

## Prologue

Sentaya, near Silverwater Wash, Fertility Moon waxing, year 1147

She could hear the last of the thunder rumbling in the distance; she could feel it pulsing in the ground beneath her feet, as if the earth itself trembled still at the storm's fury. The forest flickered with lightning, strange, frightening shapes flashing before her and then vanishing like wraiths. The rain had ceased long ago, but a cool wind swept among the trees, carving through her damp clothes, chilling her like death.

She still carried the torch, though it offered no light. She didn't remember it dying out. She should have thrown it away, but she couldn't bring herself to let go of it. There was comfort to be found in the feel of that rough wood, in the faint smell of oil that still lingered in the burnt remnants of cloth. She should have taken something from the house. There were clothes she might need, toys she still loved, tokens that would help her remember Mama and Papa, Kytha and Baetri. As if she could forget.

Fear had kept her from going inside. She'd gone in once, seen that they were dead. She hadn't found the courage to go in a second time. Then Mama had died, the last of them, and she had run from the village. Was it even a village anymore? The houses remained. The lanes, the marketplace, the garden plots. But with everyone dead, was it still a village?

A moment later she was crying again. How many tears could a girl shed in one night? Did grief and shame know any limits? Did fear and rage?

She didn't know where she was going. She knew only that there was nothing left for her here, and that she couldn't go to the white-hairs again. Not after what had happened this night.

She crumpled to the ground, overcome once more with anguish. She wanted to be sick or to scream or simply to die. Yes, that would have been easiest. Better death than living with the knowledge of what she had done, and what had been done to her. There was no one left to mourn her, and there was nothing left for her but to mourn the others. What kind of life was that?

She knew that she couldn't take a blade to herself. She wasn't brave enough for that. But she could throw herself in the wash. Or could she? Even that thought made her quail.

Maybe if she went back. Maybe if she returned to the house and laid herself down beside her dead sisters and her father. Maybe that would be enough to kill her.

Another gust of wind made her shiver, made her teeth chatter. Perhaps she didn't have to move at all. She'd heard of people dying in the wild, killed by cold and hunger and thirst and wild dogs. That could be her.

But just thinking it made her sit up straight and grip her torch tighter. Even wanting to die, she was too much a coward to do anything but survive. She felt that she was betraying those who were gone, though Mama and Papa wouldn't have seen it that way. Young as she was, she knew that much. They would tell her to get up, to start walking again. It doesn't matter where, they would say. Just walk. Find another village. Live!

They were dead because of her. The taste of failure in her mouth was enough to make her gag.

"It wasn't just me," she said aloud, angry, hurt, desperate to believe it. "It's their fault, too. Maybe even more than mine."

Then why did you lie to Mama?

"I didn't mean to lie," she whispered, tears streaking her face.

Lightning flashed overhead, illuminating the wood and making her flinch. Pale faces seemed to loom among the trees, watching her, laughing. She covered her ears and closed her eyes, but it was several moments before the thunder finally rumbled its answer. Eventually she opened her eyes again and her hands dropped to her side.

She sat there for what seemed a long time. Lightning lit the forest several times more, and still the thunder retreated. No more rain fell. Even the storm was leaving her. How she wanted to lie down and close her eyes and never wake again. But as frightened as she was of being alone, death scared her more.

Eventually she climbed to her feet, and still gripping that dead torch, she started down the path once more. Yes, walk, the voices said, urging her on. Find another village. Live.

## **Chapter 1**

Kirayde, near the Companion Lakes, Thunder Moon waxing, year 1211

“What are we, Grandfather?”

Besh sat back on his heels, wiping beads of sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and looking over at the boy. “What are we?” he repeated. “We’re sheep, of course. Why else would we live in the highlands and eat roots and greens?”

Mihas giggled, but quickly grew serious again. Whatever had taken hold of the boy’s curiosity didn’t want to let go.

“You know what I mean,” he said. “What kind of people are we?”

The old man leaned forward again, his knees and elbows cushioned in the soft black earth

as he pulled clover and thin sprays of grass out of his garden. The goldroot looked healthy, the tops of the tubers firm and plump. In another half turn he'd harvest them. The time for pulling weeds had long since passed. Was it then vanity that had him crawling about in the dirt, peering into the shadows of the root greens? Ema would have thought so. She would have teased him day and night had she seen him now, an old man too proud to share the earth with clover and grass.

“Grandfather?”

“We are Mettai, Mihas. You know that.”

“But what does that mean?”

Besh sat up again. “Why are you asking me this?”

Mihas looked down at the ground, kicking at a clod of dirt with his bare foot. His fine long hair, black as a raven's feathers, hung over his forehead, concealing his eyes.

“Do you remember the peddler who came through here just after the dark of the moons?” the boy asked.

“The old Qirsi?”

“Yes, him. He said something.”

“Come here,” Besh said, waving the boy over to him.

Mihas walked to where his grandfather was kneeling and sat beside him, looking solemn.

Besh smiled to show the boy he wasn't angry with him. “What did he say to you?”

“He said we were like the creyvnal, that we really didn't know what we were.”

“Perhaps he meant it as a compliment. The creyvnal is a powerful beast. Wouldn't you like to have the body of a lion and the head of a wolf?”

He smiled; Mihas didn't.

"The creyvnal isn't real, Grandfather. Even I know that."

"You're right. It's not real. But still the peddler also was right, in a way. The Mettai are like the Creyvnal."

"How?"

"Well, we're Eandi. We have dark hair and dark eyes, we live long lives, we're strong like other Eandi. But like the Qirsi, we can use magic."

"But did he mean that we're not real? I mean, I know we are. But was he saying that our powers aren't real?"

Besh eyed Mihas briefly. Then he reached for one of the clovers he had pulled from the ground and held it out to the boy.

Mihas frowned.

"Take it," the old man said.

The boy held out his hand and Besh placed the clover in his palm. "What does Mettai mean?" he asked. "Do you know?"

"You mean the word?"

"Yes."

"It means blood of the earth."

"Good. Put some dirt in your hand with the clover."

As Mihas did this, Besh pulled his knife from the sheath on his belt and dragged the blade across the back of his own hand. His skin there, tanned and brown from the Growing sun, was scored with dozens of thin white lines, all of them running parallel to the cut he had just made;

evidence of a life spent drawing upon earth magic. Like rings within the trunks of the great firs and cedars growing in the forests around Kirayde, the lines on a Mettai's hand could be used to judge his or her age.

A man could even trace the history of all his years, if only he could recall the conjuring made whole by the blood that flowed from each of those scars. Some would claim that unnecessary conjurings like this one were a waste of blood and earth, that they were frivolous expressions of Mettai power. But wasn't there value in helping a boy find pride in his heritage and in the power that flowed in his veins? Besh had been conjuring for most of his sixty-four years. This, it seemed to the old man, was as valid a reason as any for drawing forth his blood.

He let the blood well from the wound for several moments before carefully gathering some on the flat of his blade. He held the knife over Mihas's hand, balancing the blood on the steel.

"Blood to earth," he murmured. "Life to power, power to thought, color to clover."

He tipped the blade, allowing the blood to drip off the knife and onto the boy's hand, where it mingled with the earth and the flower. For a moment nothing happened. Then the blood and soil, blended together now in what looked like rich, crimson mud, began to swirl slowly in the palm of the boy's hand. Four times it went around, and then it vanished into the roots of the flower.

An instant later, the soft pink hue of the clover gave way to brilliant sapphire. The flower appeared to come to life again, its color dazzling, its leaves opening once more. In the center of the bloom, amid the blue, there appeared a small spot of bright yellow, as perfect and round as the sun in Morna's sky.

Mihas laughed aloud.

“If our magic isn’t real,” Besh said, “how do you explain that?”

The boy reached for another clover. “Do it again, Grandfather!”

“No. Once is enough. One should never trifle with Mettai magic.”

“Can you teach me?”

“Not yet. You know that. When you begin your fourth four you can start to learn. And when you complete that four, you’ll have earned your blade. All right?”

Mihas nodded, looking glum. No doubt, five years seemed an eternity to the child. Little did he know how quickly the time would pass.

Besh glanced at his hand. The bleeding had slowed. Another scar to mark the years.

Sixteen fours. How quickly they’d gone by. Many among his people lived to be this old. He wasn’t so unusual in that respect. If anything, he was more fit than most. Sixty-four was said to be a powerful age for those who reached it, a time of wisdom and enhanced magic. For most it was actually a year of endings. How many men had he seen live out their sixteenth four only to weaken and die soon after?

Besh had no intention of being one of them. He planned to guide Mihas into his power. Better him than Sirj, the boy’s father. The man would make a mess of it, and in the process he’d do the same to the boy. Besh had never liked Sirj’s father -- he was as stubborn as he was stupid, and he could never manage to keep his mouth shut. It was bad enough that the man had built his house just next to Besh an Ema’s back when she still lived and Besh still worked as the village cooper. But that Elica should marry the man’s son . . . Besh shook his head. He would have spit at the thought of Elica’s fool of a husband had Mihas not been there, watching him. No, Besh

couldn't die yet. Once Mihas came of age he could go and join Ema in the Underrealm, but not before.

He licked the blood from the back of his hand and from his blade, as was proper. A Mettai never wasted blood, and by licking the wound, he stopped the bleeding. From what he'd heard over the years, he gathered that this wasn't true for other Eandi or for the sorcerer race. But it worked for a Mettai every time.

"Can I see your knife again, Grandfather?"

"Have a care with it," he said, handing it to Mihas, hilt first.

Mihas's brown eyes danced in the sunlight. "I always do. You're the one who's always cutting himself."

Besh had to laugh.

Clever boy. His mother's child. Dark-skinned and long-limbed, like Elica and like Ema, and as quick as both of them. Ema would say that the father of such a child couldn't be all bad. As far as Besh was concerned it meant only that Elica's blood was stronger than her husband's.

The old man turned his attention back to the clover and grasses intruding upon his goldroot, and for a long time he and the boy said nothing. The sun burned a lazy arc across the sky, blue save for a few feathered clouds. Swallows darted overhead, wheeling in the light wind, chattering and scolding like children at play.

"Are you the oldest person in Kirayde?" Mihas asked suddenly.

The boy was sitting in the dirt, still toying with the knife. The blue and gold clover lay on his knee, a prize that he would show his mother and father.

Besh laughed at the question. "No," he said. "I'm not the oldest."

He turned and sat, stretching out his stiff legs. An old man shouldn't kneel for so long,  
Ema's voice scolded in his head. If you're not careful, you'll wind up bent and lame.

"That little girl you play with, the one with so many older brothers."

"Nissa?"

"Yes, Nissa."

"She only has four brothers."

"Only four?" Besh said. "I thought it was more than that. Anyway, her grandmother is older than I am. And so is the herbmistress."

"She is?"

Besh raised his eyebrows. "Is that so hard to believe?"

"Not really. I just . . ." Mihas shrugged. "If you're not the oldest, then why are you one of the village elders? Nissa's grandmother isn't."

"No, she's not, but the herbmistress is. Truly, Mihas, I don't know why the other elders chose me to join their circle. But I do know that there's more to the choice than just a person's age."

"Oh." Mihas turned the knife over in his hands. "What about Old Lici? Is she older than you?"

Besh glanced at the boy again, but Mihas seemed intent on the blade. Most likely he was curious and nothing more. Besh had seen several children shouting taunts at the old woman just a few days before, and he had warned Mihas to stay away from her. When the boy had asked him why, he hadn't been able to give a good reason. This was the first time either of them had mentioned the woman since then.

“I believe she is older,” Besh said, trying to keep his tone light.

Apparently he failed.

“You don’t like her, do you, Grandfather?”

“I don’t really care for her one way or another.”

“It seems like you don’t like her.”

Clever indeed.

Mihas was right. Besh didn’t like the old witch who lived at the southern edge of their village. Or more to the point, he didn’t trust her. He might even have been afraid of her. Besh had been no more than a babe suckling at his mother’s breast when Lici first came to Kirayde, but he’d heard others speak of her arrival enough times that he could almost claim as his own other people’s memories of that cool Harvest day.

Lici was but eight years old at the time, a pretty girl with long black hair and fair features. But something dark lurked in her green eyes -- the memory of tragedy, some said -- and for some time she refused to speak. It was clear to all that she had wandered alone in the wild for many, many days, perhaps as long as an entire turn of the moons, and that she had been without proper food and clothing for all that time. She was emaciated. Her arms and legs were covered with insect bites and scarred as if from brambles, and her hair was matted with filth. Most likely she had kept herself alive by eating what roots and berries she could find.

Many speculated on what might have happened to her. Some assumed that she had survived an outbreak of the pestilence that claimed the rest of her family and village. Others wondered if she’d been the lone survivor of an attack by brigands. There were darker suggestions as well -- even then, when Lici was but a child, a few wondered if she might have

been responsible for whatever doom had befallen the rest of her people.

To Besh's knowledge, though, the full tale of Lici's past was known only to two people: Lici, of course, and a woman named Sylpa.

Sylpa had been the leader of the village elders at the time Lici came to Kirayde. That first day she took Lici in, and during the years that followed raised the girl as she would a daughter. Gradually, as Lici's strength returned, and the memories of whatever tragedy she had endured faded, she began to speak. She took her lessons with the other children and grew to womanhood. Besh remembered thinking her beautiful when he was a small boy and easily impressed by long silken hair and eyes that sparkled like emeralds. But he also recalled that, even then, he never spoke with her, or rather, that Lici never spoke with anyone other than Sylpa.

She rarely smiled, and she had a discomfiting habit of looking a person directly in the eye as she walked past in utter silence. Though Besh dreamed of marrying her, he also began to fear her.

Over time his fascination with her waned. He married Ema, had children of his own, made a name for himself among the Mettai as a skilled cooper and wise leader, and eventually was selected as one of the elders. Lici never married. She had suitors, including an Eandi merchant who saw her one morning as he drove a cart loaded with his wares into the village marketplace. He returned to Kirayde several times during that one Planting season, hoping that this dark, beautiful Mettai woman might deign to speak with him. She did not. After a time, he stopped coming.

When Sylpa died, Lici left the house they had shared and built for herself a small hut in a lonely corner of the village, near what villagers called the South Rill. She still spoke with no

one, but she began to teach herself to weave baskets. The Mettai of the northern highlands had long been known for their basketwork, and Kirayde had a master basketmaker who could have offered her an apprenticeship. But as with everything else, Lici did this alone. And she did it brilliantly. Within only a few years, her craft rivaled that of the village's master. Soon, peddlers were coming from all over the Southlands to buy Lici's baskets.

Some in the village began to say that the woman was growing rich off her craft, that she hoarded gold and silver pieces the way a mouse hoards grain for the Snows. It may well have been true, at least for a time. Nevertheless, Lici remained in her tiny hut, wearing old clothes that had once been Sylpa's, and eating the roots and greens she grew in her small garden plot. Then abruptly, just a few years ago, she began to turn the peddlers away. Suddenly it seemed that she had no interest in trading any of her baskets. The peddlers offered more gold. They offered jewels and silverwork from the Iejony Peninsula, and blankets from the cloth crafters of Qosantia. They stood outside her door and pleaded with her for just one simple trade. Lici refused them all.

To this day, no one in the village knew why.

Besh thought it a fitting end to her years of prosperity, and he was surprised that others didn't recognize it as such. The old woman had spent her entire life in shadow, marked by the gods for some dark fate. Perhaps she meant well. Perhaps she chose solitude and behaved as she did because she never had the chance to learn any other way. Truth be told, Besh didn't care.

He didn't want to have anything to do with her, and he certainly didn't want Mihas going near her.

"It's not that I don't like Lici," he told the boy at last, watching the swallows dance

overhead. "I just think you'd be better off staying away from her."

"But why?"

"It's hard to explain. She's . . . odd."

"Is it because her parents died?"

Besh looked at the boy, wondering how much he had heard about Lici's past.

Mihas leaned closer to him, as if fearing that others might hear what he said next.

"Nissa's father says that wherever she walks, four ravens circle above her."

Four ravens. The Mettai death omen. That was as apt as anything Besh might have thought to say about her.

"Nissa's father may be right."

"Then why is she still alive?"

"There are many deaths, Mihas. Some are slower than others."

The boy frowned. "I don't understand."

"That's all right. Just do as I say and stay away from Old Lici."

"Yes, Grandfather."

Besh stood slowly, stretching his back and legs. "We should go home," he said.

Mihas scrambled to his feet. "Are the roots ready yet?"

"Not quite. Next turn, perhaps."

The boy nodded and handed Besh the knife.

They started walking back toward the house Besh shared with his daughter's family.

They hadn't gone far, however, when Mihas suddenly halted.

"Oh, no!" the boy said and ran back toward the garden.

“What’s the matter?” Besh called after him.

Mihas stopped beside the goldroot, bent down and lifted something carefully out of the dirt. Then he started back toward Besh.

“What did you forget?”

“My clover,” the boy said, holding it up proudly for Besh to see. One might have thought that Mihas himself had changed its color. “I want to show Mama.”

Besh knew what the boy’s mother would say about the flower, but he kept his silence and they walked back home.

The house stood in a grove of cedar on a small hill just east of the marketplace. It was larger than most houses in Kirayde, though to an outsider, someone from one of the Qirsi settlements along the wash, it would have seemed modest at best. A thin ribbon of pale grey smoke rose from the chimney, and two small children chased each other among the trees, giggling and shrieking breathlessly as they ran.

As Besh and Mihas drew near, Elica emerged from the house bearing an empty bucket, her long hair stirring in the breeze.

“It’s about time,” she said, glancing at Mihas and then fixing Besh with a hard glare.

“What were you doing all this time?”

“Taking care of the goldroot. Can’t an old man tend his garden without being questioned so by his daughter?”

“Not when there are more pressing chores to be done.” She held out the bucket to Mihas.

“Fetch some water from the rill, Mihas. Quickly. Supper’s going to be late as it is.”

The boy stopped just in front of her, but instead of taking the bucket, he held up the

clover, beaming at her.

“What’s this?” she asked, taking the flower and examining it.

“Grandfather did it!” Mihas told her. “It was a clover and I asked him whether our magic is real and he did that!”

Elica fixed Besh with a dark look, but then smiled at her son. “It’s lovely. Such a bright color. Now, please, Mihas. The water.”

“All right, Mama.”

He grabbed the bucket and ran off, still clutching the clover in his free hand.

“You should know better, Father!” Elica said, sounding cross, as if she were speaking to one of her children. “No good can come of teaching the boy empty magic. And anyway, he’s too young to be learning blood craft.”

Sometimes Besh thought that Elica might be just a bit too much like her mother.

“I taught him nothing,” he said. “I showed him a bit of magic. And it wasn’t empty. That Qirsi peddler who came through here earlier in the waxing had him wondering if Mettai magic could do anything at all. I wanted him to see that it could.”

“So show him something useful. You could have brought him back here and started my fire. You could have healed one of the children’s cuts or scrapes. Elined knows they have enough between them to keep you bleeding for half a turn. But no. You choose to color a flower.”

Sirj, Elica’s husband, stepped around from the back of the house, his shirt soaked with sweat, a load of unsplit logs in his arms. He wasn’t a big man -- he was only slightly taller than Elica -- nor was he particularly broad. But he was lean and strong, like a wildcat in the warmer

turns.

“What are you going on about, Elica? I could hear you all the way back at the wood pile.”

“It’s nothing,” she said.

Sirj didn’t say anything. He just regarded them both, waiting. His house, his question. He was entitled to an answer and both of them knew it.

“I colored a flower for Mihas,” Besh finally told him. “I wanted to show him some magic. He was asking if Mettai powers were real.”

Sirj eyed the old man briefly, his expression revealing little. It might have been that he knew Besh didn’t like him, or maybe he was no more fond of Besh than the old man was of him. Whatever the reason, theirs had never been an easy relationship. But after a moment, Sirj merely shrugged and continued past Besh and Elica into the house. “No harm in that,” he murmured.

Besh and Elica exchanged a look before following him inside.

Their supper consisted of smoked fish, boiled greens, and bread. Annze and Cam, the young ones, spent much of the meal teasing one another across the table and, after being chastised for that, feeding their fish to one of the dogs that ran wild through the village and in and out of nearly everyone’s home. Except Lici’s, of course. Even the dogs knew better than to bother her.

After they had finished and Mihas and the little ones had been put to bed, Besh lit his pipe and went out to smoke it in the cool evening air. He walked around to the back of the house as he often did, sat on the stump Sirj used for chopping wood, and gazed up into a darkening sky. Panya was already climbing into the night, her milky glow obscuring all but the brightest stars.

No doubt red Ilias was up as well, following her across the soft indigo, but Besh couldn't see the second moon for the trees.

After a short while, Elica came out, walked to where he sat, and rested a hand easily on his shoulder.

"It's a clear night," she said.

"For now. The fog will come up before long. It always does this time of year."

She nodded. Then, "I'm sorry about before, Father. I shouldn't have said what I did. Sirj is right. There's no harm in showing Mihas some magic now and then." She kissed the top of his head. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm too much like Mother."

Besh smiled. "There are worse things."

"I suppose."

Elica started to walk away.

"He asked me about Lici."

She stopped, turned. "What did you tell him?"

"Same thing I always do: stay away from her. But he won't be satisfied with that for much longer."

"She won't be alive much longer," Elica muttered. Immediately she covered her mouth with a hand, her eyes wide as she stared down at Besh.

"Forgive me, Father. I shouldn't have said that. It was cruel. And I didn't mean that because she was old--"

Besh began to laugh.

"You think it's funny?"

The old man nodded. “Yes, in a way. Mihas asked me today if I was the oldest person in Kirayde. That’s how we ended up speaking of Lici.” He took Elica’s hand. “It’s all right, child. You’re right: she won’t be with us much longer. And -- Bian forgive me for saying so -- perhaps that’s for the best.” He gave his daughter a sly look. “I, on the other hand, intend to stay around for a good many years. So don’t go selling off my pipe weed any time soon.”

She kissed him again. “Good night, Father. Don’t stay out too long. It’s getting cold.”

Besh gave her hand a squeeze, then watched her walk away. After some time his pipe burned out, but still the old man sat, enjoying the air, and the darkness, and the sounds of the night. A few crickets, the last of the season, chirped nearby, and off in the distance a wolf howled. In recent nights Besh had heard an owl calling from the hills north of the village, but not tonight.

Eventually he began to see thin strands of mist drifting among the dark trunks of the firs and cedars, and he stood. The cold night breezes were one thing, but as Besh had grown older he’d found that the nighttime fogs chilled him, bone and blood. He retreated into the house and made his way to bed.

None of the rest would remember.

Why should they? Most hadn’t even been alive at the time; those who were had been too young to understand.

But she knew. Oh, yes, Lici knew.

She could still see it all. She could see houses that had long since been broken by storms and snows and howling winds. She could see copses and clearings that had since given way to

homes and garden plots. She could close her eyes and summon an image of Kirayde just as it had appeared that first day. She could walk the lanes past house and plot and tell any who cared to listen when each had been built or first tilled. She could go to any person in the village and give the year, turn, and day of his or her birth.

Lici remembered all of it.

They thought her crazed. She never married or had children, she didn't speak to them, she refused to prattle on about nothing or smile greetings that she didn't mean. And so they called her mad, they called her a witch. The children mocked her and their parents scolded them in turn. But then those same mothers and fathers ignored her, as if she were nothing more than a spider spinning webs in her tiny corner of the village. Did they really think that was better? Would they have chosen silence over taunts had silence been all they knew?

How long would it take them to realize that she was gone? Who would be the first to notice? Would they think that she had wandered off by accident? Would they think that she had drowned herself in the rill or gotten lost in the night mists? Or would they know that she left them by choice? Might there be one among them who would even guess her purpose? Would any of them know why she had chosen this night? Probably not. But it amused her to imagine the possibilities.

Sixteen fours. Sixty-four years. To the very day. That was long enough for anyone to stay in one place, to live among the same people, to turn over in one's head the same thought again and again, to direct every moment of every day toward a single purpose. Sixteen fours. Some said there was power in the very number. Indeed. Lici had power in abundance. And she would need all of it.

She had learned her craft well. Not basketmaking, though she also had much skill at that, but rather the blood craft, the magic of her people. The white-hairs thought that Qirsi magic reigned supreme in the Southlands, and perhaps they were right. But the magic of the Mettai was no trifle. And in the hands of a master, even one as old as she, it could be a mighty weapon.

At last her waiting had come to an end. She had planned and waited, she had suffered indignities both glaring and subtle, she had trained herself in both her crafts, pushing herself harder than any master would push even his most prized apprentice. All in preparation for this night, which was both an ending and a beginning. Kirayde would be lost to her forever, and despite all that she had endured here, the thought saddened her. This had been Sylpa's home and so had been as much a home to Lici as she could have expected after Sentaya. Now, though, she would begin a new journey, a new life, if one as old as she could ask for such a thing. She had hungered for this countless long years.

From her hut by the rill she could see the mist gathering about the village, shifting and elusive, glowing like a horde of wraiths in the white and red radiance of the two moons. It was nearly time. She had her baskets packed and ready in her old cart. She could see the nag from her doorway, gleaming white in the moon glow, shaking her head impatiently, ready to be on her way. The creature would be a good companion in these last days.

She had enough food to keep her going until she could trade for more. And though she tried to think of items she would need that she might be leaving behind, she knew there was nothing.

She had but one purpose now. That was all that remained. She could almost smell the Silverwater and the trees that surrounded the place. The gods knew she remembered the way,

even after all this time.

Some things could never be forgotten. Or forgiven.

## Chapter 2

### Runnelwick, near Silverwater Wash, Dreaming Moon waxing, year 1211

Sunlight sparkled on the wind-blown waters of the wash, shifting and dancing like stars in Morna's sky, so bright that Giraan had to shield his eyes from the glare as he checked his traps at the water's edge. The first two of his eight traps were empty still. One of them had been robbed of its bait. He doubted that he'd find much in the others either. This trade was still new to him, and he knew better than to expect success to come quickly.

The gods rewarded labor. They found virtue in the struggle to perfect new skills. Giraan had spent sixteen years making his living as a wheelwright, and he had mastered the saw and the rasp, the plane and the hammer. In return, the gods had given him a strong back and a steady hand. They had given him a beautiful wife and four fine children. And they had granted him long life, so that he might see his sons and his daughter take the first steps into their adult lives. They had seen to it that he and Aiva wanted for nothing.

If anything, they had made life too comfortable, too easy. It almost seemed to Giraan that they were telling him to try his hand at something new. So after four years as a wheelwright he passed the business on to Oren, his eldest, and he started teaching himself to trap. He bought one trap from a peddler who had passed through Runnelwick just after the thaw. The rest he built himself, copying that first one as closely as he could. It took him two or three tries to get it right,

but in time he had his eight traps.

Qirsi in other villages would have thought him a fool, of course, struggling with his tools when he possessed shaping magic. But such was the way of the Y'Qatt. His people understood that the V'Tol, the Life Power -- what others called magic -- was a gift from Qirsar, one that was not to be squandered out of indolence. He'd heard the names by which others called the Y'Qatt: ascetics, fanatics, lunatics. Even the name Y'Qatt had once been meant as an epithet, for it was believed that the Y'Qatt, an ancient Qirsi clan, who had refused to fight in the early Blood Wars, had been driven by cowardice. But it wasn't that they were craven; they had been opposed to war itself, seeing it as evil, a misuse of Qirsi power. And so those who, like Giraan, refused to wield their power for any purpose, embraced the name, seeing in the principled stand of these ancients an echo of their own piety.

Giraan had argued with the Qirsi peddlers who occasionally stopped in the village to sell their wares. He'd been called all the usual names. And always he silenced them with the same question: If Qirsar had intended for us to expend our V'Tol on acts of magic, why would he shorten our lives every time we use it?

No one had ever been able to answer to his satisfaction, because, quite simply, there was no good response they could offer. Throughout the Southlands, magic was killing the people of his race. It was a slow death, imperceptible to some, but real nevertheless. In recent years, as the number of Eandi in the land increased, and the number of Qirsi dwindled, others had begun to realize this as well. Already the Eandi lived longer than did the men and women of his race. What sense was there in adding to this disparity by using magic frivolously, by relying on V'Tol to do what might also be accomplished with some physical effort, with sweat and muscle and

skill? More and more Qirsi were asking themselves this same question; the Y'Qatt movement was growing.

The next two traps Giraan checked were empty as well, and he walked on to where he'd set the third pair. As he drew near, he saw that the nearer of the two had something in it. A beaver. The gods had been generous. Beaver skins fetched a fair bit of gold from most merchants -- at least the peddlers he'd seen trying to sell them had been asking quite a lot. He'd made a deal with Sedi, the old tanner. Seli would skin and treat any animals Giraan managed to trap, and in return Giraan would make any repairs that Sedi's wagons might ever need, free of charge. Sedi had agreed to the exchange with a chuckle and a shake of his bald head, no doubt thinking that he had won the old wheelwright's services at no cost to himself. He was going to be disappointed.

When Giraan finally started back toward the village, he was as giddy as a child. He'd caught a stoat in the seventh trap. By the end of this day, Sedi would be trying to change the terms of their bargain, or he'd be looking for a way to be done with it altogether. Angry as Sedi would be, though, they'd have a good laugh over it before the night was through.

On his way back home, he walked past the village plantings and checked to see how the crops in his and Aiva's plot were faring. It had been a fine Growing season -- warm, with enough rain to keep Elined's earth moist and dark. It would be another turn before the goldroot was ready, but they might be able to begin picking the vine beans in half that time. Whenever it finally began, Giraan was certain that this would be a generous Harvest.

His home stood near the southern edge of the village. It was no larger than any other house in the village, but it wasn't small either. And now that the all the children had been joined

and had built their own houses, it felt almost spacious, like one of the great palaces in which the Qirsi clan lords lived.

Aiva sat out front, sharpening the blades she used in the kitchen. Her white hair was pulled back into a plait, and she wore a simple brown dress. She'd been a beauty as a youth, with long, thick hair and eyes as pale as bark on an aspen. As far as he was concerned, she'd lost nothing to age. As he drew near she looked up and waved. Giraan held up the two animals he'd trapped and laughed at what he saw on her face: her widened eyes, her mouth agape and covered with a slender hand.

"Two of them!" she said, breathless.

"A beaver and a stoat." He couldn't keep the pride from his voice. In truth, he didn't even try. Where was the harm in letting his beloved Aiva see how pleased he was?

"Does Sedi know?"

"Not yet." He smiled. "But he will soon enough."

"He'll be angry."

Giraan shook his head, the smile lingering. "He'll act angry at first, but he won't really mind. He knows that it was a fair bargain we struck."

"I hope you're right." She stood and looked at the stoat and then the beaver. "They're fine animals, Giraan. You should be very proud."

"I doubt that either one is fit for eating."

"We both know that you didn't trap them for their meat. You trapped them for gold, and for the sheer challenge of it."

Giraan frowned. "You sound as though you disapprove."

“Not at all. Just don’t be talking about the lack of meat as if that makes you less thrilled about the catch than you really are.”

She smiled to soften the words. Then she raised herself onto her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “Take them to Sedi,” she said. “I don’t want them in my kitchen.”

He had to grin. “Yes, my lady.”

It usually made her laugh when he addressed her so, but suddenly Aiva was looking past him, toward the path that wound past their house to the marketplace. He turned to look.

An old woman had paused on the track to watch them. Her hair was as white as that of any Qirsi, but the darkness of her skin and eyes marked her as one of Ean’s children. She wore a simple brown dress much like Aiva’s except that this one was frayed and tattered. Though the day was warm, she also wore a faded green wrap around her bent shoulders. She carried two large baskets, one under each arm, both of them covered with small blankets that concealed their contents. She also wore a carry sack on her back.

“Hello,” Giraan called, raising a hand in greeting as he stepped around Aiva to put himself between this stranger and his love.

“This house is new,” the woman said, her voice so low that for a moment he wondered if he’d heard her correctly.

“I’m sorry, but I believe you’re mistaken. My wife and I built this house ourselves nearly sixteen years ago.”

The woman stared at him a moment. Then a faint smile crept over her face. “Yes,” she said. “And to me, that would make it new.”

“You were here that long ago?” Aiva asked, taking a step forward.

“It’s been sixteen fours,” the woman said. “I was just a child.”

“Sixteen fours!” Aiva said. “Truly the gods have blessed you!”

The woman grinned, revealing sharp, yellow teeth. “Yes, they have.”

“You live near here?” Giraan asked.

“I did once. We lived . . . we lived south of here. But my people moved about a good deal.”

“You’re Mettai,” he said.

She stared at him for several moments, her smile fading slowly. “We are,” she answered, ice in her voice.

Giraan shook his head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“Why should I be offended? You merely told me what I already know. I’m Mettai.”

“Yes, of course. But I . . .”

“When you said I was Mettai, did you mean to insult me?”

It almost seemed that she was trying to confound him with her words and her indignation.

“Not at all,” Giraan said, smiling, trying to mollify her.

“But you know that we are hated by Eandi and Qirsi alike, and so you feared that I would take offense. If you were to see a one-legged beggar in a marketplace, you would not say to him, ‘You’re a cripple.’ You would ignore his infirmity, or at least pretend to. But you would slip a silver into his cup as a gesture of pity, and feel that you had done a good turn. So, it is with the Mettai. You spoke without thinking, stating what was obvious, and now you fear that you have reminded me of my infirmity.”

“I assure you--”

Aiva laid a hand on Giraan's arm, silencing him.

"I'm afraid you've misunderstood my husband, good lady," she said. "He simply apologized because we do not judge people by their race or even their clan, and he feared that you would think he was doing just that. We are Y'Qatt. We know as well as anyone what it is to be shunned by one's people. You would be welcome here no matter your clan or your nation." She beckoned to the woman with an open hand. "Please. Come and sit with us. No doubt you've traveled far. You must be weary. We haven't much, but we can offer you food and drink."

"My lady is most kind, but I should be getting on to your marketplace. The day's nearly half gone, and I've farther to go."

"What is it you're selling?" Giraan regretted the question as soon as the words crossed his lips. He would have preferred that this strange woman move on and leave them in peace. But he was curious about those overlarge baskets she carried, and he couldn't help but give voice to that curiosity.

She smiled again, and he thought he saw a flash of malice in her dark eyes. He knew what she was thinking. He and Aiva would buy something from her now, or at least agree to a trade. He'd asked the question. But more than that, he was still stinging from what she'd said earlier. They'd barter over price and he'd convince himself that he needed whatever she might be selling. But in the end, no matter how much he gave her, it would be the same as that silver slipped into a beggar's cup: a token of his pity, a way to assuage his guilt. For the truth was, as soon as he said that she was Mettai, he had cringed inwardly. Her infirmity. He would never have phrased it that way, but yes, that was just how he thought of it. Whatever Aiva might have

said, being Y'Qatt was nothing like being Mettai.

He and his people chose to live as they did because they knew that in resisting the urge to use their powers, they were acceding to Qirsar's wishes. Their way of life honored the Qirsi god. The Mettai, on the other hand, were born to their fate. Some said that they were created by the Eandi god, Ean, to mock Qirsar. Here, Ean seemed to be saying, I give you Eandi sorcerers who are neither frail of body nor cursed with brief lives. Others claimed the opposite. Qirsar made them, these people said, to show Ean how his children might have been if only he'd been able to give them the gift of magic. Either way, the Mettai were mongrels, or worse, the bastard offspring of some rivalry between the gods. In a sense, they were the embodiment of the Blood Wars, the violent conflicts that had been fought throughout the history of the Southlands.

More to the point, though, they used blood magic, opening their veins for every act of sorcery. They were as different from the Y'Qatt as the darkest, coldest night of the Snows was from the bright warmth of this fine day.

"You'd like to see what I'm carrying?" the old woman asked, tilting her head to the side as might a mischievous child.

Aiva nodded, no doubt eager to end the unpleasantness. She hated it so when anyone failed to get along. "Yes, please."

"All right, then." The woman placed both baskets on the ground and stretched. Even without her burden, her back remained bent, her shoulders rounded.

Then she removed the blankets that covered the two baskets, and Giraan forgot everything else. The strange awkwardness that had made him wary of the stranger just moments before seemed to vanish, as if swept away by magic. Within the large baskets were smaller ones

of all sizes, shapes, and colors. Basketry was the one craft for which the Mettai were renowned throughout the land, and clearly this woman had mastered the art as few others had.

“They’re beautiful!” Aiva whispered.

The woman smiled and inclined her head. “Thank you, my lady.”

“You made all of them yourself?”

“I did.”

“There are so many. It must have taken you years.”

“Several, yes.”

Giraan looked at her. “Haven’t you been selling them all along?”

“I promised myself that I would see as much of the land as possible before Bian called me to his side. So I made these baskets and set them aside from those I sold day to day. I trade these for food and gold, sometimes even for a night’s sleep in a warm bed. As you can see, there are plenty here, and they’re of good quality. And if need be, I can make more. Osiers are easy enough to find.”

The smile remained on her tanned, wrinkled face, and she didn’t shy away from his gaze. But something about what she was telling them struck Giraan as odd. Still, even if the woman was half-mad, there could be no denying the worth of her wares.

Aiva had already chosen two baskets, one that was shallow and round, and another with steeper edges and a braided handle.

“You’ve chosen well, my lady,” the woman said. “Those are two of my favorites.”

She might have been strange, but clearly the woman had been peddling for a long time. She knew this craft as well.

“How much for the two of them?” Giraan asked, reverting to the tone he had used in his shop when negotiating the price of a new wheel for a cart, or the repair of a broken rim. “We don’t have much gold.”

“I don’t need gold; only something else I can trade in another village.” She nodded toward the beaver and stoat that he still carried. “I’d trade them for pelts if you have any.”

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Food then. Salted meat? Cheese? A loaf or two of bread?”

“Baskets such as these would fetch a fair bit in the marketplace. I’m not sure that we can spare so much from our kitchen.”

“I’m an old woman, sir. I don’t eat much, and I’m not trying to grow fat and rich in my last years. As I’ve told you, I seek only enough so that I can continue my travels. Surely you and the lady would be able to part with one loaf of bread and half a wheel of cheese.”

“You’d trade the baskets for so little?”

She frowned, seeming to consider this. “I don’t suppose you have any wine as well?” She glanced at Aiva, the grin returning. “I might be old, but that doesn’t mean I’ve forsaken all my old pleasures.”

“Of course you haven’t,” Aiva said kindly. “But I’m afraid we have no wine. Perhaps some smoked fish. We’ve been preparing it for the colder turns, but we already have a good deal, and we’ve time to catch and smoke more.”

Aiva looked at Giraan, a question in her eyes. He was reluctant to part with the fish, but he could see that she wanted the baskets, and she was right: they did have time before the end of the Harvest. They could catch more fish.

“Three whole fish,” he said, facing the old woman. “In addition to the cheese and bread.”

She nodded. “Done.”

They stood in silence a moment, the woman eyeing him expectantly. Then he realized that Aiva was already holding the baskets she had chosen, and the stranger was waiting for her payment.

“Right,” he said. “I’ll get the food.”

He turned, walked into the house, and quickly gathered the fish, cheese, and bread, wrapping them in an old cloth, as ragged as the woman’s dress. When he stepped back outside, he heard Aiva speaking to the stranger. It took him only a moment to understand that his wife was trying to make conversation, and that the old woman was doing little to encourage her.

“... With your family when you came here?”

“I believe so. I was very young.”

“Do you remember how old you were?”

“No.”

“But you remember the village. You said so. Is it so different now? Have we changed that much?”

At that the woman looked up, gazing first at Giraan, who had paused on the top step, and then at Aiva. “No,” she said. “I don’t think your people have changed at all.”

She swung the travel sack off her shoulders and held out a thin, roughened hand for the food.

Giraan walked to where she stood and handed it to her.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, placing the bundle carefully in her sack and shouldering the

burden again. She looked briefly at Aiva. “My lady. I hope you find good use for the baskets.”

With that, she started off into the village. She didn't so much as glance back at them.

“I'm glad to see her go,” Giraan said.

Aiva nodded absently, admiring her new baskets. “She is odd. But she does fine work.”

“I suppose.”

She glanced at him. “Go find Sedi. Get your animals skinned and tanned. You'll feel better.”

Giraan laughed. “You're right.” He started his friend's house. “I won't be long.”

He walked slowly, having no desire to catch up with the old woman. He even stopped briefly by the wash, just to sit and watch the water flow by before continuing on his way. By the time he reached Sedi's home on the west end of Runnelwick, he felt reasonably certain that the stranger had seen to her business in the marketplace and moved on.

Sedi glanced up from his work as Giraan entered the shop. An instant later, his eyes snapped up a second time, fixing on the two animals Giraan carried.

“I don't believe it!” he said, setting aside his work and standing. “Two already? And a stoat, no less!”

“Both in need of your skills, my friend.”

The tanner shook his head, a smile on his thin face. “I should have known better than to make such a bargain with you, Giraan. I've known you for more than eight fours, and you've always managed to best me in everything.”

“Not everything,” Giraan said. “You've always been the better fisherman, and our garden never looks as fine as yours.”

Sedi nodded, conceding the point. "Almost everything, then."

"You know that I'll gladly do whatever work your wagons ever need."

"Of course, and I'm happy to treat your skins."

Giraan handed him the rope on which he'd tied the animals.

"That's a good sized beaver," Sedi said. "It should fetch a fair price when the next peddlers come through from the east."

"The east?"

"Yes. And wait for an Eandi. No matter how much a Qirsi peddler offers you, an Eandi will beat the price. Particularly if he's headed for Qosantia or Tordjanne."

Giraan knew immediately that this was sound advice. It made sense, really. Since the end of the Blood Wars, the bordering nations of the Eandi -- Stelpana and Naqbae -- had remained hostile to anyone or anything having to do with the Qirsi, even outcasts like the Y'Qatt. The people of Aelea were much the same way. The wealthier nations of the lowlands, however, seemed more than happy to trade in Qirsi goods, and in fact, according to many of the peddlers who came through Runnelwick during the course of the year, they often sought out certain items from the Qirsi clans -- baskets, blankets, the fine light wines of the H'Bel and the Talm'Orast. It shouldn't have surprised him that they would also covet the fine animal pelts found in the northern lands near the Companion Lakes.

"All right, then. Thanks for the advice," Giraan said.

Sedi grinned. "You sure you should trust me? We're competitors now."

Giraan had to laugh. "Hardly." He turned to leave the shop. "Thank you, my friend."

"My pleasure. I won't get to them today, and they'll need a few days to dry once I've

done the work. Give me until the beginning of the waning.”

“Of course.” Giraan opened the door, but then paused on the threshold. After a moment he faced the tanner again. “Aiva and I had a strange encounter today. A Mettai woman along the road.”

“The one peddling baskets?”

“You saw her, too.”

Sedi shook his head, light from the doorway shining in his bright yellow eyes. “No. But I’ve heard others speaking of her. Of her baskets to be more precise.”

“What are they saying?”

The tanner shrugged. “That her baskets are the finest to be seen here in anyone’s memory.”

“But what about her?” Giraan demanded, his voice rising. “What are they saying about the woman?”

Sedi frowned. “I’ve heard nothing about her. Why?”

Giraan sighed, then took a long breath, trying to calm himself. Why, indeed? He wasn’t sure himself. “Forgive me. I found the woman . . . odd. Disturbingly so. But I said something foolish when first I saw her, and it may just be that she didn’t like me very much.”

“What did you say?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Giraan forced a smile, embarrassed by the memory. “Forget that I mentioned it.” He left Sedi’s shop, intending to walk back home. Instead, not quite knowing why, he turned and walked to the marketplace, scanning the stalls, peddlers’ carts, and byways for the old woman. He didn’t see her, but he soon realized that her baskets were everywhere. Or

rather, not everywhere, but present in numbers enough to be noticeable. Several of his fellow villagers had already purchased their own, and a number of sellers had traded for others and were now peddling them along with their wares.

Wherever she was now, the old woman's purse had to be bulging with Runnelwick's gold. Giraan wasn't certain why this disturbed him so, or why he should begrudge the stranger her success. What was the old woman to him? Yes, she was strange, not to mention rude. But even he could see that her baskets were lovely. No wonder so many of his neighbors wanted them. Hadn't Aiva herself traded for two of them? After some time he shook his head and turned for home. This was too fine a day to waste brooding over a strange old Mettai witch.