



EXCERPT FROM MAGI STORM

Book 2 Of The Magi Of Rulari

The Magi of Rulari chronicles the on-going saga of two very different peoples learning to live together on a world where magic works and men and women live or die by the sword.

A simple act of kindness dumps a young healer into a web of Magic intrigue and war.

When Catrin arrives at the crumbling Wyvern Towers to unite Wild Magi Logan Silvermane aka the Weatherman with his baby son, she discovers the place is in ruins. Logan is there on mission to convince an old friend to accept the new Magi Accords. The Accords will free Askela's enslaved Magi from the tyranny of the Proctors and help keep everyone safe from an invasion by the nearby kingdom of Jacite. They soon discover there is a traitor at Wyvern Towers. Can Catrin & Logan convince a powerful wizard to return and take up the Magi defenses of Askela before a Jacite agent destroys Askela's best hope for peace?

From Jacite With Love

THE ROOM had been furnished with antiques from the first settlers on Rulari. Ornate, highly polished tables gleamed in the light from the cut glass lamps. On the other side of the door the Birthday celebration for Maximillian Rex King of Jacite, was in full swing.



The woman who sat in an overstuffed chair waited impatiently. Fay Dupree was blond and beautiful. She was also smart, sneaky and a gifted Magi. For several years now she had been operating as an agent of her government, fermenting rebellions and generally spreading dissent in the population of the neighboring kingdom of Askela. None of those assignments had been of a long-term nature, simply quick in and quick out once the riot started. They had generated her valuable contacts which she hoped to use if she landed the coveted assignment rumored up for grabs.

The woman who entered was tiny; the top of her head barely reached Faye's shoulders and her slight form looked frail, although Faye had reason to know this was deceptive. Her iron-grey hair was pulled back in a loose bun, and a pair of horn-rimmed glasses perched on her nose. It was her eyes that gave her away. They were light grey, piercing and shrewd.

"Well, young lady, I see you've returned," Jessica Mélange said, sitting down in a specially made chair behind the desk. The chair seat was raised, and steps led up to it, ensuring that Jessica's eyes were at a level to most of her seated visitors. "Report."

"I was able to successfully ferment a rebellion in River City," she said. "The rebels took over much of the town and

the keep before they were defeated. While in power they managed to destroy a great many structures and ruin the economy. It will take years to recover. I also set up a network of agents to send us information which I left in place."

As usual, you've done an efficient job." Jessica looked her over as if deciding on something. "The next assignment I have in mind is somewhat different. It's long term, which I know you've been wanting. However, it will require more physical participation on your part."

Was she planning to have her lead an army? "I am proficient in hand-to-hand combat—"

"Not that kind of participation," Jessica cut her off. "You will need to insinuate yourself into the life of a high-ranking Proctor."

"Insinuate? How?"

Jessica looked at her grimly. "Want it spelled out, do you? You are to become his mistress. Do you have an issue with using your body to further Jacite ends? I ask because the other candidate for the job did have issues with it."

Faye straightened in her chair. "You mean I'm second choice? Who was first, may I ask?"

"You may not. Well?"

"No, I don't have an issue with it. What is his name?"

"His name is Magnus Cromwell, and he is currently running for Chief Proctor against Julius Sandman."

"Is that all I am to do?"

"No, I want you to continue to set up our spy network within Askela. I'm assigning Geric Wellington to you as an aide. She will be posing as your maid. Tell the agents they are to search for new things to provoke discontent. With the New Magi Accords now the law of the land, complaints about how the Proctors

treat everyone is no longer a valuable tool for discord. We need new issues to set off conflict."

After Faye left, another woman stepped into the room.

"You heard?" Jessica asked.

"Yes. How much does she know about me?" Gerica asked.

Jessica looked her over, thinking and not for the first time, that it was a pity such a powerful Magi was so plain. Gerica fit the part she would play on this assignment; she was tall, with dark brown hair showing touches of gray, brown eyes and a brown complexion. Her figure was average; the loose maid's clothing she wore disguised her few curves.

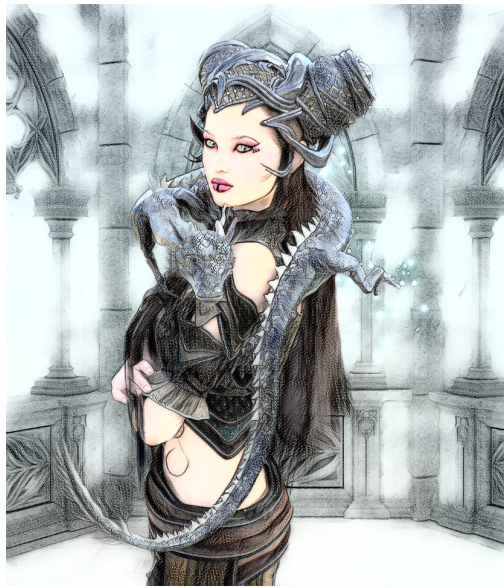
"Not as much as she thinks." Jessica replied. "She doesn't know how powerful a Magi you are. I suggest you keep that information to yourself. I am giving you a secondary mission on this one. Faye is ambitious; I'm not sure she can be fully trusted to put the good of Jacite before her own desires. I want you to watch her and let me know if it looks as if she's going off mission."

Gerica nodded and left the room.

A Stubborn Woman

MIKEL HAD another nightmare. Catrin awakened by his nurse Sesul when she was unable to get the baby back to sleep, rocked her foster son back to sleep. Looking down into Mikel's face, she came to a decision. Her healer's sense told her the boy was having nightmares because he was feeling insecure. This could only be because he was missing his foster father, who had been gone for six months. She knew Logan had only gone because of his sense of duty. Someone had to convince the remaining Wild Magi to accept the Accords. Logan was known to most of them and he was powerful enough to defend himself if the need arose.

When Catrin learned from her grandfather the latest place the Shahren had sent Logan, she made up her mind to take Mikel to him. She had gone to the War Room at Ironlyn to find out what she could about Wyvern Towers. Nicos, the artificial intelligence who controlled Ironlyn's defenses, had told her the last of the family who had ruled Wyvern Towers had died in battle. Wyvern Towers did not guard a gate, but like Ironlyn



it was located on a conjunction of several Ley Lines. The Ley Lines could provide an extra power boost when Magi exercised their talents. When man first came to Rulari and discovered their uses, it became a practice to establish fortresses where two or more of them crossed each other. Any protection Wards set up for a keep were stronger under them because the Wards could be directly tied to the Magi

shields.

"Is there an artificial intelligence like you there?" She asked.

"My records indicate there is. It is only a level 9, like Geri of course," Nicos had replied with typical A.I. snobbery. Catrin ignored it. "Since Wyvern Towers last keepers are gone from Rulari, it is possible that it will recognize the blood of Ironlyn as a replacement."

"I see," she said slowly. "Are you suggesting I should attempt to take control of Wyvern Towers? Because I don't want to do that. My place is here."

"It is not good for places of power to be empty of a controlling hand; the founders never intended that."

"I don't want to rule the place. I just want to re-unite Mikel with his father."

"You are to all intents and purposes, the child's mother," Nicos reminded her. "Childcare lore says children do better with both parents present." He went on without a pause. "My records indicate the keep should have closed itself up until a new claimant arrives. You will need these instructions to enter Wyvern Towers."

"Then how did Logan and the other Wild Magi enter if the A.I. closed the gates?"

"Obviously, the Wardswere weakened in the battle when the Drake holding Wyvern Towers was killed. It might have been possible for a Wild Magi to force entrance using the Ley Lines."

Wild Magi were men and women with strong Magi talents who refused to join either the allied free Magi of Askela or the Shan's Proctors. The Proctors, who until the Magi Accords went into effect, had routinely forced unaffiliated Magi to join them, had usually left the Wild Magi alone. Individually each Wild Magi was powerful enough to make it difficult for even two or three Proctors to force them to do anything they didn't want to, and they were closely allied with the powerful Mercenary Guild whose tentacles ran through all the human settlements and controlled the largest military force on Rulari. Even the Shahan didn't dare cross the Mercenary Guild. Askela like the other human kingdoms was ruled by powerful warlords who hired private armies from them to fight their battles. Once a war had finished, the mercenary units could be dismissed, relieving the warlord of feeding and housing them.

The recently created Magi Accords re-structured the Proctor System which previously oversaw all the Magi in Askela. Most of the Proctors accepted the Shan's reorganization of their

system, but some did not. Of Those who didn't accept them, a few simply left the service, setting out on their own. Rumors said that a few of the more rebellious former Proctors had set up a rebel alliance to put a Proctor on the throne of Askela. This was only a rumor as was the allegation that contact with Jacite agents had been arranged to restore the Proctor system to its original form.

Fresh from her discussion with Nicos, Catrin went to her sister Rebecca. There wasn't a great deal of similarity between the sisters as far as looks; Catrin took after their mother who had been tall, beautiful, well-endowed, with a mane of dark curling hair, vivid green eyes and a lovely, heart shaped face. In contrast, Rebecca looked like their grandmother, slight, with night-black hair and a porcelain complexion.

When she heard Catrin's plans, Rebecca looked at her in exasperation. She didn't want her younger sister making a long trek to Wyvern Towers. It wasn't safe with outlaws and defiant Proctors running around all over Askela. Catrin was a powerful spellcaster; she was intelligent, a dedicated doctor and foster mother, but Rebecca doubted she could fight off a group of Proctors without help. While her healing abilities gave her a healthy empathy for those around her and she usually strived to keep the peace, Rebecca knew any argument she posed would have to be subtle. Catrin could be as obstinate as a goat once she had decided on a course of action. If she decided that a thing must be done, it was next to impossible to get her to change her mind. Never-the-less Rebecca tried.

"You can't take a baby that age out on the road," Rebecca said, referring to Catrin's foster son Mikel. "He needs places to play and explore. He'll be very unhappy cooped up in a traveling wagon all day for several weeks."

"Mother and Papa did it with us," Catrin retorted.

"They had Grandpa and Grandmamma to help them," Rebecca pointed out. "You will be driving the wagon I assume, so you won't be able to give him much attention."

"I'm taking Sesul with me to look after him when I'm driving." Catrin referred to Mikel's wet nurse.

"What about her son Jory? She will want him with her. That means the two of you would have *two* babies to keep happy in a traveling wagon."

"They will play together as they've always done. I've drawn up a design for converting the interior of the wagon to a playpen in the daytime."

"What about supplies for the road?"

"I was planning on taking two wagons, one for Sesul, the boys and I to sleep in, and another for things like that."

"Who is going to drive the other wagon?"

"I was hoping one of the grooms would be willing to come with us."

"No," said Andre from the doorway. Rebecca's husband was a well-muscled man of medium height with a neatly trimmed black beard. "A groom won't do. There are too many former men-at-arms turned bandit on the loose. After the Accords were ratified by the Khaso Commissaire most of the fighters not a part of the Mercenary guild were just left to fend for themselves. It wouldn't be safe. You need to take at least some of our Mercs with you for protection."

"Will you speak to them for me?"

He nodded and she turned and left. Over her shoulder, she said, "I'm going to take these plans to Jerlyn Tobias so he can get started altering one of the Wagons for me." Jerlyn Tobias was employed as a handyman and a general jack of all trades by Ironlyn.

"I told you that you were wasting your time," Andre reminded his wife.

She sighed. "I had to try. Why did Logan allow himself to be persuaded into trying to recruit the rest of the Wild Magi anyway?"

The question had been rhetorical since this was not the first time they had held this discussion. He reiterated the reasons anyway. "One, he doesn't want Mikel growing up in a world where Magi fights Magi. Two, The Weatherman is personally known to a lot of the Wild Magi. Three, he is powerful enough to hold his own if he runs into a rebel Proctor, and four, if I had been gone for six months could someone talk you out of going to look for me?"

"I suppose not. You think she wants to go because she misses him as a man, don't you?"

He just nodded again, smiling.

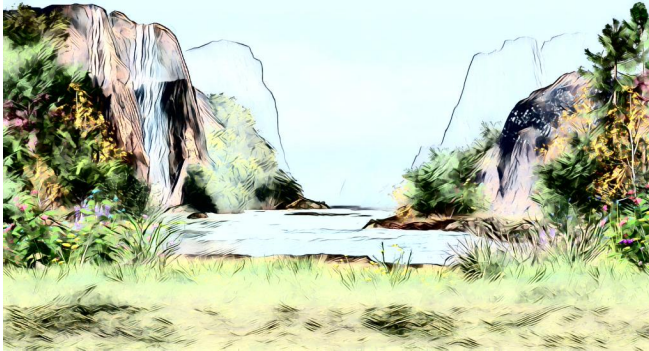
"So do I," his wife admitted with a sigh.

Man With A Mission

LOGAN SILVERMANE stopped his unicorns on the rise of a hill overlooking Wyvern Valley, while he took stock of his destination, he allowed both animals to drop their heads and graze on the sparse grass available. Wyvern Shire didn't look prosperous. Split rail fences divided what should have been tidily plowed fields from pastures. Instead, the fields were overrun with weeds not tilled in neat rows, and the fences, which should have held goats, sheep and cattle, were falling apart.

Focusing his long-distance glasses, he could see off to the left an abandoned fishing village with a broken-down wharf extending far out into the bay. The map said the place was called Fauxcoast and it had once been a prosperous port. It

certainly looked disreputable today, he thought. A few small



boats were still moored to what was left of the pier, but they were in poor shape.

To the right, between the hill where he sat and Wyvern Towers, was another village; Edgestar wasn't abandoned but the homes and shops were in such ill repair they might as well have been. A few patch-ups had been attempted, but those had damage inflicted on them as well. Someone didn't want this village to thrive.

Beyond Edgestar, lay a hardscrabble tent camp of what he recognized as a merc unit. Accustomed to the neatness and order of the men under Jors Swordsmith, the Captain in charge of the unit at Ironlyn, this set up was jarring. He shook his head over the open tent flaps showing half-made bedrolls, dirty clothes strewn everywhere, swords and pistols lying in piles instead of neat racks. His friend Andre a former Merc, now the husband of the Draconi of Ironlyn, would have been kicking butts over it.

Up the hill from the camp was Wyvern Towers. It was a towered hexagon, sitting flush against the steep cliff of a flat-topped mesa behind it. The keep didn't look in much better shape than the town it was supposed to protect. The red and yellow stones might once have appeared imposing, but now they just looked chipped and broken. A pair of wooden gates leading into the castle stood ajar. From here the inner bailey looked like an unkempt jungle.

Couldn't Magnus have done a few repairs if he intended to stay here? He wondered. No, on second thought, lowering himself to bother with repairs wasn't Magnus' style. From the looks of

things he must be camping out in that ruin of a castle. Logan shrugged. He had slept in worse places as a child after the Proctors had wiped out his village. He clucked softly to the great golden unicorn he rode and to the pack unicorn, starting them down the poorly kept road to the Castle.

He could see villagers peeking out at him from broken windows as he rode slowly through the town. He was aware of the dangerous image he cast; it was an image he deliberately cultivated because it saved time and effort to teach strangers to respect him. He looked every inch one of the Wild Magi; a well-armed, leather clad man on a powerful unicorn without the protection of armed soldiers whose demeanor dared anyone to try and rob him. The absence of hired guards told anyone who cared that he rode alone because he knew he didn't need protection.



When he started through the Merc campsite, several men came out to meet him. He stopped the unicorn and waited. His teenage self would have been terrified, knowing he might have to fight them to keep from being robbed. He had survived too many of these encounters since then. Now he just found them annoying.

"Who are you?" one of them demanded.

Logan looked him over, conscious that a couple of men were edging to get behind him. "You can call me the Weatherman. Who's your Captain, Sargent?"

"I am." A thin, wiry man about Logan's age came forward. "Tomas Jones of Red Wing Company."

Logan sighed. It was obvious this bunch had practice waylaying and robbing travelers. The Captain would keep his

attention while his men surrounded him and pulled him off his unicorn. Or at least that was supposed to be the way it worked. This time they had mistaken their quarry.

"Jones," he said mildly, "If you don't call off that pair trying to crawl up my backside, I'll have to hurt them."

A modicum of respect showed in the Captains eyes. This was no rich pigeon for plucking, this man was expecting trouble and not afraid to handle it.

"Delco, Jerry, get back over here where he can see you," Jones snapped.

Sullenly, they obeyed their captain.

"You know Jones, this type of thing comes pretty close to Banditry. I could report you to the Guild for this."

Jones had the grace to look embarrassed. "We aren't bandits," he declared. "I admit our arrangement with the Village is a little unconventional; in return from protecting them from the Raiders we get to keep what we collect. Besides a man's got to eat," he said stubbornly.

"Tell me about these raiders," Logan said.

Jones shrugged. " From what we gather it's a mixed group of Sekhmet and humans. Every two or three weeks they come into the valley, raid the outlying farms and then take swing through some of the villages and the Trade Station. We've fought them off two or three times since Wyvern Towers fell."

Logan looked at him consideringly. It might be true. He wanted to learn more about these raiders. "I take it you accepted this 'unconventional' contract because your Company bond fees are due and you're broke so you can't get another assignment from Merc Headquarters?"

"Partly," Jones admitted.

Logan's eyebrows rose. "Partly?"

"Well, between the Raiders and the Proctors soldiers, most of the men got killed. The women here are real grateful to us for sticking around, if you know what I mean."

"I see," Logan said dryly; he could just imagine what form that gratitude took. "Who was your original employer?"

"Like I said," Jones replied. "We haven't been paid in more than six months and the villagers can't afford us, so they agreed we could collect our fee from anyone passing through the village. How much is the information worth to you?"

Logan looked them over again. They were a ragged looking bunch; many of their faces showed the gauntness of those on the thin edge of starvation. He had been hungry like that himself. With a wry smile at his own foolishness, Logan slipped a hand inside his vest pocket and took out a gold coin. He sent it spinning toward Jones who caught it deftly. After biting the coin to test that it was actually gold, Jones shrugged. "We worked for Warden Braylin. He didn't pay us before he got killed when the Proctors took Wyvern Towers. We had nowhere else to go, so we just stayed."

"What did the Proctors want?"

Jones continued, "A woman Magi came to Warden Braylin for sanctuary, and he took her and her kid in. A bunch of Proctors came looking for her. Warden Braylin thought his Wards would keep them out. They didn't. When they took the woman and the child, they sacked the place and killed him. We fought them, but we didn't have any Magi help. It was over pretty quick. Afterwards, they just turned us loose. Figured with Braylin dead we had no reason to fight them. It wasn't like the woman could pay us. A few days after the Proctors left, some of them that worked in the Towers came back, not that there was much left. They said the Proctors had looted the place."

Logan nodded toward the keep. "Who is up there now?"

"A month ago, a Proctor named Magnus and his apprentices moved in. About two weeks later a woman showed up. I understand she's quite a looker."

Logan was skeptical. "You trying to tell me you didn't stop her?"

"No; she put some kind of spell on the boys and they let her pass."

"Do you want me to contact the Mercenary Guild for you? I understand they have protocols in place for companies who find themselves in your situation."

"Sure, why not?" Jones said.

"Okay, I'll send a message to Guild Headquarters letting them know you're stranded."

Jones nodded, moving out of his path and gesturing for his men to do the same. They obeyed but there was some grumbling.

"You shouldn't have let him go. He had gold," Delco protested, "We might have taken him, Captain."

Jones snorted. "Right. He didn't turn a hair when you tried to get behind him. I've heard of the Weatherman; he's one of those Wild Magi and nobody to mess around with. I recognized him. He's fought alongside Mercs before. He took part in the siege of Ironlyn; I hear they had an ex-Merc leading them and they fought the Shahan's army and Proctors to a standstill. I like living. Besides, it sounds as if he has an in with the Guild. Maybe he can be useful to us."

The closer he got to Wyvern Towers the more Logan felt the Wards surrounding the keep. Unlike those at Ironlyn which were tied firmly to the conjoining ley lines, these felt fractured, as if the link between the Wards and the leys had been damaged.

The tall entrance gates were standing partially open, but he didn't immediately urge his mount inside. The two carved

dragons guarding the access to the Towers, emitted a faint hint of power. Logan had never actually seen a Dragon in person, but stories and legends about them abounded. Some of the tales had been brought through the gate when men first arrived on Rulari and were obviously nonsense. The tales had fired his boyish imagination though, so he had done some reading on his own whenever he could sneak into the archives in Khaso City. He had needed to sneak in because the archives weren't open to the public and he didn't want to chance being caught and tested for Magi gifts. A lone boy in Khaso City wasn't safe from either the Proctors or the men and women who preyed on its citizens; he had been careful not to draw attention to himself.

Unlike Earth, Rulari did have dragons, but they weren't enormous reptiles with a taste for beautiful virgins who hoarded gold. The Dragons of Rulari were fairly small, not much larger than domestic cats. They did bear their young by laying eggs, but they also suckled them like any other warm-blooded animal. (One of the books he had found showed drawings of this). The book had a funny name for them; oviparous or something like that.

The original builders of Wyvern Towers must have shared his fascination with dragons because there were carvings of them everywhere not just guarding the Tower gates. He saw them on the door knockers, hitching posts for unicorns, and even over the arch that had once led into extensive gardens.

There was evidence of formal gardens in the inner bailey, but the carefully laid out beds of plants now only grew weeds, and grass poked up between the flagstone walkways. A narrow cobblestone drive circled the outer edge of the bailey leading to each of the seven towers. Six of them were approximately the same size, but the bigger center one must have been where

Warden Braylin lived. Wide stone steps went up to a carved wooden door with a brass handle in the shape of a dragon's head.

He stopped at the first tower he came to and dismounted. The steps on this one was not as imposing as the ones he could see attached to the center tower. He lifted the handle on the wooden door and pushed it open. It was dark inside; unlike Ironlyn, no lights came on at his entrance. Andre had said it was a spell the builders had crafted and set into Ironlyn. Either the spell was broken here, or the builders of Wyvern Towers hadn't known it.

Light streaming in from the open door showed a torch had been dropped on the floor. Logan picked it up and examined it. It still had burnable fodder, so he flicked it with a little bit of power, and it caught fire. Holding it high, he examined the room. It appeared to be some type of kitchen and eating room. He could hear a trickle of water in the back. The cistern holding the water was leaking a little, but it was still serviceable.

This place would do to sleep in for tonight, he thought, sticking the burning torch into a crevice in the wall. It didn't provide a lot of light, but it lit up the room enough so he could see to lay out his bedroll. Then he went back outside to unsaddle his unicorns. After bringing in his saddle and the pack of food and cooking utensils into the tower, he took the unicorns over into the shrubbery that used to be flowering gardens and picketed them for the night where they could graze on the wild grass growing between the paving stones. After a moment's thought he set a few Wards around them. The Wards served a dual purpose; they would keep the animals close to the tower and deter anyone who tried to steal them. Tomorrow would be soon enough to locate Magnus and his

apprentices, he thought, and went back inside to fix his solitary dinner of shaved meat and lentil stew.

AFTER MANY exasperating delays, the three Traveling wagons were finally ready by early summer. The first wagon, which Catrin would drive, had been remodeled inside so that one of the two bottom beds folded up and out of the way, creating a play space for the boys to use when the wagon was moving. The bed across from it, which Mikel and Jory would share, had a side railing to keep them from rolling off the bed. The wagon also had two doors, the normal one in the rear with steps that folded up when traveling, and a door in the front giving access to the driving bench. The rear door had a latch near the top and out of the boys reach to keep it closed when the wagon was moving. When the boys were asleep, Sesul could ride on the seat beside Catrin. With the door open, it was easy to check on the boys if they woke up from a nap. Despite the delays, Catrin was quite pleased with the way Jerlyn Tobias, Ironlyn's handyman and jack of all trades, had implemented her design.

One of the other two wagons carried supplies, and the other beds for the five men at arms Andre was sending with her under the command of Sargent Carson Michaels. Michaels was a middle-aged man with short cropped gray hair, a small goatee and sharp gray eyes. His muscled body had begun to sag a trifle with age, but he was a strong, able commander.

Mary, Carson's wife was coming with them to give Catrin and Sesul an extra pair of hands. She was a short, dumpy woman with twinkling gray eyes and a merry smile. Her cropped gray hair curled around her face.

Andre had assigned four of his hired mercenaries who were willing to travel to go along under Carson's command. Bain Lansdowne had volunteered when he heard Sesul was going. A tall, strapping young man, he had hopes of talking her into

marrying him. Sam Leonard, a tall skinny man with brown hair with a balding patch, was second in command. He would drive the wagon Mary would ride in. The other two mercs were polar opposites: Torj Miller was young, this was his first assignment. He was a big young man with bigger muscles who was anxious to make his way up the ranks. Diego Castro was an experienced soldier, about medium height, with a bland expression and a wait-and-see attitude that had served him well in the past. In his spare time Diego played the guitar. He and Torj were in charge of the spare herd of unicorns that traveled with them.

A couple of nanny goats and a ram would make the journey as well. Andre had rolled his eyes when he heard this, but Catrin was determined to bring them; the boys would need fresh milk. Bain, who had grown up with goats, was assigned their care.

The morning they were due to leave, Catrin walked out to find Misty, one of the three white maned cats she and Rebecca had rescued as kittens, attempting to drag her bed up the steps into Catrin's wagon.

Until recently, the three kittens had remained inseparable, but after Mela had given birth to a litter, a rivalry had developed between the two females. When Misty saw her approaching, she dropped her burden and meowed demandingly.

"So you want to come along, do you?" Catrin asked her. "It will be a long trip."

Misty just stared at her, silently commanding her to put the bedding in the wagon.

Catrin lifted the bed off the steps and opened the door. She set the cat's bed at the foot of the bed she slept in. That way it would be high enough that the cat had a place of refuge from Mikel and Jory, who like all toddlers, were a trifle heavy-handed with pets.

Misty leaped up to the bunk and inspected it. Apparently Catrin's choice met with her approval because she curled up in the bed.

"Is she coming with us?" inquired Sesul as she stepped in the door.

"I guess so," Catrin agreed. "She must be ceding the field to Mela." The other female cat had grown territorial since she had given birth to a litter of kittens several weeks ago.

Rebecca, Andre and Selene came to say goodbye.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Rebecca asked her.

Catrin smiled and hugged her. "Yes. Mikel needs his dad."

"Feels like old times," Rebecca said. "But this time I'm staying here, and you are leaving without me."

Rebecca and Andre had been married nearly a year and Catrin could sense a new life beginning in her sister's womb.

"You will not miss me as much as you think; I'm no Seer like Selene, but I think you are going to be quite busy soon."

Selene said nothing, just hugged her sister hard. Catrin kissed her on the cheek. "I'll miss you," she told the younger girl. "Take care of them for me."

Selene nodded. "I will. I will miss you too."

Ironlyn Shire lay next to the border crossing into the neighboring kingdom of Jacite. Set back into a steep cliff separating a wide prairie from the coast, Ironlyn Trade Station just outside the gates was a jumping off point for Trade Caravans and other Travelers wanting to go from one kingdom to the other.

Wyvern Towers was located in the province of Ravenshell. To reach it from Ironlyn, Travelers passed the Station and followed the main Travelers road north until Ironlyn's protective cliffs dwindled into low hills. There the road forked, one continuing on into Askela, while the other turned

and began to ascend the foothills separating Ironlyn Shire from Wyvern Shire.

Their route would take them past two Sekhmet villages. The Sekhmet were a race of people descended from felines who had come from another world through a portal about the same time humans had arrived on Rulari.

Being at about the same technological level, the two civilizations met as equals. Like the humans, the Sekhmet discovered how useful the Ley Lines were, and soon both groups were competing for the same areas. The interaction of two very different peoples was uneasy at best and many things contributed to the growing tension between the two groups of colonists. While the humans and the Sekhmet were not at war, the laws and customs of the two societies were different enough to cause strain between them. Although at first both groups had been tolerant of these cultural disparities, disputes gradually arose between them, and now armed hostility had become a way of life between the two populations. During one of the Sekhmet annual festivals of the Gods, the Shahan had taken advantage of the strict neutrality imposed on all attendees to broker a treaty to stop the two groups from raiding each other's villages and farms.

There were still a few occasional transgressions by both groups however, and Michaels was understandably nervous upon learning Catrin planned to pass by two Sekhmet settlements on her way to Wyvern Towers.

"Are you saying the tribes won't honor the treaty?" Catrin asked.

He hesitated, "I have known unauthorized raids to happen. The first tribe we pass will be of the Maarhis clan. It is customary for their young men and women to prove themselves in battle before they become eligible to have children. Some of

them take the position it is easier to apologize after the fact than to prevent it."

"How close are we going to come to their village?"

"This road passes within twenty miles."

"I see. Thank you for telling me. It can't be helped; this is the nearest road that goes to Ravenshell Province. We will just have to be careful I suppose."

They had safely passed the Maarhis village and started up into the hills when Catrin found the Sekhmet girl collapsed beside the road. She was young, Catrin judged her to be in her middle teens, of the Maarhis tribe and in the throes of childbirth.

Despite Michaels protests, Catrin ordered the wagons to stop. The girl looked up at her out of pain filled, tear-drenched eyes.

"Help me," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

Catrin knelt in the dirt beside her. "I am a healer. May I touch you?"

The girl nodded and then gasped as another contraction hit her.

"Breathe through it, like this," Catrin said, showing the panting breaths used to ease childbirth.

"I think your baby is coming soon. You will be easier if you let me help you to a bed in the wagon. Can you stand up?"

When the girl nodded, Catrin said. "Sesul, Mary, help me get her into the wagon."

Between contractions, the women got the teenager into the wagon and onto a bed.

"Take the boys and set up the playpen outside," Catrin instructed Sesul. "And tell Sargent Michaels we will make camp here tonight."

"Her people will be looking for her," Michaels protested to Catrin when Sesul relayed this information. "We shouldn't interfere with what is happening."

"I'm not leaving a pregnant teenager out here alone to birth a baby!" Catrin snapped. "If her people come looking for her, they will see that we have treated her kindly and helped her. Surely they can't object to that."

Grumbling under his breath, about the irrationality of women in general and Catrin in particular, Michaels went to give orders to set up camp.

"What is your name?" Catrin asked the girl.

"I am Lalra, fourth daughter of Rokohana Kosu of the Maarhis Tribe of Clan Ilhanyu."

Catrin held the girl's hands while she breathed through another contraction.

"Lie back and relax until the next one comes. Why are you so far from your village Lalra?"

"The child will not be full Maarhis. The father is from the Taiga. We met at the Festival Of The Lights in the fall. I knew it was forbidden but when he asked to meet at the fertility celebration, I went."

She gasped as another contraction hit. When it was over, Catrin gave her a few sips of water.

"Does he know about the child?"

"No. When I returned to our rooms, mother was waiting up for me. She confined me to the room for the rest of the festival. When we left for home, I tried to slip away to look for his people, but I was watched too closely."

"Your mother knows you are with child?"

"I told her when she came to notify me a mate had been chosen for me. She was furious. She said my husband would kill the child, so I ran away. There is a Taiga Tribe north and

east of here. I hoped I could reach them, and they would help me find Prasra."

"That is the baby's father?"

"Yes."

Catrin reached down with her healer's senses. The baby was in position in the birth canal. "Okay, push hard now Lalra. Soon you will see your child."

The baby girl squalled as the contractions pushed her out into the world. Catrin caught her and turned her over so she would expel any fluids still in her mouth. Gently she laid the girl on Lalra's breast. In contrast to Lalra's warm golden color, the baby's skin was the color of milk and marked by thin purple and brown stripes. Her tiny hands flexed, and small claws popped out.

"A beautiful girl," Catrin said. "What will you name her?"

"She is Ishu, after the rising moon."

Catrin tied off the umbilical cord and helped Lalra fasten a diaper on the child. "Let her suckle," she instructed. "It will help expel the afterbirth."

Catrin was setting her newly cleaned birthing tools on a towel to dry when she heard the hullabaloo start outside.

"I think your mother has arrived," she remarked.

The Sekhmet girl looked frightened. She clutched her new daughter protectively. "She will kill her," she told Catrin.

"I won't let her do that," Catrin assured her. "When she sees her granddaughter, she might change her mind."

Lalra shook her head. The human gesture looked odd coming from her. "No," she looked down at her daughter's face as she suckled. "Ishu is part Taiga. It is forbidden."

Catrin frowned. "I see. I can't allow someone to shed blood over this. Your mother must be worried about you. You will have to see her, so she knows you are safe. I won't let her

harm the baby, but you may need to make a choice as to whether you stay here or go on with us."

"She will not let me go easily. I do not wish to bring my troubles on you."

Catrin patted her hand. "You let me worry about that."

When she stepped out of the wagon Catrin found she was just in time to stop the fight. Battle lines had already formed, and it was obvious tempers were running hot. A finely dressed Sekhmet woman, mounted on a war unicorn and accompanied by four warriors similarly mounted, was facing off with Michaels and his men who stood between her and the wagon.

"Greetings, Rokohana Kosu," Catrin called from the steps of the wagon. "I am Draya Catrin Mabinogion Of Ironlyn. Can I assume you are seeking your daughter?"

"It is you who holds my daughter?"

"Your daughter is here, but she is a guest, not a captive. I assure you she and your granddaughter are free to leave whenever she wishes."

"My granddaughter?" The woman repeated.

"Yes. She and Lalra came through the birth just fine. Would you like to see them?"

"The child is normal?"

"Quite healthy. I understand your daughter named her Ishu."

Rokohana Kosu dismounted. "I would see my daughter."

"Of course," Catrin agreed. "You will wish to see for yourself she and her daughter are well."

One of the mounted warriors began to protest.

"Be still!" the woman snapped. "Do you think me incapable of defending myself against such as these?"

"No, Rokohana," he muttered.

Catrin opened the door and stepped inside, gesturing for Rokohana Kosu to follow her.

Lalra was sitting up in the bed with Ishu cuddled against her, still suckling. The Sekhmet girl looked up at her mother warily.

Kosu looked the child over and sighed.

"I had hoped the child would not show her mixed heritage so much," Kosu said. "This one tells me you and the child are healthy?"

"Yes Mother."

"Give her to me. I will dispose of this disgrace. I will find an explanation why you are no longer untouched. You can still marry."

"No!" Lalra snarled. "Ishu is mine! I'll not let you kill her!"

"Daughter, that is a normal maternal instinct after birthing. I am sorry for it, but I can't allow the child to live. Give her to me."

"NO!" Lalra shouted, causing Ishu to whimper.

Catrin stepped between the pair. "Rokohana Kosu, no one is killing any babies today. I will not allow it."

Kosu turned on her. "Do not interfere human. This is Sekhmet business."

"No, Draconi, it is my business."

"Draya Catrin I can't bring this trouble on you," Lalra said. "I must go on alone."

"I do not think it will bring trouble on me," Catrin said, meeting Rokohana Kosu's eyes firmly. "I believe your mother is too wise a ruler to risk going to war with the Sword of Ironlyn, which would surely happen if she harms me and mine."

"Very well, Draya Catrin," Kosu said as if making a concession. "You may keep the little mongrel if it means so much to you, but Lalra returns with me."

"That will be up to Lalra," Catrin said. "If she wishes to leave her daughter here and return with you, I will not stop her, and I will care for Ishu as my child. But that is Lalra's decision, not yours or mine Rokohana."

Kosu turned to Lalra. "Well, daughter? Do you go or stay?"

Lalra looked down at the tiny body nestled so trustingly against her breast. "Mother, I will stay with Draya Catrin, and I will raise my daughter to love not hate."

Catrin saw the flash of pain that crossed Kosu's face. "Very, well. From this day forward, I no longer have four daughters—only three."

She turned and left the wagon. Catrin watched her mount and ride away.