curt statement.

"She has had a long day, *Mashea*."

Ayali looked at her mother, certain she had an ulterior motive for her words.

Nori only glanced to her before setting her eyes on Shenal. "You have taught her all that you taught me."

"A lifetime is not enough," Shenal said and shook her head. "But perhaps tonight you should rest, Ayali." Her grandmother smiled. "Tomorrow will be a long day as will many tomorrows until the harvest is done."

Ayali breathed a sigh of relief. "Many thanks, *Mashea'we*."

"Ayali."

She turned to her mother, who sewed a new dress for herself.

"Remember that magic has many uses. Not only can it be used as a weapon or shield, but also as a tool. Practice when you can, especially with these dragons released from their slumber."

Ayali grimaced as a cold shiver raced down her spine. Dragons. They had caused the stranger's memory loss and brought him to them. In some ways she was grateful, but she knew from her grandmother's warning that these dragons were a bad sign. Shenal had warned that the return of this Red Clan meant the Darklord—their master—would return as well. No one would be spared when that day came.

With such thoughts in her head, Ayali had trouble resting that night. Not even the return of her father and the stranger stole away her fears; the last thoughts before trying to sleep compounded with each passing moment until dawn.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melanie Nilles grew up on a western North Dakota cattle ranch and farm. Along with her interest in horses, she always had a fascination with science fiction and fantasy. She currently resides in central North Dakota with her family, which includes her husband and kids, and three cats. Her published works include the STARFIRE ANGELS series and the LEGEND OF THE WHITE DRAGON epic. Besides writing, she also trains and shows her horse in dressage. For updates, visit her website at www.melaniennes.com.

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