

## Prologue

*Celiera ~ the Garreval*

She was only nine years old, and she was going to die.

Lillis Baristani clung to her beloved friend, Earth master Kieran vel Solande, and showered his throat with frightened tears.

Around them the world had gone mad. Magic, blades, and barbed *sel'dor* arrows filled the air. Blood ran red on the ground. Below, at the base of the Rhakis mountains, dozens of vile, snarling, monstrous wolf-beasts called *darrokken* were charging up the slope towards the small, fleeing party while the creatures' evil masters flung globe after globe of blue-white Mage Fire to cut off all chance of escape.

Whatever the Mage Fire touched disintegrated on contact...not dissolved ...simply disappeared. Entire chunks of the mountain evaporated in an instant, and the ground was shifting and shaking beneath Kieran's feet.

"Kieran!" his friend Kiel shouted, pointing uphill. "The mountain!" Another frightful barrage of Mage Fire had dissolved half the peak above their heads. The remaining rock and stone gave a rumbling shriek and collapsed, sending a wall of dirt, stone, and wood rushing towards them.

"Hold tight, little one," Kieran whispered. Lillis tightened her arms around his neck, pressing so close that her kitten, Snowfoot, mewed a protest and squirmed in the sling tied round her neck. Kieran turned to raise both hands and she felt the electric tingle of his gathering magic. It danced across her skin like crackling sparks of green light. Inside her, Lillis's own magic rose in response.

She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her face to his throat. *Bright Lord, please help Kieran, she prayed. I don't want to him to die. Or Papa, Lorelle, Kiel, or me either.*

She felt the vibrations of Kieran's throat against her lips as he shouted defiantly and flung out his weaves. The magic left him—and her too—in a great rush. *Please, gods, please gods, please, gods.*

Incredibly—or, perhaps, miraculously—the crumbling mountainside froze. Lillis risked a glance up to confirm that they were not about to be crushed flat as a griddle cake, then squeezed her eyes shut again.

“Five-fold weaves, my brothers!” Kieran shouted. “Keep that scorching Mage Fire off us!” Suddenly, he gave a grunt of pain, and Lillis felt him falter. Her head lifted, and though the battle raging all around terrified her, she forced her eyes open.

Kieran was arrow-shot. The sight of the ugly black, barbed metal arrow puncturing his thigh made her belly lurch.

*\*\*Get down, Lillis,\*\** his voice murmured in her mind. *\*\*Run to your father. Kiel and I will hold them off.\*\**

*\*\*But what about you?\*\*\** It was the first time she’d ever spoken to him mind-to-mind. *\*\*You’re coming too, aren’t you?\*\*\**

*\*\*In a chime ...once Kiel and I deal with these Eld rultsharts.\*\** From a face too handsome to be mortal, his normally laughing blue eyes regarded her with unsettling solemnity, and then she knew what he would not say. He turned his head to press a kiss to her face, then another to the thin arms wrapped so tight around his neck, and though he did not release his hands from his weave, she felt the tug of Spirit fingers prying her grip loose. She fought to cling, but her childish muscles were no match for his magic. Her hold on him lost, she slid to the ground. *\*\*Go, kitling. Quickly.\*\** Another nudge from invisible hands shoved her towards Papa.

“Master Baristani,” Kieran cried aloud to her father, “take the girls. Go with the *shei’dalins* into the Mists! Run!”

Clutching Snowfoot to her chest, Lillis stumbled across the uneven ground towards Papa’s outstretched arms and the small knot of scarlet-gowned healers. Before she reached them, a darting flash of darkness caught her eye and a foul odor filled the air. She turned to find a *darrokken* rushing towards her, its red eyes glowing like the Dark Lord’s flames, venomous saliva dripping from its yellowed fangs. All over the foul wolflike creature’s scaly back, sores oozed green, odorous slime. She turned to run, but her foot caught between two rocks and she went down. Snowfoot still clutched to her chest, she hit the ground hard. Knees and elbows took a nasty crack, and she bit her lip so hard her mouth filled with the salty, metallic tang of blood. She jumped to her feet, but pain shot out from her ankle, radiating halfway up her shin. With a cry, she fell down again just as the *darrokken* lunged.

One of the Fey warriors made a sprinting leap towards her, and scarlet-hilted Fey’cha daggers flew from his hands. The razor-sharp blades cut through the monster’s tough, leathery hide, and the *darrokken* dropped dead in its tracks.

“I’ve got you.” The warrior who’d killed the *darrokken* reached for her arm, but before he could grab hold, another of the monstrous beasts was upon him. Its fangs sank into his leg, and the Fey toppled, rolling over as he fell and landing with unsheathed blades in his hands. “Run, child,” he cried.

Those were the warrior’s last words. He bared his teeth in a snarl and plunged his red Fey’cha into the vulnerable belly of the beast just as the monster snapped its sharp yellow fangs around the warrior’s throat and ripped. Blood sprayed across Lillis’s face in a hot, red rain. Fey and beast died together, fighting, tearing, and slashing until the last breath of life left their bodies.

“*Lillis! Get up! Run!*” Kiel cried. His blue eyes were filled with fear, his blond hair spattered with dirt and blood. Two black arrows stuck out of his shoulder like grotesque spines. “Run for the Mists. Lorelle, Master Baristani—go!”

One of the *shei’dalins* in their party rushed forward to grab Lillis. A rapid healing weave spun out in golden-tinted waves of color, and the pain in her ankle subsided. The woman helped Lillis to her feet while another took Lorelle’s hand and began to run towards the shifting, sparkling clouds that guarded the Fading Lands. More *darrokken* rushed up the mountainside and dove into the middle of the small group. Lillis shrieked as the monstrous wolf-beasts slaughtered half a dozen more Fey and drove three of the *shei’dalins* back down the mountain towards the waiting Eld.

When she reached the edge of the Mists, Lillis turned back to watch the battle below. The remaining warriors guarding their escape were falling fast to the ferocious maws of the *darrokken*, while the Mages continued bombarding the mountainside with their devastating magic. A tide of Fey warriors burst from the Mists-filled pass of the Garreval and raced across the ground at lightning speed, swords flashing silvery bright in the sunlight.

Black Eld arrows turned day to night, and hundreds of Fey went down. Kieran fell with them.

“Kieran!” Lillis shrieked as she watched him fall. “*Kieran!*” She started to rush towards him, but the *shei’dalin* grabbed her and held her fast.

“*Nei,*” the veiled woman whispered. “You cannot go to him. He would not want it. He dies so you may live.”

With unexpected strength, the *shei’dalin* shoved Lillis towards the shifting radiance of the Faering Mists. “Quickly, into the Mists. It’s our only chance.”

Lillis struggled against her hold, squirming and flailing as the tears poured down her face. She screamed Kieran’s name again and again as the *shei’dalin* dragged her away. Before they’d gone more than a few steps, the mountain gave a groaning rumble that escalated to a deafening roar.

Kieran’s Earth weave collapsed and the entire mountaintop caved in,

sending shards of shattered rocks, splintered trees, and a wave of earth crashing towards the valley below. The ground beneath Lillis's feet fell away, and with a wail she toppled back into the shining white abyss of the Faering Mists.

Her last sight was of Kieran, screaming defiance as the avalanche enveloped him.

## Chapter One

*Fading Lands, Faering Mists.  
Fey warrior, champion of Light.  
Fading Lands, Faering Mists.  
Leading a never-ending Fight.*

*Tairen Soul: Singing, soaring high.  
Tairen Soul: Thundering, roaring cry.*

*Fading Lands, Faering Mists.  
Fey warrior, fiercest of Fey.  
Fading Lands, Faering Mists.  
Alone, leading the way.  
~ Fiercest of Fey, by Corvan Lief, Celierian Poet*

*Celiera ~ Orest  
Two weeks later*

Ellysetta Baristani plunged her hands into the gaping cavity of the dying boy's chest. Her fingers closed around his heart, pumping the still chambers with desperate force as a blaze of powerful, golden-white magic poured from her soul into his.

The fading brightness of his life force tasted warm and tart on her tongue, like a sun-ripened peach plucked too soon from the tree. So young. So innocent. He couldn't have been more than fourteen. Too young for this. Too young for war. Too young to die.

Just like her sisters, Lillis and Lorelle, who'd been lost in the Faering Mists during the battle of Teleon.

"Please, my lady. Save him. Please, save my Aartys. He's all I've got left." The mother of the dying child stood sobbing beside the table, her eyes swollen and red rimmed, chapped hands twisting the hem of the blood-soaked apron

tied around her waist. Her desperation and grief-induced terror pounded at Ellysetta's empathic senses like hammer blows.

Not that a few more hammer blows made much difference in the emotional din swirling around the scarlet healing tents that had been erected on the mist- and rainbow-filled plazas of Upper Orest. As always when a battle raged nearby, the sheer numbers of wounded and dying warriors made it impossible for the dozen scarlet-veiled *shei'dalin* healers to weave peace upon them all. Not even the roar of the great Kiyera's Veil waterfalls could drown out the screams of pain and pleas for mercy.

"I'll do my best, Jonna," Ellysetta vowed. She wanted to promise to save Aartys, but the last weeks here on Celieria's war-torn northern border had taught her too well. Death, once a stranger, had become an all-too-familiar acquaintance.

Ellysetta looked up and met Jonna's eyes over the boy's limp body. The weeping mortal woman was one of the hearth witches who tended the wounded and dying. She knew death as intimately as Ellysetta now did, but that didn't stop her from fighting against it with every ounce of strength she possessed—or from begging for a salvation she knew was beyond the capabilities of all mortal healers ...and all but one of the Fey *shei'dalins*.

Ellysetta bit her lip. Aartys shouldn't be here on her table—and she couldn't help feeling partly to blame. After all, if not for her, the Fey might never have engaged their ancient enemy in this new Mage War. If not for Ellysetta, her true mate, Rainier vel'En Daris, would never have blown his golden horn this morning to call his Fey warriors and the mortal men of Orest to battle. And if he'd never blown that blast, the sound would never have spurred Jonna's young son to snatch up his dead father's sword and rush to fight alongside the men of Orest and his heroes, the immortal Shining Folk of the Fading Lands.

Yet those things *had* happened. And now, here they were, a child maimed and dying, his mother weeping and pleading for his life, both utterly dependent on Ellysetta and her magic to snatch his life from the jaws of death.

"Hold his hand, Jonna," Ellysetta commanded. "Feed him your strength. Call to him. Don't stop until I tell you." And then, though she shouldn't have vowed it, she did: "If there's any way to save Aartys, I will."

"Oh, my lady." Jonna's lips trembled and tears flooded her eyes. "Oh, thank you, my lady. *Thank you.*"

She started to come around the table, but Ellysetta stopped her. "Hold his hand, Jonna." The command came out more curtly than usual. She didn't want this woman kneeling at her feet, kissing her hem as other Celierians had done when pleading for her to save a loved one. She wasn't a goddess to be

worshiped.

“*Teska*, *Jonna*. Please,” she urged more gently. “Hold your son’s hand. There isn’t much time.” And because there truly wasn’t, she infused the words with a spider-silk-thin filament of compulsion, woven from shining lavender Spirit magic.

*Jonna* instantly snatched up her son’s hand.

“And pray, my friend,” *Ellysetta* said, adding silently, *For all our sakes*.

The words to the Bright Lord’s devotion tumbled from the mortal healer’s lips.

*Ellysetta* flicked a glance at the tall, grim Fey warrior standing near the corner of her healing table.

Without a word, *Gaelen vel Serranis* stepped forward to lay a hand upon her shoulder. Crackling energy flooded her veins as the most infamous of the five bloodsworn warriors of her quintet surrendered his immense power for her use. The sort of healing she was about to do would take more than her own vast stores of power, and though usually a *shei’dalin* would rely on her truemate to supplement her strength, *Rain* was on the battlefield, where the king of the Fey belonged, rather than at her side.

*Ellysetta* closed her eyes, shut out the world, and gathered her magic. Power came to her call, a dazzling golden-white brightness the Fey called *shei’dalin’s love*, a healing gift *Ellysetta Baristani* wielded with a strength the world had not seen since the dawn of the First Age.

Against her closed lids, the pulsating vibrancy of Fey vision replaced physical sight, darkness teeming with the glowing threads of energy that made up all life and substance. Her consciousness traveled down the blinding-bright conduits of her arms, into *Aartys’s* dying body, then sank deeper. Moving with swift purpose, she followed the threads of her healing weave and descended into the Well of Souls, the blackness that lay beyond and beneath the physical world, the home of demons and the unborn and the dead waiting for passage into their next life.

There, she could see the fading light of *Aartys’s* soul as he sank into the long, silent dark of the Well. When his light disappeared, he would be lost. Determined not to let that happen, she plunged after him, her presence a dazzling incandescence that lit the shadowy world of the Well like a golden-white sun.

**\*\**Aartys*.\*\*** She wove Spirit, the mystic magic of thought and illusion, hoping to make him feel his mother’s grief and fill him with an urgent need to return to her. **\*\**Fight, Aartys. Fight to live.*\*\*** Death, ultimately, was like drowning. Once the initial terror passed, the dying embraced the numbness and simply let themselves fall, like wrecked ships sinking to the bottom of the

sea. *\*\*Do not surrender. Reach for my Light. Let me bring you back to your mother. She needs you. She will be lost without you.\*\**

Her weave was strong, her command of Spirit as exceptional as her command of the potent healing magic of the Fey. Yet still he fell.

*So tired*, his fading spirit whispered. *Tell Mam I ...*His voice trailed off and the pale light of his soul began to sputter.

*\*\*Aartys!\*\** Ellysetta dove after him. The threads of her weave stretched to the breaking point as she followed him deep into the Well, deeper than any other healer dared to go, deeper than she should have gone without Rain to anchor her.

*\*\*Take my magic, kem'falla,\*\** Gaelen said. *\*\*Use what you need, and quickly. You have been gone from yourself too long.\*\**

*\*\*Aiyah.\*\** She seized the magic Gaelen had offered for her use—the dark black threads of magic that throbbed with red sparks. Azrahn, the forbidden soul magic.

Ellysetta worked quickly, reluctant to put Gaelen at risk by making him hold his weave for more than a chime or two. Though Gaelen considered the chance to save Fey lives well worth the risk of wielding Azrahn, they both knew how dangerous the magic was. She plaited the cool, dark threads of his Azrahn into her flows of *shei'dalin's* love, weaving the strands of icy shadow and warm, healing light together.

The new weave—amplified by her powers as well as Gaelen's own—let her descend much farther into the Well. But as deep as she went, Aartys remained out of reach.

*\*\*Enough, kem'falla,\*\** Gaelen said. *\*\*We're out of time.\*\**

*\*\*Just a little farther.\*\**

*\*\*Nei. You've been gone from yourself too long. If you cannot save the boy now, you must let him go. Your life is too important to risk so needlessly.\*\**

Anger bubbled up inside her. *\*\*Needlessly?\*\*\**

*\*\*You know what I mean.\*\**

*\*\*Every life is precious, Gaelen.\*\** She'd held too many dying men in her arms, comforted too many stricken loved ones, seen her own mother beheaded by the Eld. She could not bear the thought of one more lost, wasted life—especially not this beautiful boy, whose bright eyes and sunny smile had reminded her of her own young sisters.

*Nei*, she could not—*would not*—lose another soul today. Not to magic, not to war, and not to the thrice-flamed Well of Souls!

Cold whispered through her veins. Azrahn surged up from the great, deep source inside her, summoned by her anger. An almost sentient eagerness pressed against her will, as if the Azrahn inside her *wanted* her to weave it,

wanted her to embrace its dark, forbidden power.

For her, giving in to that temptation would come with a terrible price. She bore four Mage Marks, placed upon her by the High Mage of Eld, and each time she spun Azrahn, she risked receiving another one. Two more and her soul, her consciousness, her entire being, would be his to command.

Still, the lure was tremendous. Gaelen's threads didn't contain a fraction of the power her own did. She could weave just a little ...just enough to save the boy. Perhaps she could even spin it quickly enough that the High Mage wouldn't have time to sense it and Mark her again.

*Yes ...yes, just a little, and quickly. Such a small thing. Surely he would miss it.*

The siren's call whispered in her ear. Dimly, she heard someone say her name, as if calling from far away, but the voice was soon silenced. Forbidden power throbbed in her veins, and all around her, the darkness of the Well of Souls pulsed to the same beat. Her ears filled with muted susurrations, a rhythmic ebbing and flowing, as if she were a child in the womb, listening to the blood rushing through her mother's veins. The sound was hypnotic ...entrancing...

She reached for her Azrahn, let its cold sweetness fill her.

**\*\*Ellysetta!\*\*b> A furious and all-too-familiar voice roared her name. Power rushed into her body, and deep within the Well, her Light flared like an exploding sun.**

The jolt sent her weave spearing wildly into the Well, so deep it passed the fading light that was Aartys's soul. Stunned, she had just enough time and presence of mind to close her weave around Aartys and cling tight before her soul was yanked from the Well and slammed back into her own body.

The shining brilliance of Fey vision faded to darkness. The tranquility of the Well gave way to a murmur of voices, muted screams of men in pain, the smells of blood and sweat and suffering. Her eyes fluttered as her senses gradually returned to her body.

She was clutched in a hot, hard, golden embrace, but neither that nor the blazing heat of two burning purple suns glaring down upon her could stop the icy shivers racking her frame. She blinked up into the achingly beautiful, utterly furious face of her truemate.

"Rain, I—"

His eyes flared tairen-bright. Pupils and whites disappeared, leaving only spark-filled whirls of lavender that glowed so bright they could have lit a dark room. "Do. Not. Speak." His nostrils flared, and even the long, inky black strands of his hair crackled with scarcely contained energy. "Just ...be silent." He was so angry, his temper bordered on Rage, the wild, ferociously lethal fury

of the Fey.

A choked sound snagged her attention. “Aartys!” she cried.

Powerful arms encased in heavy, golden, tairen-forged steel tightened their grip around her and held her fast. “Is alive and does not need your help.”

She turned her head, but she couldn’t see the boy. Scarlet-veiled *shei’dalins* surrounded the table where he lay, and the glow of concentrated healing magic shone so bright even mortal eyes could see it.

“*Beylah sallan,*” she breathed. Thank the gods.

That remark was the feather that broke the tairen’s back. Rain plunked her on her feet, gripped her arms, and gave her a shake strong enough to rattle her teeth. “Thank the gods? *Thank the gods?*” His Rage blazed so hot, flames nearly shot from his head. “Thank Gaelen for having the belated sense to call me when he realized what was happening.” He shook her again. “Idiot! Ninnywit! Reckless, rock-headed dim-skull! How many times are you going to put yourself in such danger?”

Her brows snapped together. “Me?” she shot back. “That’s a bit of the sword calling the dagger sharp, don’t you think?” She yanked herself out of his grasp and returned his glare with her own. “Do I berate you for all the risks you take in battle?”

He drew himself up to his full height, and with his golden war steel adding significant breadth to his already broad shoulders, he loomed over her. “Don’t try to turn this on me. I am the Defender of the Fey, and we are at war. It is my duty to lead our warriors in battle.”

“And I am a *shei’dalin,*” she retorted. “The most powerful healer we have. It is my duty to save every life I can!”

“Not at the risk of your own! You were about to weave Azrahn, Ellysetta! Despite the danger—despite your sworn oath never to weave it again unless we both agreed.”

The pain in his voice—even more than the frightening truth of his words—deflated her defensive ire. She had made a vow and nearly betrayed it—nearly betrayed him. Her shoulders slumped and she lifted a shaking hand to her face.

He was right, but before she could admit it and apologize, Jonna gave a short cry. Rain and Ellysetta both turned to the table where Aartys lay. The *shei’dalins* had extinguished their weaves and were already departing. The boy was sitting up, the gaping wound in his chest gone without a trace, even the dried blood and grime of war washed away by *shei’dalin* magic. His mother had her arms wrapped tight around him, and her shoulders heaved with sobs of relief and joy.

“Thank you.” Jonna wept, tears raining from her eyes. “Thank you for my

son. Light's blessings upon you!"

Ellysetta found Rain's hand. He'd removed his gauntlets, and her fingers curled into the broad, warm strength of his.

His eyes flashed a warning at her, but to Jonna he offered only gentle understanding. "*Sha vel'mei*, Jonna," he said, his voice a deep, rough velvet purr. "You are both welcome. And you, Aartys . . ." He leveled a stern look on the boy. "I do not want to see you on the battlefield again. Your sword is sharp and your soul is brave, but I need you most here, guarding your mother and the Feyreisa." He clapped a hand on the child's shoulder. "There is no more honorable duty for a warrior of the Fey than to protect our women. Do you accept this great honor?"

"You want me to help guard the Feyreisa?" The boy's eyes went big as coins. He cast a dazed glance at Ellysetta before turning back to Rain. "Aye, my lord Feyreisen," he agreed. "I do accept."

"*Kabei.*" Good. "Then it is decided. Sers vel Jelani and vel Tibboreh"—he tilted his head towards two of the grim-eyed Fey posted at the corners of Ellysetta's healing tent—"will explain your duties to you. For now, go with your mother and get some rest and a change of clothes."

"But the Feyreisa—" Aartys began.

"—will not need your protection at the moment, as she will be coming with me."

\* \* \*

### *Eld ~ Boura Fell*

Vadim Maur, the High Mage of Eld, shook off the flicker of awareness that had brushed across his senses and withdrew the part of his consciousness he'd sent into the Well. If the brief touch had been the girl, she was gone now, and the protections that barred him from her mind were firmly back in place. He could still sense her existence, but that was all.

"Master?" The timid, subservient voice near his left shoulder broke the silence. "What should I do with him?"

Vadim tightened his lips in irritation, then just as quickly relaxed the pressure when he felt the flesh split and warm liquid ooze down his shrouded chin. Wordless, he dabbed the edge of his deep purple hood against his mouth. His body had grown fragile these past weeks. The Rot had him firmly in its grip, and not even the ministrations of his powerful *shei'dalin* captives could hold it back any longer. Soon, the truth already suspected by most of his council would be impossible to hide.

His time was running out.

He gazed through the observation portal into the *sel'dor* cage with its wild-eyed inhabitant: a young man, the last of the four magically gifted infants to

whom he'd tied the souls of unborn tairen seventeen years ago. The boy had shown full mastery in four of the five Fey magics, but only a middling level three in Spirit, so there'd never been any possibility of his becoming a Tairen Soul capable of summoning the Change. But his bloodlines were strong, and he'd proven quite adept at wielding Azrahn even in early childhood.

Vadim had been using him as a breeder, but recently, with the Rot advancing through Vadim's flesh and Ellysetta Baristani still so stubbornly elusive, he had seriously considered using the boy as the vessel to house the next incarnation of his soul. At least as a stopgap until the much more powerful Ellysetta finally found her way back into his keeping.

That plan was scuttled now. The boy had gone mad, just like the thousands of others to whom Vadim had grafted tairens' souls over the centuries. The madness usually began after adolescence, starting with voices only the afflicted could hear, then progressing to bouts of Rage, and finally complete savagery and destructive madness and death.

Of all the children to whom he'd bound the soul of a tairen, only Ellysetta had survived twenty-four years without a hint of insanity. That made her an invaluable prize, not only as a powerful vessel to hold Vadim's incarnated soul, but as the key to his long centuries of experimentation. .

In the cell, the boy put his hands to his head. Shrieking unintelligible gibberish, he pulled great tufts of hair out by the roots and spun around the room, slamming his body against the wall and ripping at his own flesh.

Vadim's fingers curled in a fist. "Restrain him before he damages himself more. Continue to breed him as long as you can." Too many centuries had gone into the crossbreeding of magical bloodlines to throw the boy away without squeezing as much benefit from his existence as possible. "If he endangers the females, send him to Fezai Madia." The leader of the Feraz witches had been complaining lately over the quality of the slaves he'd been sending for her sacrifices to the demon-god Gamorraz. Insane this boy might be, but there was no denying the strong magic in his blood.

Leaving the observation room, he passed through the nursery and paused to glance into the two cradles resting against the wall. Two infants with bright, shining eyes stared up at him. Both boys, both already showing promise of mastering all Fey magics. Each had the soul of an unborn tairen grafted to his own. Would they go mad, too? Or had Vadim finally discovered the secret to successfully breeding Tairen Souls of his own?

Only time would tell. For now, they represented another generation of possibility, another opportunity to succeed in case Ellysetta Baristani continued to elude him ...

...or in case she fell prey to the same lethal insanity as her predecessors.

\* \* \*

*Celiera ~ Orest*

“Where are we going?” Ellysetta asked as Rain dragged her away from the healing tents. Her quintet had started to follow, but one hot look from Rain had stopped them in their tracks.

“Someplace I can keep you out of trouble.”

There was still a snap in his voice, so she offered a small peace offering. “You were good with Aartys.”

He gave her a withering look, and her olive branch went quietly up in flames. “Do not attempt to soothe this tairen, *shei'tani*. You nearly died—or worse—and I will not overlook that.”

She bit her lip. He was right. She'd gone too far into the Well, and *something* had been quite successfully pushing her to use her most dangerous magic. Still ...this double standard her truemate imposed on her had gone on long enough.

“Why do you get to be angry, and I do not?”

He glared. “What do *you* have to be angry about?”

She stopped stock-still and yanked her hand from his grip. “Are you serious? I'm your *shei'tani*—your truemate—and you can actually ask me that?” She didn't wait for him to reply. “How many times have you barely made it back to Orest alive? How many times have you crashed into Veil Lake, bloody and half-dead, limbs broken, flesh shredded, enough *sel'dor* arrows in you to supply an entire company of archers? Yet you expect me to patch you up and send you back to battle time and time again. You and every other warrior who ends up on my table.”

“You are a *shei'dalin*. That is what *shei'dalins* do.”

“Precisely! You fight out there.” She jabbed a finger towards the scorched and still-smoking southwest corner of Eld. “Well, *that* is my battlefield.” She turned and jabbed her finger back at the healing tents. “And I'm every bit as determined to win my war as you. If that means I occasionally have to take risks—just like you do—then, by the gods, that's exactly what I'll do!”

“Over. My. Rotting. Corpse.” His teeth snapped together with an audible click. He grabbed her wrist again and put on a burst of speed that forced her to jog to keep up with him.

The collection of bloodsworn black Fey'cha daggers strapped across her chest and around her hips slapped against her steel-embroidered scarlet robes as she ran, and the feeling of being a chastised child dragged along behind an irate parent only chafed her more.

“You're being unfair!” she exclaimed. “I may not have my wings yet, but I'm a Tairen Soul, too, Rain. I feel the same need to defend our people as you do.”

Just because the only enemy I can defend them against at the moment is death, that doesn't mean my efforts are any less vital than yours!"

His eyes glowed so bright they nearly shot purple sparks. "Have I ever suggested they were? Have I not let Gaelen weave the forbidden magic for your use so you could save lives that would otherwise be lost? I do not object to your saving lives. But I will not allow you to risk your own in the process!"

"But—"

"*Enough!*" he thundered. "You don't have to like it, Ellysetta, but I am the Feyreisen—both your truemate and your king—and *on this matter, I will be obeyed!*"

Ahead lay the open plaza near Veil Lake that Rain and the tairen used for launching and landing. Four majestic winged cats, each the size of a house, crouched on the manicured grass at the lakeshore. Their heads were extended as they lapped at the cold waters fed from Kiyera's Veil, the gauntlet of three-hundred-foot waterfalls that tumbled down from opposing mountainsides at the lake's western shore.

When they reached the plaza, Rain slowed his pace. Ellysetta yanked her wrist from his grip a second time, marched to the mossy edge of the bricked space, and presented him her back. She pressed her lips in a thin line, angry at his high-handedness. For a woman who'd spent the first twenty-four years of her life as the shy, obedient daughter of a poor woodcarver and his wife, Ellysetta had become mulishly resistant to Voices of Authority. Even when those voices belonged to kings, wedded husbands, and beloved truemates. If Mama were still alive, she would shake her head in despair of her adopted daughter's willful ways.

By the lakeshore, the largest of the tairen, a great white beauty with eyes like glowing blue jewels, lifted her snowy, feline head and turned to pad towards them. Her long tail slapped against several tree trunks as she walked, bringing a shower of leaves raining down in her wake. When she reached the plaza, she spread her wide, clawed wings and reared up on her hind legs to shake the debris from her fur. A deep, throaty purr rumbled in her chest, and she tilted her head down to pin Ellysetta with a whirling, pupilless blue gaze.

*\*\*You worried your mate, kitling,\*\** admonished Steli, *chakai* of the Fey'Bahren pride. The musical tones of the tairen's speech danced in the air like flashes of silver and gold and carried with them feelings of panicked fear and images of Rain whirling in the sky and rocketing towards Upper Orest. *\*\*You should not alarm him so. Tairen frightened for their mates are dangerous—especially to beings as breakable as mortals.\*\**

"Not you, too, Steli!" Ellysetta crossed her arms, feeling immensely put out. "You think I'm not afraid when he's out there getting maimed by arrows and

bowcannon?”

Steli's ears flicked and her tail lashed the earth. *\*\*Ellysetta-kitling would not scorch the world. Rainier-Eras already has. Without you to anchor him, he would again.\*\**

That simple, inescapable truth deflated Ellysetta's temper as nothing else could. A thousand years ago, after the death of his first mate, Sariel, Rain Tairen Soul had scorched the world in the blaze of tairen flame, killing thousands in mere instants, millions in a handful of days. He'd paid for that act of Rage with seven hundred years of madness and another three centuries spent battling his way back from the abyss.

*\*\*Rainier-Eras is proud,\*\** Steli continued, *\*\*and he does not wish to frighten his mate. He does not tell Ellysetta-kitling that each day becomes harder. That each battle weakens what took him so long to rebuild.\*\**

Ellysetta cast a troubled gaze over her shoulder. Rain stood a short distance away, shoulders hunched, pinching the bridge of his nose as he expended visible effort to calm himself. She'd frightened him badly, and his control hung in tatters. Untruemated Fey warriors absorbed the torment of every life they took—the pain, the darkness, the sorrow of lost dreams hanging like burning stones around their necks—and Rain bore the weight of millions on his soul. Mental and emotional discipline was the only thing standing between him and insanity, and her nearly fatal trip into the Well had stripped those protections threadbare. Shame washed over her.

The tairen bent her head and nudged Ellysetta. *\*\*Go to your mate, kitling. He needs you. Now more than ever.\*\**

Ellysetta crossed the short distance to Rain's side. Moss grew green and thick along the edges of the plaza's mist-dampened bricks. Winter would be upon them soon, and the spray off the Veil would turn to flurries of ice crystals. The nights would grow longer, the Eld Mages more powerful. Despite the brave efforts of Lord Teleos's soldiers, Celieria stood no chance of surviving the winter as a free land without the help of the Fey. The might of the tairen was the only power Mages truly feared.

Until Ellysetta found her wings, Rain was the only living Tairen Soul capable of Changing to his tairen form and leading the pride into battle. As such, he would have to fight—again and again and again—and the torment of his soul would grow more unbearable with each engagement. Ellysetta hadn't been thinking about that when she'd made her decision to save Aartys. She hadn't been thinking about Rain at all.

“I'm sorry, *shei'tan*,” she apologized sincerely. “I should have been more careful—for your sake if not my own.”

“That's what you always say,” he replied in a low voice, “but it never stops

you from doing what you know you should not.”

She rubbed her forehead, where a headache had begun to throb. “I never meant to go so deep into the Well, but he was a child, Rain. Not much older than Lillis and Lorelle. I couldn’t let him die. Can’t you understand that?”

He sighed. “I do understand, *shei’tani*. Better than you think.” He turned to face her. “But saving that boy or even a thousand more like him won’t bring Lillis and Lorelle back.” He crossed to her side and took her shoulders in a firm grip. “You’ve got to stop risking yourself this way, Ellysetta. You’re no good to your sisters, or your father, or anyone else for that matter, if you’re dead or lose your soul to the Mages.”

“I know that. I do. It’s just that—” Her voice broke off. She could feel his fear, his love, his guilt for bringing her into the dangers of a Tairen Soul’s life, his terror that he might not be strong enough to hold himself in check the next time she came so close to death.

“Oh, Rain.” She leaned against him, resting her forehead against the unforgiving golden steel of his tairen-forged war armor and laying the palm of one hand against the smooth warmth of his jaw. Though they could not read each other’s thoughts until their bond was complete, they could, when they touched skin-to-skin, feel each other’s emotions as clear as day.

Because he was the strongest of the Fey, the most powerful Tairen Soul in living memory, it was so easy to forget how fragile he truly was, how narrow the band that kept him from plunging into madness.

*\*\*Sieks’ta, shei’tan.\*\** I’m sorry, beloved. She wove the apology into his mind on a thread of Spirit, not reading his thoughts, but offering him one of hers. With her hand against his face, her skin touching his, she knew he could sense her sincerity and the great love she bore him just as she sensed his agitation drain away, replaced by regret and weariness.

He turned his lips into her palm and pressed a kiss there. “As am I,” he said. “I know my fear for you is a burden, and it shames me that you must bear it. You are a Tairen Soul, which means you are fierce, born to fight and to defend those in your care; but you are also my *shei’tani*. I thought I would be strong enough to let you embrace the warrior’s side of your nature. I know now I’m not. I cannot allow you to be harmed—not even by your own actions.”

Ellysetta forced a small smile. “Perhaps when our bond is complete, things will be different.”

“Perhaps,” he agreed without conviction.

Steli’s wings flapped. The white tairen nudged them with her nose. *\*\*Time to fly, Rainier-Eras. The day grows late.\*\**

“Aiyah.”

“Where are we going?” Ellysetta asked.

“Crystal Lake,” he admitted.

“The Source in the mountains? But that’s bells away—” She broke off and her brows drew together in concern. Every great city in the Fading Lands had a Source at its center, and the Fey drank the water of those Sources to bolster their strength and replenish flagging magical energies. The only Source that existed outside the Fading Lands was Crystal Lake, and its magic-infused waters fed one of the tributaries that flowed into Kiyera’s Veil and the Heras River.

If the diluted Source waters of the Veil were no longer powerful enough to replenish Rain’s magic or rejuvenate his strength . . .

“It’s more precaution than need,” Rain reassured her, reading her expression. Fey didn’t lie, which meant he was telling the truth—or at least a version of it. “Besides, how long has it been since we’ve managed to do more than snatch a few bells’ sleep together? I thought you might like some time away from the battlefield and the healing tents.”

“I would.” The other *shei’dalins* slipped back through the Mists every few days to restore themselves in the peace of the Fading Lands. Banished and Mage Marked as she was, Ellysetta didn’t have that luxury. “I suppose we could both use a visit to the Source,” she said, stepping back to give Rain room for the Change.

He waited for her to get clear before closing his eyes and summoning his magic. Flows of power gathered and swirled around him, darkening to a gray mist that sparkled with rainbow lights. The crackling energy of his magic poured over Ellysetta in hot, electric waves. She gasped and closed her eyes on a shudder of shared pleasure as Rain’s Fey body was unmade—his flesh and consciousness flung out into the mist of the Change—then re-formed in a staggering rush into the great, sleek body of his tairen self.

When the magic of the Change cleared, Rain Tairen Soul crouched where Rain the Fey had stood: a magnificent, kingly creature, like one of the sleek black jungle cats Ellysetta had seen in illustrated books of faraway lands, except that a tairen stood easily half as high as a fully grown fireoak, and great, batlike wings sprouted from his back. Even by tairen standards, Rain was an impressive male, with fur a glossy, unrelieved midnight black, a vast wingspan, and radiant, pupilless eyes that glowed like lavender suns.

He lowered his head to pin Ellysetta with that bright, whirling gaze and rumbled a throaty purr. Her body clenched like a fist, every nerve abruptly sizzling with a rush of pure, primitive heat. She might not yet have found her wings, but the tairen in her soul recognized its mate—and yearned for him with staggering force.

She wet her lips and tried to compose herself while Rain purred deep in his

throat and nosed her with unmistakable interest. “Stop that.” She laughed, giving him a shove. She summoned an Earth weave that transformed her gown into steel-studded scarlet leathers, with Fey’cha belts crossed over her chest and her quintet’s daggers sheathed in the belt slung around her hips. A subsequent weave summoned a burst of powerful silvery Air magic that lifted her body up and deposited her into the cradle of the leather saddle that Rain wove for her on his back. She anchored herself in place with the saddle’s leather straps. “I’m ready.”

*\*\*Then spin the weave, shei’tani. Around Steli as well as us.\*\**

Ellysetta nodded and reached once more into the well of power that lay within her. Lavender Spirit, the mystic magic of consciousness, thought, and illusion, surged up in a rush and she wove the dense threads of energy in a pattern Gaelen vel Serranis had taught the Fey only a few months ago. She flung the weave out like a net, first around Steli—who promptly winked out of sight—then around herself and Rain, rendering them invisible to both mortal and magic eyes.

The other tairen had left the waters of Veil Lake and padded over to the plaza. They leapt into the air seconds before Rain crouched down on his haunches and sprang skyward, and their presence provided cover for the rush of wind that might have betrayed Rain and Steli’s otherwise invisible launch.

Ringed by the pride and sheathed by invisibility, Rain, Ellysetta, and Steli soared high over the Rhakis mountaintops into the thin, crisp chill of the autumn sky. A dusting of snow capped the high, jagged peaks to the north. Below, just across the Heras River, the southwest corner of Eld still smoldered from the fiery aftermath of the recent battle. What had two weeks ago been a fortified village was now a scorched plain, razed to the ground, every living and dead thing in a twenty-mile radius reduced to ash. Yet still, the Eld came to battle the legions of Orest with relentless determination, wearing them down bit by bit, retreating back into the dense forests of Eld, where, thanks to the batteries of bowcannon trained on the skies, not even the tairen could follow.

To the west, the billowing wall of mist that marked the borders of the Fading Lands rose up from the mountaintops. Rain flew close enough that Ellysetta could feel the tingle of magic from the Mists, and her fingers tightened on the pommel.

From the valley floor, the Mists looked like a line of thunderclouds hugging the crests of the Rhakis mountains. From the sky, however, they looked more beautiful than foreboding, like a radiant veil of shifting rainbows that stretched upward as far as the eye could see.

Ominous thunderheads or shimmering veil, Ellysetta recognized the Faering Mists for what they truly were: a deadly magical barrier meant to keep

the enemies of the Fey from entering the Fading Lands.

It was true that many an innocent shepherd had wandered by accident into the Mists, only to emerge again, decades later, unharmed, not aged a day, carrying tales of being feted by the Fair Folk in misty forest palaces. To the not-so-innocent, the Mists were far less kind. Entire armies had been swallowed up, never to be seen again.

Ellysetta's body tensed with remembered pain. She knew, firsthand, the torments that lay within those shifting clouds. Thanks to the four Mage Marks she bore, the Mists were now more dangerous to her than the Well of Souls, and the last time she'd entered, she'd very nearly not made it back out again alive.

If it were otherwise, she would not be here in Orest, weaving her magic to save lives. She would be in the Mists, searching every gods-cursed fingerspan of the magical barrier, tearing it apart thread by scorching thread if she had to.

Because somewhere in that veil of shifting mist, the last members of her family had been trapped; and she could not reach them ...or even tell if they were still alive.

\* \* \*

### *The Faering Mists*

"Lorelle! Papa! Can you hear me? Where are you?" Lillis Baristani's voice was hoarse from shouting, and the ocean of tears she'd shed had left her eyes swollen and burning.

She turned in circles and squinted in a vain effort to pierce the suffocating veil of shifting whiteness around her. She'd been in the Mists a long time—bells, certainly, maybe even a day or more, though it was hard to tell time when the vapor was eternally lit by its own magical glow. In any event, she'd not seen or heard another living being since the moment the mountain had shuddered like a wild, angry beast and she'd lost her footing and fallen back into the Faering Mists.

Never in all her life had she been so alone. Always, someone had been with her: her twin, Lorelle, or Mama or Papa or Ellie.

Alone was frightening. Almost more frightening than the terrible, monstrous *darrokken* or the evil Eld soldiers that had attacked Teleon. Almost more frightening than even the sight of Kieran screaming as he disappeared beneath an avalanche of dirt, rock, and toppling trees.

"Kieran?" she cried. "Kiel? Anybody?"

There was still no answer.

Lillis blinked back tears and clutched her small kitten to her chest. "They're not coming, Snowfoot. I don't think anyone's coming." In the sling tied around her neck, her black-and-white kitten mewed and squirmed and sank

its tiny sharp claws into the wool jacket covering Lillis's pinafore.

Papa had always told Lillis, "If ever you get lost, kitling, stay right where you are. Your mama and I will come to find you." But Mama was dead—killed by the same evil people who had attacked Teleon—and Lillis had waited long enough in the white blindness of the Mists to know that either no one was still alive to find her or they were looking in the wrong place.

Either way, she couldn't stay here.

She stroked Snowfoot's soft fur and hummed a little song Ellie had always sung to Lillis and Lorelle when they were frightened or upset. The tune didn't soothe Lillis like it did when Ellie sang it, but Snowfoot stopped his anxious mewling.

"I'll bet you're getting hungry and thirsty, aren't you?" Lillis murmured to the kitten. "I know I am." She wrapped her thin arms around the tiny feline, cuddling it closer and pressing her face to the soft fur at the top of its head. "Come on, Snowfoot," she said. "Let's go find Papa and Lorelle."