

SCIMITAR SUN

Chris A. Jackson

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Dedication

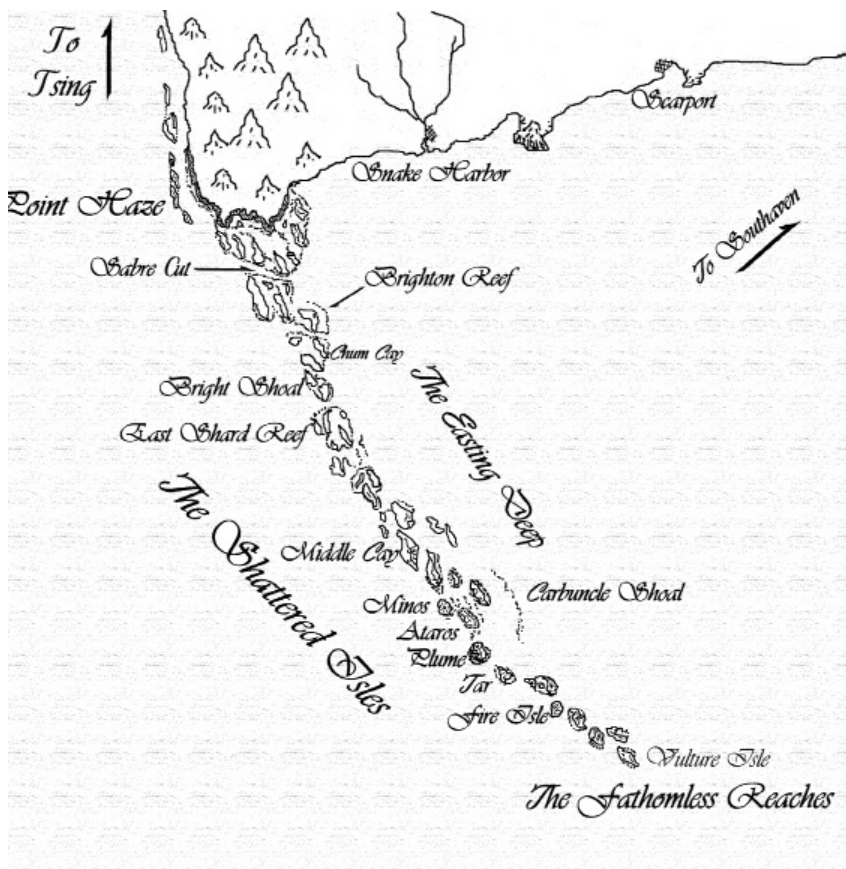
I dedicate this book to the entire cruising community, especially all those sailors with whom we shared sunsets, cocktails and potlucks.

Pirates one and all...

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PRELUDE

Hidden Flames

THE LIGHTKEEPER HEAVED A deep cleansing breath and leaned against the door he had just slammed shut behind the child of Orin Flaxal. He could breathe easier now that her infernal book was gone, though he could still feel the damp, salty magic that permeated its pages. He preferred a nice, dry heat any day.

That poor girl, he thought. To be denied her heritage by that bitter old woman and something as ephemeral as time. The thought of his own gifts, and what his life might have been had they been similarly denied, made him shudder.

Sniffing and coughing back the irritating lump in his throat, he shook himself, smoothed his soot-stained tunic and began to climb the stairs back to his study. His steps were lighter with Orin Flaxal's log book out of his home.

"Who was that, Master?"

"What? Edan?" The lightkeeper stopped short and looked around irritably. "I told you to stay out of sight! What are you doing? Where is Flicker? If you've let her loose again, I'll—"

"Flicker's right here, Master," the boy said, stepping from behind several barrels of coal tar and tugging a thin gold chain clasped around his wrist.

A tiny female firesprite fluttered out from her hiding place, her skin the hue of burnished copper, her hair a literal flame, wavering and flickering with the flutter of her gossamer-smoke wings. She tugged on the gold chain which girded her slim waist, glared at Edan, then settled onto his shoulder to sulk.

"I haven't let her loose, and I did stay out of sight. The woman never knew we were here." He came forward, ignoring the petulant firesprite as much as was possible with the heat of her fiery hair bathing his neck. His own hair was carrot-red and cut short, not by choice but by necessity; Flicker kept catching it on fire if it grew too long. The boy's smattering of freckles made him look younger than his thirteen years. His clothes were plain: cotton pants and a thick leather apron over a once-white shirt pocked with scorch marks where the sprite's flaming hair or one of the lightkeeper's burning contraptions had touched it.

“Who was she?”

“None of your business!” the lightkeeper barked. Embarrassed that the boy may have witnessed his moment of weakness, and wary of the questions he knew would come, he turned and ascended the stairs in a flurry. “Now don’t bother me. I’ve got things to do. See to the paraffin distillation, and don’t let Flicker near it! If I have to rebuild that—”

“I just emptied the vat, Master, and the cooker’s on low. We have plenty.” He followed the lightkeeper up the steps, his eyes wide. “That woman; I heard you talking to her about magic, about being a seamage. Is she a seamage?”

“No, she’s not, Edan. Her father was. She is—”

“Did she try to become one? Did she fail her trials, too?”

“No! No, she never got the chance you had, boy. Now she’s too old.” He turned on the boy, his bushy eyebrows bristling. “Now stop asking me questions and get to work! Bring me the small jar of phosphorous from the cellar. I’ve got an experiment to run, and you’ve got chores to do. Forget about magic! You had your chance at it, and failed. Be content with having a place to sleep and food to eat!”

“Yes, Master,” the boy said as he turned and headed down the stairs to the cellar.

The lightkeeper stopped and looked back over his shoulder, regretting his temper. In his own way, Edan was in the same circumstance as Cynthia Flaxal: he would never know the delight of elemental magic coursing through him. But he would never stop thinking about magic, and the chance he had lost.



Sam was in the water, and it was burning. The whole world was burning.

Guillotine floated only twenty feet away, consumed by flames, its burning debris falling down around her. Out in the middle of the bay, *Black Guard* was an inferno.

And her arm...her arm was on fire. Even under the water—she could not remember why she was in the water—something sputtered and sizzled in her flesh, sending jolts of agony up her arm. She managed to keep treading water, panic pushing the pain aside as she looked around at her hellish surroundings. Across the bay a large galleon lofted a missile onto the town; it exploded in flight, sending a rain of white hot streamers down on everything. Screams rose in the air like the smoke that stung her eyes.

Then she remembered.

She had been on *Guillotine*, and Jinkus was showing her around the foredeck. A horn had sounded nine times, and everyone stood stunned: the alarm had never sounded before. A small ship—identical to *Hippotrin*, but with the likeness of a woman as a figurehead—had appeared from the fog, and people had started shouting and running about. The ship had thrown a small cask at *Black Guard*, and the corsair exploded in flames. Sam had stared as the small ship headed straight for *Guillotine*, and a small catapult on its foredeck lofted a cask toward them. Jinkus had shouted, then pitched her over the bow rail. She hit the water as a wave of unbelievable heat bathed her back. When she surfaced, an errant bit of white fire had hit her arm and stuck, burning into her flesh. Then something had hit her head, enough to daze her.

Now people swam past her toward *Cutthroat*, which swung nearby on her anchor cable. Sam looked toward shore where the town was burning and made for *Cutthroat*.

Sam swam with the other men and women, the pirates who had taken her in when everyone else had left her; everyone but Tim. She couldn't find Tim now, but she knew if she stayed with the pirates, they would take care of her. After all, she was a pirate now, too, and they were her only family.

Acrid smoke burned her eyes and lungs. Many swimmers didn't make it: some drowned, some were injured so badly that they died and sank, and some were taken by the long shapes that swam in from beyond the reef. The water was red with blood by the time she reached *Cutthroat* and clamored up the cargo net that had been draped over the side.

A man screamed behind her, and she turned back to see Jinkus being shaken apart by a huge shark. The screaming stopped as he was dragged under.

Once out of the water, her arm burned worse. She looked at it, wondering how it could smoke and sputter after being underwater. A pirate she didn't recognize grabbed her and pulled her down behind the bulwarks.

"Don't just stand there like a dolt, girl! Here." He pinned her arm and drew a knife from his belt. "Gotta cut that outta there or it'll just keep burnin'. Hold fast, now!"

Sam cried out as he cut the thumbnail-sized bit of burning stuff from

her forearm and flicked it over the side. Her arm bled freely, but it no longer burned. He cut the bottom of her shirt into broad strips and bound the wound.

“There! Good lass! Now stay down.” He clapped her shoulder and took his own advice.

She leaned against the comforting solidity of the bulwark and looked around. There were maybe thirty men and women aboard *Cutthroat*, many wounded, all trying to stay low and out of sight. A ship sailed past: *Hellraker*, headed for the mouth of the bay. *Cutthroat* swung hard on her anchor as a rush of water filled the harbor. She stared as *Hippotrin’s* twin floated free from where she had been beached and jibed toward the channel behind *Hellraker*.

“They’re leaving,” she said to no one. “We should leave, too.”

“Aye, I think you’re right, Sam,” the man beside her said, peering over the rail. “The place is goin’ right down the scuppers to the Nine Hells, ain’t it?”

She looked at him and realized he was *Cutthroat’s* first mate; Parek was his name. “Where’s the captain?”

“He was ashore. Either dead or fled, now, I suppose.” He grinned and chucked her on the shoulder. “Guess that makes me captain!”

“I, uh... Aye, sir,” she said, trying to sound confident.

“Good lass! Now spread the word forward. We raise the fores’l and jib when the anchor cable’s cut.” He hefted a boarding axe and handed it to her. “That’s your job. Got it?”

“Aye, sir!” Her arm throbbed as she took the heavy axe, but his confidence in her bolstered her resolve.

“Good! Wait fer my signal. Now go!”

She worked her way forward, spreading the captain’s orders until she was at the capstan head. She braced herself and moved to the hawsehole, looking aft for the captain’s signal. Men and women scrambled up the rigging to ready the foresail. The captain looked at her, then brought his arm down in a chopping motion.

It took her several swings to cut the thick rode, and her arm was throbbing and bleeding when she finished. The ship swung free, and the captain shouted orders as she sat and cut more strips from her shirt. By the time she’d wound two more lengths around her arm and stopped the bleeding, they were heading out of the channel.

Sam pulled herself up and looked over the side of the ship. Beside the

channel, the wreckage of *Hellraker* was strewn across the reef. Bodies floated in the shallows, a slick of carnage. She scanned the horizon; *Hippotrin* and her sister ship were racing to the north under full sail. She worked her way aft, wondering where they would go; what they would do. There was already much discussion on this matter around the captain, and he settled the argument in true pirate fashion.

“Bloodwind’s on *Hippotrin* and sailin’ north with that hell-spawned ship on his tail. I’m captain of *Cutthroat* now, and I say we head south and find someplace to hunker in.”

“But what’ll we do?” one of the crew asked, panic edging his voice.

“What’ll we do? By bloody hell and high water, what do you *think* we’re gonna do? We’re bloody pirates, ain’t we?”

A low murmur spread through the burned and battered crew—a murmur of hope.

“Get the mains’l on her, then. Someone go below and find out what we’re haulin’ fer provisions. A round of grog for the injured, but nobody sleeps until we find a place to hunker in. Sam, you come here and take the wheel.”

Sam gripped the wheel’s spokes, gritting her teeth as her arm throbbed in time with her racing heart. A bottle of rum was thrust at her and she took a deep swallow, coughing at the burn but knowing it would ease the pain. She turned the wheel to port at her captain’s orders, and brought the needle on the compass to a course of due south.

CHAPTER ONE

Heir

“SHAMBATA DAROO?”

Cynthia stirred, dragging her eyelids open. She stared at the door to the bath chamber, hoping she'd dreamed the voice and willing it to go away.

A light tap on the door and a singsong, “Shambata Daroo?” in Paska's voice confirmed that she wasn't dreaming. Mouse perked up from the pile of warm towels upon which he was lounging, emitting a questioning, “Eep?”

The latch turned and she thought about easing underwater, but the sunken marble tub full of warm, lavender-scented water was not the sea; she could not do her tricks here, and would have to surface in less than a minute.

Paska peeked in and smiled. “Ahh, you *are* here. Why you not answer?” She entered, her year-old son, Koybur, balanced on one hip, and a cutlass slapping the other.

Mouse let out a piercing “Beebee!” and streaked over to orbit the infant's head, drawing delighted squeals from the child.

“I'm taking a bath, Paska,” Cynthia said, water lapping at her chin. “I'm trying to relax.” With Mouse's and little Koybur's screeches competing for the honor of rupturing her eardrums, relaxation seemed unlikely.

“You in de wata all day, and you get in de wata to relax?” The dark-skinned woman laughed. “I know how you need to relax! Chula, he relax you! Sometime he relax me so much I can't help but—”

“A bath is different from being in the sea, Paska. And I don't need Chula to help me relax.” *Especially now*, she thought, pushing herself up and watching the water cascade down her bulging belly.

Her pregnancy was well along; with only two months left, she welcomed any excuse to relieve herself of the uncomfortable weight. She accepted Paska's help getting out of the deep tub, reached for a towel and began the laborious process of drying herself. She had learned quickly that pregnancy made everything a chore. “So, what is it, Paska? Something important enough to interrupt my bath, I hope.”

“Oh, shua! Plenty important! De boat come from Southaven with message for you. Here.” She delved into a small satchel at her belt and

handed over a scroll case.

“From Southaven?” She furrowed her eyebrows, donned a robe and took the case. “Probably something from the Keelsons. I should have them address their letters to Cammy.” She broke the seal, pulled out the rolled parchment, and knew immediately that it was not from the shipbuilders. The paper was thick, smooth and expensive. She unrolled it and read the message. Yes, this was important.

“Is the messenger boat still here?” she asked, reading as she strode out the door and down the corridor, Paska following. “I’m going to have a reply.”

“Oh, yeah. He’s still here. He’s got a frien’ here. He won’t be leavin’ ’til mornin’.”

“Good. That’ll give me time to think about this.” She entered her rooms, formerly Bloodwind’s own. They had been completely refurbished to suit her tastes, the walls painted in peaceful blues and greens that emulated the sea itself, the furniture thickly upholstered and comfortable. “Would you please find the messenger and have him come to my chambers in the morning to take a letter back? Oh, and find Cammy for me. I need to speak to her.”

“Shua! You want dinna sent up, too? It save you all de walkin’ up and down de stairs.”

“No thank you, Paska. I’ll have a late dinner. I have to go talk to the mer before I eat, and I probably won’t get back until after dark.”

“Why de rush? What on dat papah got you so riled up?”

“It’s from the old lightkeeper in Southaven. He wants to see me.”

Mouse let out an “Eep” of alarm and abandoned teasing the baby to dart to Cynthia’s shoulder, his tiny features scrunched into a mask of worry.



“The lightkeeper?” Camilla knitted her brow. “Why does he need to see you? And why can’t he come here? Tell him you’re pregnant and can’t travel, and if he wants to see you, he can bloody well—”

“He says he can’t travel by ship, Cam, and I don’t think he’s lying. He’s a pyromage. You know the old saying about fire and water.”

“That they’re good servants but bad masters? Cyn, you are the master, not the servant. If you push yourself too hard, you’re going to have problems with the baby.” Mouse fluttered to Camilla’s shoulder and nodded in agreement.

“I was thinking of the one that goes, ‘Fire is love and water sorrow. One burns, the other quenches, and only one will see the morrow.’”

“How prophetic!” Camilla glared as she paced furiously back and forth. “Does he say what he wants, or just that it’s important?”

“He only says it has to do with magic.” Cynthia smiled as she gazed out over Scimitar Bay. One galleon bobbed at anchor, and the new three-masted schooner, *Peggy’s Dream*, lay tied to the pier in the very berth where *Guillotine* had burned. This was a different place now that the marauding Captain Bloodwind was gone: more peaceful, more productive. “That I became a seamage so late in life has changed his thoughts on the nature of the trials an elemental must undergo. He wants to discuss it, and he has a task he’d like me to help him with, though he doesn’t say what it is.”

“How *mystical!*”

Camilla’s sarcasm was sharp enough to draw a look from Cynthia. Her friend stood beside the open shutters, staring at one of the pillars that supported the open balcony, her arms folded and hands clenched into fists. Cynthia suddenly felt guilty; she had forgotten how uncomfortable these rooms made Cammy, and her special aversion for the balcony. Best not to think of what that bastard Bloodwind had done to her friend here in all the years she was his captive.

“We can talk about this somewhere else if you—”

“No!” Camilla’s head snapped up, and Mouse tumbled off her shoulder in surprise. She breathed deeply and her murderous glare faded. Despite her protest, she looked around at the walls as if they were closing in on her. “No, I’m fine, Cyn. I just don’t like this place.”

“Let’s go into the study, then.” She pushed herself up from the papasan chair.

“It’s not just these rooms, Cyn. The whole place is starting to bother me. Too many memories.” She followed Cynthia, visibly relaxing as they entered the smaller room.

Cynthia eased herself into the upholstered chair set before a huge and cluttered roll-top desk. Mouse fluttered along with her and landed on the desk, where he started poking into every cubby. Cynthia fingered a sharkskin scroll and scanned the ancient lettering. It always amazed her how the mer managed to do everything land-based folk did, but with different tools and subtle magic. The scroll’s letters were written with squid ink, but the ink would never have dried or even stained the

cured vellum without the spells to make it happen. Mer mages were rare, and highly venerated in their society. She dropped the scroll and sighed, glancing over all the books and scrolls she had yet to read, but she pushed away her worries. She had more urgent issues to deal with right now.

“Maybe you should come with me to Southaven. Take a break.” Camilla didn’t sit and she still looked uneasy, but at least her previous white-knuckled tension had eased.

“And leave no one here to deal with things? Probably not wise, Cyn. Though, when you get back...”

“Fine with me. You deserve a break. You could even run things from Southaven, if you like.”

“You think that would work?” Camilla asked, raising an eyebrow.

“It might be difficult at first, but you already run the shipping business pretty much by yourself. It would probably make the business end of things a little easier, with Fergus’ accounting offices and the Keelsons’ shipyard right there. Ghelfan’s yard here doesn’t need much in the way of oversight from either of us. He’s got Dura for that.” They both chuckled at the thought of the burly dwarf running the half-elf shipwright ragged.

“But what about the lightkeeper?”

“I’ve got to go, Cam. I owe him a lot.”

“Maybe you should stay there until you have the baby. I mean, Kurian is there, and you could have a real midwife.”

“And deprive the mer of being present at the birth of my heir?” She shook her head with a wry smile. “Talk about never hearing the end of it!”

“But how can the mer be here for the—” Camilla’s eyes widened. “Oh, you’re *kidding* me! You plan to have the baby *underwater*?”

Mouse jumped up excitedly at the talk of the impending birth. He flew to Cynthia and perched on her bulging stomach, pressing his ear to listen. He tapped her tummy until he was rewarded with a kick. Cynthia shooed him off.

“Yes, but just in the lagoon.” She laughed at the shock on her friend’s face. “What’s the problem? The little critter’s been bobbing around in water for the last seven months. Being born into a nice warm lagoon will probably be less of a shock than being born into air. Not to mention that it’ll be more comfortable for me.”

“But what if—what if there are problems?”

“The mer have priests if anything goes wrong.”

“Well, Feldrin’s not going to like the idea, I’ll tell you that.”

“Feldrin’s not *here*,” Cynthia said, letting slip a little of her ire, which sent Mouse darting for cover. That Feldrin would not be happy was the one subject she refused to consider right now. She pushed herself up and strode for the door. “Have the crew of *Peggy’s Dream* ready her for sea. I’ll leave the day after tomorrow. Oh, and ask Ghelfan if he wants to come along. I’m sure the Keelsons want to see him, and he had some minor changes to the design he wanted them to implement. I’ll see you tonight. I’ve got to talk to the mer before I leave.”



Cynthia stood on the warm sand of Skull Beach, staring at the lagoon. She’d been standing here for so long, obsessing about the upcoming confrontation, that Mouse had fallen asleep on her shoulder. During the walk over the ridge and down the well-groomed trail to the beach she had considered how to broach the subject, but to no avail. The mer would not be happy with her taking this trip, especially with the arrival of “The Heir” so near, but they were not happy about anything she did that wasn’t their idea.

She didn’t like that term—“The Heir”—and wondered who among the mer had coined it. Heir to what, she wanted to know. She hadn’t done anything yet that warranted an heir. Their insistence could simply have been to ensure that they would have a sympathetic and powerful voice to argue their desires to the air-breathing world. They had gone without a seamage for fifteen years after Orin Flaxal, Cynthia’s father, had died. Of course, it could also be a power-play with her, personally. Everything the mer did was for their own benefit. She loved them for what they had taught her and for the friendships she had developed, but she knew that they held no love for most landwalkers, as they referred to all the terrestrial races. She often thought that, on the whole, the mer would be happiest if life on land simply ceased to exist.

That thought kept her awake through many lonely nights.

Maybe Camilla was right: maybe it was time she reminded people that *she* was the Seamage of the Shattered Isles. She was going to ask—no, she was going to *tell* them that she was going on a trip for her own benefit. “It’s my decision,” she told herself once again. “They don’t control my life. If I want to take a trip to Southaven, it’s none of their business.”

With new resolve, she propped her snoring sprite into the crook of a nearby tree and strode into the bath-warm water of the lagoon.

As always, being enveloped by the sea was a sensual experience. The barrier between her skin and the water seemed to blur, as if she could spread out in all directions and become the sea itself. It was a sensation she could easily lose herself in if she didn't concentrate on who she was and what she was doing.

As she submerged completely, the simple incantation she'd learned from Orin's log flushed her skin with blood, creating a thin layer of tissue—a second skin—that provided her with the ability to breathe in water. Well, she didn't actually breathe, but she didn't need to. What she needed, the sea gave her; what she did not, the sea took away.

She created a pressure wave and rode it through the gap in the reef. Her surroundings shifted from bright turquoise to deep blue as the bottom plunged toward the depths. She took a moment here to look around and enjoy the view of the looming wall of the outer reef and all its denizens. In a riot of color, an innumerable variety of fish, corals, anemones and other creatures swam and swayed in the surging waves, a symphony of life that overwhelmed her with its complexity and beauty.

Far too easy to be distracted by all this, she thought as she returned to her task. Concentrating, she sent out a pulse of sound that would call her finned friends. She knew better than to venture into their territory unescorted, seamage or no. One wouldn't just barge into a friend's home without an invitation, and the mer were particular about protocol. It was not long before she felt the powerful pulses of sound that told her someone, or something, approached.

Two grey shapes descended toward her from the surface, their long, muscular bodies moving effortlessly through the water faster than even a mer could swim. The dolphins raced around her in circles, teasing her with their superior agility. She smiled at them and made the signal that she was not amused at their joke. One of them nudged her and rolled to rub the length of his underside against her. This, she knew, was another joke, and a rather suggestive one. Dolphins could be aggressive if given any kind of encouragement, so she discouraged him with a firm pulse of sound that she knew would be just short of painful to his sensitive sonar.

The two darted away, duly abashed, but returned with no hint of

rancor. They never took anything personally, and never stayed angry long. To a dolphin, everything was either play, a joke, sex, or something to eat. She was rescued from further cetacean mirth by the arrival of the sleek mer scout, Chaser.

Cynthia always marveled at the beautiful harmony of the mer body with its environment. Their upper torsos were slim and muscular, vaguely human above the waist save for the five gill slits along the lower ribs on each side and the prominent dorsal fin. At the hips, however, mer changed to all piscine. Their lower extremities were compressed laterally, with dorsal and ventral finlets running along the crests, ending in powerful tails. They swam like sharks rather than dolphins, lashing their bodies from side to side, their arms set at angles like pectoral fins.

Chaser snapped to a stop before her and made a quick chopping motion with one webbed hand, then a circle, sending the dolphins up to patrol around them. Dolphins and mer were long-standing allies, though the relationship was far more than a simple domestication of an animal, like a dog or horse. Dolphins were the only air breathers that the mer truly trusted, Cynthia Flaxal included.

Greetings, Seamage Flaxal's Heir, he signed, welcoming her formally by sweeping his short spear in a wide arc, but also grinning with double rows of needle teeth. Chaser always used her correct title and addressing her respectfully. Others weren't so polite.

Greetings, Chaser, she signed back. *I need to converse with Trident Holder Broadtail. Is he in his home?*

Cynthia had worked long and hard to master the mer language. They spoke using a complex sign and body language and some simple sounds, and they had writing, but there were distinct curiosities to their vocabulary. They did not give proper names to specific places; locations were inferred according to their distance and direction, or by some event or designation of purpose. Only the location "home," meaning "place of birth" had a specific meaning to the territorial mer, so Cynthia always started with that and hoped she was right. Otherwise, she had to decipher directions such as "Ten tail flips west from the elkhorn grove north of the outer reef of the seamount where the leviathan sleeps." It took some getting used to.

The organization of the mer society was just as confusing, but was slowly revealing itself through her study. "Trident Holder" was a literal translation for the office held by their most respected elder.

Calling him a king or an emperor would not have been accurate, since the sociopolitical system of the mer, at least these mer, was nothing resembling a monarchy. Even after two years, Cynthia wasn't sure she understood their means of choosing a ruler, or what powers that ruler had. The Trident Holder was a chief defender, speaker for the community, enforcer of laws, and war-leader, but he had no power to create new laws or make decisions for the community. Cynthia thought that this must be a difficult position to hold: all the responsibility of a leader, and none of the real power.

Decision-making was a community function, though exactly how that worked, Cynthia was still unsure. The Trident Holder had told Cynthia that when a vital choice was necessary, the mer schooled and presented their question, and "The Voice" was invoked. When the school broke up, every mer knew the decision that had been made, and it was the Trident Holder's job to enforce that decision. Exactly what "The Voice" was, the Trident Holder could not explain.

Broadtail is in his home, but he is busy with hatchlings. He will not be able to see you for maybe five tides.

Five tides was more than two days; Cynthia would be halfway to Southaven by then. *I will talk with Quickfin or Tailwalker, then. It is important.*

Tailwalker will be happy to see his betrothed! Chaser signed with a flip of his tail that implied humor. Tailwalker was Broadtail's eldest offspring, and thus first choice by the community for next Trident Holder. The community had also chosen him to be Cynthia's husband. Though all knew it was a symbolic joining only, the marriage would unite the landwalkers and the mer in a state of truce for the duration of their wedlock. As such, it was a union of which many did not approve. Cynthia shared the dissent, though for different reasons than most. Because of her symbolic marriage to Tailwalker, the mer forbade her from taking a human husband. This was the root of Cynthia's familial discontent: Feldrin was not happy with this arrangement at all. The proud Morrgrey was known officially as "The Seamage's Consort" or "Father of The Heir," and he detested both titles.

Cynthia's heart twisted. She wondered again if that had been the reason he'd left. Feldrin Brelok was a big man, but his pride was even bigger, and his temper was a long time cooling once it was stoked. He had been elated by her pregnancy, but soon their discussions had

turned into heated arguments. Feldrin had been adamant that the child should not be born out of wedlock, while Cynthia had argued that he had known the rules of their relationship when he agreed to it. She had thought he understood, but she was wrong. Feldrin had left, taking *Orin's Pride* south to Marathia.

Cynthia pushed the painful memory aside to focus on the issue at hand. One could not be distracted when dealing with the mer.

Please take me to Tailwalker, she signed, and followed Chaser down the reef. She had no trouble keeping up with him; mer were fast, but they still had to swim. Cynthia used the sea itself to move, and could go as fast as she chose to. At the eastern tip of the reef they struck out for open water, and the color shifted to the deep blue of midnight beneath them. The pair of dolphins, Chaser's charges, swam along with them, occasionally surfacing for air and sending shadows flickering down on them. The southern tip of Carbuncle Shoal lay to the east, but they would not go so far: about a league from Plume Isle a seamount rose from the depths, reaching to within fifteen fathoms of the surface.

Atop the seamount lay the city of the mer.

As they neared, Cynthia admired the towering lattice of coral that rose from the undersea mountaintop. This single living structure, a dome more than sixty feet tall, was the equivalent of a terrestrial city's outer defensive wall. The structure's complexity and ingenuity never ceased to amaze Cynthia. The coral lattice had taken eons to grow. The mer took very good care of it: grooming it, trimming it, and adding the formidable defensive structures of fire coral and long-spined sea urchins that would dissuade even a sea drake from attempting to breach the wall. Water flowed freely through the structure, but no fish larger than Cynthia's outstretched hand could fit through the lattice of coral without being torn to shreds or punctured by dozens of venomous spines.

Chaser and Cynthia dove for the nearest entrance, a long grotto lined with glowing phosphor and defended by two mer warriors bearing lances and short, stabbing tridents. Nets of stinging nettle-weed were tied off to the side, ready to be lowered if necessary, effectively blocking the dangers of the sea from getting in, or preventing anything inside from escaping. This always made Cynthia nervous; despite her considerable powers, once inside she was at the mercy of the mer.

Welcome, Seamage Flaxal's Heir! the guards signed, lowering their weapons and motioning the pair through the entrance. Cynthia

politely thanked them. Unlike their dolphin allies, mer were quick to take offense and held grudges indefinitely.

Inside the barrier, the true grandeur of the mer city lay before them; twisting spirals, arches and architecture inconceivable to land-based builders soared at all angles. The mer built without the concept of “square” or “level.” Like the wall, the entire city was a living organism of growing coral and sponge. However, here the design was aesthetic instead of defensive, and the walls were decorated with anemones, sea fans, algae and populated by a thousand varieties of tropical fish. Mer teemed in and around every structure, working and playing in a cacophony of motion.

A tight school of a dozen finlings, barely old enough to be swimming unescorted, darted up to them and all began signing at once. Their enthusiasm and awe delighted Cynthia, and she managed to greet them without mangling her signing too badly. Several asked if they could touch her, to which she agreed. All mer found human skin a tactile mystery: no scales, neither rough like a shark nor slimy like an eel, close to a dolphin’s skin but not quite the same. Chaser finally shoed the school away, explaining that Cynthia was here to see her betrothed. The finlings fluttered their gill slits in mer giggles and darted off.

Cynthia followed Chaser through the twisting grottos of the crowded city. She’d been there many times, but the three-dimensional maze of the mer architecture always baffled her. They arrived at the aperture that led into Tailwalker’s grotto, and Chaser made a thrumming noise deep in his chest that was the equivalent of a knock. An identical call sounded from within, and they entered. Immediately, Cynthia tensed. In addition to Tailwalker, six other mer hovered about in all orientations, a sure sign that this was not a harmonious gathering.

She knew Tailwalker, of course, and she also recognized his close friend, Quickfin. The latter was an enthusiastic supporter of the alliance between landwalkers and mer, and one of Cynthia’s strongest allies. Opposite them swam four mer she did not recognize. In the center was a male with a dark green patch on his tail, who seemed to be leader of the group. About him floated a hulking male warrior, a male with a red crest on the dorsal edge of his tail, and a female also with a red fin-crest. Coloring was one of the only ways Cynthia could distinguish one mer from another.

The two-tail comes to call on her betrothed, the foremost of the

four strangers signed. Two-tail was a tremendous insult, usually not used to her face. *Should we leave so you two can spawn like dolphins?*

Swallow your insults, Eelback! Quickfin signed. He gripped the haft of his short spear with his webbed hand. All the mer were armed, which was not unusual, but Quickfin was the only one actually holding a weapon at the ready.

Cynthia had never met Eelback, but had heard the name often enough. Of all the mer who did not approve of the alliance with landwalkers, he was the most vocal. She started to sign something to diffuse the situation, but Chaser's gentle grip on her arm told her that Quickfin was not finished.

Seamage Flaxal's Heir will not be—

We do not care what the landwalker seamage will or will not be!

the large mer warrior signed, his hand drifting to a long dagger suspended by his ornamented baldric. *She has no power over the mer!*

I do not seek power over the mer!

Cynthia interrupted, shaking off Chaser's hand. She was tired of being treated like she wasn't there. *But power I have, and I will not be insulted by you in my friend's home!*

Cynthia pulled the power of the sea around her until the entire grotto vibrated with carefully bridled energy. They could all feel it, and she saw nervousness in their movements. They knew very well that she could kill them with a single plea to the sea; the water was their home, but they were not immune to it.

Do you challenge me?

she signed, narrowing her eyes at the mer opposing Tailwalker and Quickfin. *Any of you? All of you?*

The mer froze in place, shocked by her sudden and uncharacteristic vehemence. Cynthia had always been non-confrontational, playing the mediator and diffusing tensions. This was not like her.

The large male's tail fluttered in frustration, the muscles in his powerful torso rippling with fury.

We cannot challenge a seamage and survive, the male with the red fin-crest signed, interposing himself between the angry warrior and Cynthia. *We do not seek confrontation, but discussion with the Trident Holder's eldest. This one, with his spear pointing at us, has made threats. We wish to converse, not fight.*

Eelback touched his ally on the shoulder.

Redtail signs truly. We came to converse with Tailwalker. We became angry with Quickfin's threats. He made a gesture equivalent

to a polite bow. *Our anger is not with the seamage, but about the seamage, and the bonding of mer with landwalker.*

I made no threats that were not earned, Quickfin signed, lowering his spear. *If you do not seek confrontation with Seamage Flaxal's Heir, apologize. Now.*

Quickfin, please! There has been no challenge. The insult is void without it. She didn't know what had transpired to put her friend in such an antagonistic state, but demanding an apology would not stabilize the situation. *If Eelback and his friends wish to discuss something with Tailwalker without the presence of a landwalker, I will say what I have come to say and go.*

There is nothing remaining to be discussed, Eelback signed, making a gesture signifying departure without the formality or friendliness of a goodbye.

The four mer aligned their orientation, a sign of unity, and left the grotto. Cynthia noticed a lingering display of subtle eye contact and body language from the female toward Tailwalker. The display was nothing she could translate, but its meaning was obvious: the female was flirting. There was more going on here than a simple confrontation over politics.

What was that all about? Cynthia signed when the eddies from their departure had stilled.

I am sorry that you were here to witness this, Seamage Flaxal's Heir. They sought alliance against the union of mer and landwalker, Quickfin signed, making a dismissive gesture. *They became insulting when Tailwalker declined.*

And the female wanted some other type of alliance, I assume? She made a gesture of suspicion as she looked fixedly at Tailwalker, who was remaining uncharacteristically passive and showing signs of embarrassment with shifts in his coloration. Her smile revealed her joke, and the fluttering gill slits of the three mer told her that her jest had hit its target.

The female is named Slickfin. She is the sibling of Redtail. Chaser's tail flicked twice in a whip-like fashion, propelling him around in a tight circle. *She wants more than an alliance from Tailwalker, I think.*

She is nothing but a bribe! Quickfin signed, his fins extending in sustained anger. *They use the promise of sex to shift Tailwalker's alliance.*

This surprised Cynthia. She had assumed the female's interest in

Tailwalker to be unrelated to the political discussion, because the mer did not have casual sexual relationships. In fact, the term “sex” in mer language referred to the intentional act of creating offspring. Slickfin was offering to become his mate.

She made a gesture implying polite inquiry, and signed, *Could she offer to be your mate and help rear finlings without a betrothal, as my mate has?*

She could, but she does not, Tailwalker signed, finally entering the conversation, though still visibly embarrassed. *She seeks to be my betrothed.*

But that would—

That would destroy the planned alliance between our people, Tailwalker said, fluttering his fins in agitation. *And she is very... persuasive.*

Persuasive? she asked, again making the polite sign of inquiry.

You cannot perceive it, Seamage Flaxal's Heir, but her time comes with the tide, and her scent fills the water of this grotto. Quickfin's tail fluttered again, and Cynthia realized that not all the males' agitation was anger. Female mer put out a liquid scent when they wished to entice their mates into copulation, but the release of this scent was usually private. To do so in the company of more than one male bordered on indecent, and was certainly a brazen display. No wonder they were upset.

Let's go for a swim, then, and let her scent dissipate while I say what I have come to say, she signed.

They agreed heartily, eager to leave and seek fresh water.

So, betrothed, why do you visit? You were among us only this morning. Tailwalker ran his smooth fingers up her back in a gesture of affection, though she knew it was more camaraderie than amorous in intent. *Did you miss my company so soon?*

I received a message from someone who lives in the place where I was born. There was no mer term for Southaven, just as there were no names for their own cities. *I must leave in three tides to see him. The matter is important.*

The mer stopped their forward motion as if all three of their tails had been grabbed by a tangler squid.

Travel? Quickfin made a gesture of alarm. *You are near your time of birthing, Seamage Flaxal's Heir. This is not acceptable!*

What is so important? Chaser asked, also clearly agitated.

This man is a mage, like myself. He tells me it is urgent, and I believe him. She made a sign of steadfastness. *There is no option. I must travel.*

You must be back in time for the arrival of your heir, Seamage Flaxal's Heir, Tailwalker said, making the same sign of determination.

Of course, Tailwalker. I will be gone no more than thirty tides. My baby is not due for some time yet. She made a point not to refer to her baby as The Heir, just out of stubbornness.

Thirty tides is too long, Quickfin insisted. *Your new ship can make the trip in only five or six tides. You could be back in fifteen easily.*

I could, Quickfin, but I will not. I go to the place of my birth. I have friends there whom I have not seen in many seasons. Cynthia stared down the three mer. For more than two years now she had done their bidding, eager to learn her role as a seamage and wary of insulting this easily insulted race. Unfortunately, she had found little guidance in her father's diary regarding the mer. More often than not, he simply said they were difficult and that he treated them cautiously. She'd taken that advice, but this trip was important to her, and she would not be deterred. *I will be back in thirty tides.*

We do not know what is important that this other worker of magic has for you, but is there a reason he cannot come here? Chaser made a sign of calming, obviously hoping to ease the tension.

His magic does not mix well with a sailing ship. He is also very old, and cannot leave his home. The latter excuse probably wasn't exactly true, but it sounded good.

What is his magic?

Quickfin put in.

She had been afraid they would ask this, and she replied evasively.

He is a mage of the elements, as am I.

And what is his element?

Tailwalker asked, calling her bluff.

His element is fire, as mine is the sea, Tailwalker. The mer's eyes widened in shock, and she almost laughed at how human their reaction was. Surprise was, it seemed, one thing they had in common. *Do not worry, my friends. He is a good man, and it is well that we are friends.*

I do not know if it is good to make a friend of fire, unless one is a worker of metal, Quickfin said, making a gesture of confusion. *But if you feel you must do this thing, we cannot stop you.*

You are right, my friend, you cannot stop me, she signed emphatically, then added, *Thank you for not trying.*