

THE LESSER KINDRED

ELIZABETH KERNER



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❧ LESSER ❧
KINDRED

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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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*To the glory of God
and to
the men in my life:*

My partner Steven Beard
strong and loving, valiant and true,
who holds my heart in his
and is a wildly brave man
to love and live with a writer;
my father Chan Ewing,
scientist, loved and honoured Papa-san,
who for so many years has tried to fight the good fight;
my brother Lester Ewing,
rally driver, husband, father and occasional dentist,
whose love and friendship
and memories of home
are so precious to me;
my brother in all but blood James Quick,
composer, singer, hearth-companion,
soulfriend of many years,
who always makes me laugh;
and
Christopher
clear reason to my emotion,
friendship deep beyond all reason,

I dedicate this work.

The First Morning of the World

*I woke with the late winter sun in my eyes and smiled because Jamie
had let me sleep.*

Ah.

Let us sleep.



It was the first morning of my wedded life, and my impossible beloved lay beside me. His long silver locks fell like water over the creased linen pillowcase. *Typical*, I thought, smiling. *He has been human for less than three moons and already he looks better asleep than ever I could waking. Look, not a tangle in all that mane of his.* I pulled my long frowsy braid around to glance at it. I'd seen better-groomed tails on horses. Ah, well. At least Varien—my husband—didn't seem to mind.

Dear Lady. My husband.

I gazed down at him, drinking in the physical warmth of his nearness, breathing in the smell of him. There had been only one or two nights, in our mad rush to get here from Corlī, that I had caught him sleeping when I finished my turn at watch; he tended to hear me coming and was almost always sitting up when I came to wake him. Those few times he had genuinely been asleep we were both so exhausted I'd barely had time to wake him before I fell into the warm patch he left and into dreamless sleep myself. We had only just arrived from the Dragon Isle when we had to leave the port of Corlī at a run, doing our best to escape my wretched father Marik's hirelings. We had assumed they sought our lives, for they had nearly killed our companion Rella; we managed to get her to a house of healing but we didn't dare wait to learn how she fared. As best we could tell, we had eluded them.

The sun, gathering confidence as it rose, streamed through the gap in the shutters and shone in his hair, silver taking fire from gold. It was like nothing I had ever seen—ah, save once! With a shiver the memory rose before my mind's eye. Before he was changed, while still my dear one had the shape he was born with, I had seen full daylight glinting off his silver scales.

I lay back slowly, gently, so as not to wake Varien, while the vision of him on that day rose bright before me. He stood then on the Dragon Isle, the home of his people, and his name was Akor, the proud Lord of the Kantri, those creatures whom men call the True Dragons. He was the size of a house and purest silver from the hammered

metal of his horned face to the delicate scales of his tail, save only for the deep green of his eyes, and his soulgem like living emerald gleaming in the centre of the great mask of his forehead. I gazed at him now, fully human, changed beyond believing, gone through death and fire—but there was still a faint mark, barely visible, in the centre of his forehead where his soulgem would have been. Blessed Lady, what we had been through!

Varien sighed in his sleep and turned his head. He was so very beautiful. His skin was as soft and smooth as a child's ...

Suddenly I had to try very hard not to laugh and shake the bed. Sweet Lady, that I should ever be so besotted with anyone! Me, with my man's height and strength, my plain face and my foul temper. I almost pitied Varien. The only decent traits I have ever possessed have been strength and what Jamie would call determination, but everyone else would call bloody-mindedness. I had never thought so soft a heart dwelt hidden in me; it had most certainly been hidden deep beyond finding until now.

In my own defence I can only claim to have been brought up motherless by a father—well, I had always thought Hadron was my father—who grudged every breath I took and kept me a virtual prisoner at Hadronsstead, the horse farm where I grew up. When he died, no longer ago than the summer just gone, I learned to my great relief that Hadron was no part of me, and I had left Hadronsstead in the hands of my cousin Walther to find if I could truly live the life I had always dreamt of. From my earliest memories I have longed in the deep heart of me to travel the length and breadth of Kolmar, and to seek out the Great Dragons living on the mysterious Dragon Isle far away, west across the sea. I found them, true enough, but the tale that unfolded then changed me forever, and all the Kantri along with me.

Varien stirred and moved. I held my breath to let him settle again into sleep. So dear to my heart, so valiant, so kind. His bravery I had seen while still he kept his dragon form, for he had defied the laws of his people to meet with me, to talk, to learn, and although we did not mean it, to love. A kind of madness had come over us both, for within the space of a few days we who had never met knew in our deepest hearts that we each had found our match. It was wonderful and terrible both together, to know that you have found the one soul in the world that is the completion of your own, and to know that you must remain forever separate in body. This we had known without question, but we also knew that for us there was no other choice. We plighted our troth one to another, Kantri and Gedri, dragon and human, doomed to be forever separate but matched in our hearts and minds.

I reached out to touch Varien, stopping myself just short. In that golden moment I did not wish to wake him. It was a still and breathless time, watching him sleep, seeing the gentle rays of the winter sun strike gleams from his eyelashes, glorying in the simple smell of him. Hardly breathing, I followed the contours of his face with my hand an inch away from his skin. Here and now, after all these years have passed, I remember that moment as if it had been this very morning. My body has changed as time has taken its toll, and both joy and sorrow greater have followed, but that first morning of my new world shines in my heart yet new-made, as though the sun that blessed Varien's face had never shone before on living man.

I sat back, hugging myself, longing to be in his arms again, knowing I would be there as soon as he woke, enjoying the longing for itself. I had never dared to let

myself imagine that such a love would come to me. In the years before Hadron died I had tried not to think of love at all. In the Kingdom of Ilsa, where I was born and raised and had spent every moment of my life until the autumn just gone, if you were not married by your twentieth year you were like to live alone forever. I had turned twenty-four on the Balance-day last autumn and I had expected to sleep alone all my life—but behold, here he was, the Lord of the Kantri lying beside me.

The Lord of the Kantri. The King of the Dragons. He told me that among his people kings are chosen, not born. They had hailed him as their king in his youth and he had come to the flower of his age with the good of his people foremost in his mind. His concerns for them had not ceased with his transformation: he feared still for their future. While I was on the Dragon Isle I had assisted the Lady Mirazhe with the birth of the first youngling for five hundred years; had I not helped her, at the expense of horrible burns to my arms, both mother and child would have died. Still, five hundred years is far too long a gap even for that long-lived race. Unless that changed, and swiftly, the Kantri were doomed, and Varien never forgot it. When he became human he surrendered his kingship to his dear friend Shikrar, the Eldest of the Kantri, but his people in Council had acclaimed him their king even in his new form. Shikrar had said that the Kantri would have to work out the details later, but we had heard nothing so far. I was lost in thought, lying there, but then Varien moved slightly and I gazed down at him again.

His eyes opened slowly, deep startling green beneath the silver of his lashes. When he saw me, a smile that glowed as bright as the morning lit his eyes and transformed what had been merely handsome into love itself made human.

The people of his birth have a gift known as truespeech, the speaking of mind to mind. I had been astounded to learn that I too possessed it, for it is known among humans as Farspeech and is matter for fireside tales, not for broad daylight. He had truespeech still, but now it was nearly as hard for him as for me, and much use of it brought on blinding headaches. One blessing we had been granted, in that he and I could still hear one another without effort and without pain.

In that sunlit morning, lying beside me all gold and silver, he opened his mind to me. There were no words, but there was his soul, full of love—and there was music. Sweet Shia, Mother of us all, there was music! When we had joined our hearts and minds in the Flight of the Devoted, there in his dark chambers on the Dragon Isle, we had made a new song between us, and that simple melody spoke the truth of his love to my heart more surely than any words ever could. I could hardly bear the beauty of it.

“Good morrow, my dearling,” he said then aloud, grinning as he drew me to him and kissing me soundly. His body felt strong and warm and welcoming against mine, and my longing melted into simple joy. “So glorious a morning for the first of our wedded life! Though I fear me it is long past time for us to rise.”

“I expect Jamie is being generous, love,” I murmured, smiling as we held each other close. His heart beat against mine, and in his arms was home and safety and love and all. I kept my voice light, for I could hardly bear the weight of that bone-deep joy. “If he has not sent for us yet, the morning is ours.”

“Your heart’s father is generous indeed,” said he playfully, his hands beginning to rove. “And what shall we do with so great a gift?”

Varien

She wrapped her long arms around me and held me with all her strength, and to my astonishment I found that she wept.

“And still your eyes leak seawater, littling,” I murmured, which made her laugh as I had hoped it would. Before I had learned the Gedri word for tears she had wept for joy to behold me in my true shape after all her years of dreaming, and those were the words I had used.

“Oh, Akor,” she breathed, somewhere between tears and laughter, “Akor, I cannot believe you are here, here, human, and my wedded lord!”

“Yours as long as life endures, my Lanen,” I replied, stroking her hair, revelling in the feel of it on my skin. “May the Winds and the Lady grant us many years together, that I might show you the long truth of a dragon’s love.”

She laughed at that, hard enough that I had to release her from my embrace, but once she had explained the joke to me I laughed as well. “Well, my heart,” I said, stroking her shoulder gently, “I say again, what shall we do with so glorious a morning?”

She thought for a moment and laughed. “You’re not going to believe me.”

“Very well, I will not believe you,” I said, mock-solemn, and gathering her close to me. “What do you wish to do that I will not believe?”

“I want to go riding in the Méar Hills, up in the forest.”

I thought she spoke in jest until I saw the joy in her eyes at the very thought. “The sun doesn’t shine much in winter here, and I—oh, Akor, I never had the chance to go riding in winter while Hadron was alive,” she said. “I’ve always wanted to. The Méar Hills are so close by, and the Lady knows we have enough horses.”

“Surely one each will be sufficient,” I said, laughing and not releasing her.

“Ah, but when your new wife is the mistress of her own breeding stables, and they the best in all of Kolmar, the choice isn’t as simple as it might be.” She grinned. “So. Are you going to let me go, or am I going to have to force you?”

I was intrigued. “And how would you do that? Your abilities are admirable, my heart, and you have not yet ceased to surprise me, but I have still some measure of my old strength. I do not believe that you can break free.”

“Power isn’t always the answer,” she replied, as I yelped. She had barely touched me, just under the ribs, but the sensation was remarkable and it certainly broke my hold on her.

“What did you do?” I demanded. “What was that?”

She laughed, long and loud. I could not help but join her, though I knew not what amused her. Her laugh was joy made sound and completely irresistible. “I never thought,” she managed to gasp out. “Dragons aren’t so easy to tickle, are they?”

“Tickle.” I tried the sound of the word on my lips.

“Yes, tickle. Like this—” She reached for me again and produced that extraordinary twitch. I decided that acquiring this skill would be a useful accomplishment and tried the same on her. It seemed to work and made her laugh again. After a very pleasant diversion she stopped me with a kiss, told me we could indulge our other inclinations after the sun was down, and hurried to dress.

I was proud of my simple accomplishments. Clothing no longer held terrors for me.

It was familiar now and my skin had become accustomed to the cloth, so that I no longer raised a weal from simply being dressed. I had managed to find boots to fit me when we passed through one of the larger towns on the way north from Corlí, and to my astonishment my blistered, aching feet had recovered swiftly without the need for a healer. I was delighted. I had not known that the Gedri, my new kindred, healed so quickly and without assistance. The Kantri require months or years to heal, depending on the severity of the wound, and we must enter the Weh sleep to allow our bodies to repair themselves. It might seem a terrible weakness—indeed, the Weh sleep is the single greatest weakness of the Kantri—but the time it takes does not concern us, for we are a long-lived race, and we are naturally so well armoured that we are not often injured.

I sighed and Lanen turned to me instantly. “What draws a sigh from you this bright day, my love?” she asked as she sat on the edge of the bed and laced up boots lined with soft fur.

“Ah, darling. I am still of two worlds,” I said. “A moment’s thought of my Kindred, and ‘they’ becomes ‘we’ between one breath and the next. I am glad enough to be human, believe me, but my heart is taking its time to learn.”

She came over to where I stood dressing and kissed me soundly. “Your heart can have all the time you like, my love, as long as you’re here with me while it’s learning.” She whirled away to open a chest that stood against the wall and drew out a long, heavy woolen tunic dyed a rich blue. “It’s cold out there, you’ll need this. Do you want another shirt?”

“I thank you, no.” I said. “I shall wear the tunic, but I have no need of another garment. I am overwarm as it is.”

“I swear, Varien, are you certain you’re really human?” asked Lanen, grinning. “I think you’re still one of the Kantri inside and have just taken human shape. Have you tried breathing fire lately?”

I laughed. “Yes I have, and could barely speak for an hour after!” I caught her as she passed and held her to me. “I am fully human, my heart. Shall I prove it to you?”

She kissed me again lightly and drew away, pulling me after her. “Not now, man! Restrain yourself. I told you, the sun doesn’t shine very often or very long in the winter. Come out with me, it’s a glorious day. You can prove whatever you like later but if I don’t get out soon I shall burst!”

It seemed so simple a thing, but I was reminded yet again of the brief lives of my new people. This swift heartbeat, so short a time in the world—so short a time would I have my Lanen beside me, so short a time might I live myself, who should otherwise have known a thousand years yet under the sun.

“Then let us go forth and glory in the day!” I cried, my heart racing with hers, but I pulled her to the side as she made for the outer door. I dragged her laughing into the kitchen, loosed her hand for an instant as I disappeared into the larder and emerged bearing some aging apples and half of yesterday’s loaf. “Now for it!” I cried, taking her hand again and running out the door.

I had never known so extraordinary a joy in such ordinary actions. We laughed as we saddled the horses, who seemed to catch our mood. We were barely on their backs when they broke into a canter along the track leading to the northern hills. Lanen had told me of the Méar Hills, of her dreams of walking in them when she lay lonely in her

room. So much of her life had been lived through dreams in the dark, but to the honour of her soul it had not soured her spirit or brought untimely bitterness to her heart.

We gave our horses their heads as they hurried along the road. Either they needed the exercise or they were simply trying to keep warm, for they kept up a canter of their own accord for some time. The hills rose before us, the skeletons of the trees drawn stark and sharp on the high ridges and merging into brown on the flanks. The horses dropped into a walk and we rode side by side. The air, touched now and again with wood smoke from the scattered farmsteads we passed, was a little warmer than it had been and the wind had dropped to almost nothing.

As we came closer to the edge of the winter wood we dismounted, tethered our horses loosely, covered them with blankets and left food with them while we walked deeper into the wood. I noticed, scattered among the bare branches, that there were trees that kept their leaves, deep green and glossy among their sleeping cousins. I asked Lanen about them.

"Those are my favorites," she replied, grinning. "Come, smell," she said, crushing some of the greenery. A delicious scent came wafting up from the broken pointed leaves.

"What is that?" I asked, delighted.

"Ilsan pentram," she said. "It's one of the few trees I know; I almost never got out in the woods with anyone who could teach me about trees. One year at midwinter, though, Alisonde brought in boughs of this stuff and put it all round the house, stuffed in odd corners. It smelled wonderful for weeks and I've never forgotten it. It's better outside, though, in the cold." She laughed and hugged me, and I heard in her mind a deep delight that warmed the very air. "Oh, Varien, it's all too wonderful!" she cried, breaking away from me. "I can't bear it. Come, I'll race you to the top of that rise!" She ran off at a good speed. I started to follow, but my legs were still learning their new gaits and I soon realised I would never catch her that way. So I tried the other.

What a fool I was. I should have known.

Lanen

I heard Varien cry out behind me. I ran back faster than I had come, to find him kneeling on the cold ground staring in horror at his hands. They were slightly scraped—he'd obviously fallen on them—but nothing to be distressed about. I looked at him, appalled as he stared at his own body, and knew that for the moment he was beyond words. The Language of Truth can be incredibly useful.

"Varien, love, what is it? Whence this deep distress?"

At least, I tried to use the Language of Truth. This had never happened before. He was closed, I could not bespeak him. My words returned to me like an echo from a cliff face.

"Varien, talk to me. What happened?" I said aloud, really worried. For answer he stumbled to his feet and put his back against the nearest tree. He was shaking all over, pale now. I think he would have fallen save for the tree holding him up. He still hadn't looked at me. As usual, my worry and my love for him roiled about in me and turned into anger. I went close up to him and whispered his full name furiously. "Varien Kantriakor rash-Gedri, Kadreshi naLanen!" He looked up at that, caught my eye at

last. In a more normal tone I continued, “If you don’t speak to me this instant I swear by all that’s holy I will shake you until your teeth rattle. Talk to me, man. What happened?”

He was breathing hard, like a man who had run a desperate race. With a terrible effort of will I kept my mouth shut and waited. Finally he managed to force a few words past his lips.

“Running—after you—too slow.” His face contorted again, pain and shame mingled; his hands clenched and unclenched as if he were trying to master them and failing. I did not reach out to hold him, much as I longed to. I knew as if the Lady had spoken to me that he needed to go through this himself. I waited.

“Then—I knew how to catch you, be there first, waiting for you—ahhh!” He tossed his head as though he were being struck by invisible fists, and his throat tightened so terribly that he had almost to yell to get the words out. In a dreadful voice he croaked out, “Lanen, I tried to fly!” He gave a great cry and fell to his knees again, or they gave out from under him. That had been the worst of it, and now that it was out he wept, great sobs racking his body. I could do no more than hold him close.

If Varien had not been in so terrifying a state I would have laughed, for it seemed ridiculous, but I didn’t dare. Bless the Lady for the right instincts just that once. I didn’t know exactly what he was grieving for but grief it was without doubt. I said nothing. I simply held him.

Finally words came, all rough from their passage through that poor throat. “I fell to all fours and tried to fly, and they were gone. They are gone, Lanen! Ah, my heart, it is hard, hard to bear,” he groaned. “They are gone forever. I am a creature of earth from this moment unto my death, the life of air is closed to me.” He seemed to collapse into himself, sinking away from me back on to his heels and turning his head away from me; but he held on to my forearms in a grip so strong I feared for my bones. “I am nor Gedri nor Kantri but some lost soul caught between—oh my Lanen, what have we done?”

For an instant I thought of the words of Rishkaan, one of the Kantri who had bitterly opposed the union that Varien and I had forged. The Lady knows I had tried to forget his words but they weighed always on my heart. Where Varien and I had seen in our joining a healing for Kantri and Gedri, Rishkaan had the opposite vision. His words were clear in my mind, as though he had only just spoken them to the Kantri assembled to determine my fate and Akor’s. “I too have had Weh dreams, Lord Akor, but mine have been of death and ending. My people, she would mingle the blood of Kantri and Gedri! Her children will be monsters, the world will fill with Raksha-fire and none to stand between because of *her*!” Dreams that come during the Weh sleep, when the Kantri are healing or shedding their skins, are taken very seriously by that people. Rishkaan had died fighting a demon master, a noble death, and the shadow of his dream was not easily dispelled.

Varien had me terribly worried now. Had he had some vision the equal of Rishkaan’s?

Even as I thought that, bless the Lady, he rallied. He loosed his tight grip on my arms and knelt more upright. “Forgive me, my heart,” he said quietly, and let a little of his thought through the strong shields he had put up.

I wish he hadn’t. I had never thought before how devastating it could be to hear

another's true thoughts without the softening that words can provide. His outer thoughts were not so painful, but the underthought explained much, and for the first time I even caught, at the end, a soft whisper of the deep sensation that is less than thought and more like feeling.

"My wings, my wings, alas for what is gone they are gone I am broken I am bound to the earth, bound to you\ I have paid a terrible price for love\ but I do love you in the deep heart of me at least that has not changed nor ever will forgive me this weakness I cannot fly my back is bare alas for what is gone\ I am crippled for life\ [It is because of her]."

The Language of Truth is just that, more's the pity. Truth is not always easy to bear, and after all we had been wed less than a day. Dear Lady Shia, was our joy so easily broken?

"It is not my fault, Varien," I said, suddenly angry. My new-wedded husband had killed the delight that had filled my heart moments earlier with his strange turn, and now it seemed that in the depths of his soul he blamed me for all his misfortunes. "Did I force you to become human?"

I shook him off and stood up. He rose immediately and put his hand out to me. I turned away.

"What is it? What did I—oh!" He sounded so surprised that I looked at him once more. "Ah, my dearling, I understand," he said, his voice a little less crippled now. "You grow stronger in truespeech very swiftly, Lanen. I am astounded! Only Shikrar has ever read me so deeply before. It is the *terishnakh*, the hidden words, that you have heard. Forgive me, dearling."

"Hidden words?" I cried. "Then I'm glad I heard them! I'm not a mind reader, Varien, even if I do have truespeech. If that's what you really think—"

"Please, Lanen, hear me," Varien interrupted. "You are new to this level of truespeech, and you do not yet understand. Those thoughts, they are—unbidden, to say the least. Have you never had unworthy thoughts occur to you, only for them to be rejected by your waking mind? I can no more control the murmurings of the *terishnakh* than I can stop a sneeze, but they mean little more than that. Unworthy musings that are dismissed even as they arise."

I whirled on him, furious. "You said I crippled you for life! That is not a sneeze!"

I could not help myself. I laughed.

Lanen

My soul to the Lady, I would have struck him then and there, but then I heard the words I had just spoken repeated to me in truespeech, lighthearted and loving.

Dratted dragon. He always could make me laugh, especially at myself.

Then he drew me to him and kissed me, long and deep, his strong arms holding me close, and I melted a little. I was still angry at him, but—well, a passionate kiss from the one you love most does much to disperse anger. When we stopped for breath I put my hand to his cheek. "So, Varien. Do you forgive me for costing you your wings?"

"No, *kadreshi*, I do not forgive you." I started to pull back, but he continued, "I cannot forgive you what was never your deed to begin with." He took my hand and kissed my palm, sending a shiver down my spine. "You did not change me, my heart.

If you recall, all our meeting and our joining seems to have been arranged by those greater than we, the Winds that my people worship and Lady Shia of the Gedri. How should two such mortal souls as we stand against the gods?"

I kissed him lightly and drew away, smiling again at last. "By going somewhere a lot warmer," I replied. "I don't know about you, Deshkantriakor, but I am freezing solid while we stand here and there's not a dragon in sight to start a fire. Let's go back."

That made him laugh. Deshkantriakor was the name that his oldest friend, Shikrar, had given him in jest when first he became human. The name means "strange king of the Kantri" and certainly suited him, though in the end he chose another to protect himself.

We walked swiftly back to where we had tethered the horses, folded the blankets and made our way back to Hadronsstead. The winter sun shone yet, glorious in its setting as in its rising, and the tingle of the clear cold air mingled with the scent of warm horse and the occasional waft of winter rot that their hooves stirred up as they walked through autumn's fallen leaves.

I was content for the moment to let things rest even though I knew that this was not resolved; it stood now as a shadow over us, small as yet, and as Varien did not speak much of it for some time I let it lie. I think partly I did not pursue it because I had never truly known that depth of sorrow and loss and the anger that goes with it, and I was shaken in the face of such violent and unknown emotions.

Ah now, truth, Lanen. I did not know what to do, so I did nothing. If he felt in the depths of his heart that his transformation was my fault, there was nothing I could say in my own defence. Had I not gone to the Dragon Isle he would certainly have been there yet as its king, and in his own form. It was foolish and cowardly of me to leave things thus, I know, but what would you? I was very young in many ways; I had hardly left my home before I went out adventuring in the autumn, and even though I woke each morning to this changed world, it was still difficult to believe. Perhaps the ballad makers would have me ever wise, but I am not nor ever pretended to be. After all, the makers of stories are the worst liars I know of.

The sun was down and the twilight fading by the time we returned. Jamie welcomed us at the door with a grin, sat us down by the kitchen fire and set bowls of good thick lentil and barley soup before us, with great slabs of bread and butter. We set to with a will. Jamie was in a strange mood, but he seemed to be enjoying himself. He kept bursting out laughing at nothing, and when I asked him to take food with us he laughed the harder.

"What's so funny?" I asked, my mouth full.

"My girl, I thank you, but I am not presently insane with love. I made a good noon meal, and it's hours yet before I'll need my dinner. I'll wager you've not et a thing, either of you, all day."

Varien and I looked at each other. In the rush of the day, in the midst of storms of emotion, we'd missed breakfast and completely forgotten the food Varien had brought along with us—it was still in the saddlebags. We grinned at each other, and when I glanced back at Jamie, his eyes twinkling in the firelight, I knew that I would live this down in, oh, a mere ten years or so. Still, I suspected that all fathers—or in his case, nearly fathers—must have some such stories to tell about their daughters when they

wed.

I have said I thought Hadron was my father—so I did, until Jamie told me the tale of my mother, Maran Vena. He said I looked like her, tall and strong and grey-eyed. I would not know, as she had left me with Hadron when I was but a babe. Jamie, it seems, had been devoted to her and had been her lover for three years as they travelled the length and breadth of Kolmar. Then she had met Marik of Gundar, a Merchant, and for some reason I could not understand (for Jamie didn't know it) she left Jamie and took up with Marik for three months. She was never entirely comfortable with him, and it was just as well: her curiosity had saved her life, for she had overheard Marik plotting with a demon master. Marik promised the life of his firstborn child to the Rakshasa, the Demon-kind, as the price for a Farseer, a glass globe in which he could see anything he chose anywhere in the world, and thus gain power over his enemies. My mother Maran and Jamie stole the Farseer just moments after it was made. They only just escaped with their lives, and by pure chance—I almost said “evil chance”—they found themselves, six weeks later, in the village where I grew up, and Maran met Hadron the horse-breeder. He adored her from the moment they met, or so Jamie says; but she was already pregnant with me when she wed Hadron. She left when I was less than a year old, and for love of her and because I might just be his daughter—for even Maran was not certain who my father was—Jamie had stayed on at Hadronsstead, never speaking of the past out of respect for Hadron, always there for me to turn to when Hadron turned me away. Too tall, too man-like, too plain, too strong, too wild: nothing I was or had ever done had pleased Hadron and I had lived a desperately confined life, abandoned by my mother, rejected by the man I thought was my father. Little wonder that Jamie's gentle love and kindness had been all the world to me from my earliest memories. I had not learned the truth until my adventures began, not six months past—I only knew that I had always loved and trusted Jamie, always relied on him, and bestowed on him all the love that Hadron rejected.

I had learned since, to my deep sorrow, that my father was indeed Marik of Gundar, and that he still sought me as payment for the Farseer. I had met him on my travels. It was his ship that took me to the Dragon Isle, it was his demon-master who summoned the Raksha to take me, it was he himself who tried to make me betray the Kantri and who gave me of his own free will to the demons. It was Akor, Varien in his dragon form, who had saved me from that, but Marik was too great a fool to let it rest. He tried then to steal a great treasure—the soulgems of the Lost, not gems alone but the very souls of some of Akor's people—and to protect himself he had all but killed Akor. I closed my eyes briefly and shivered at the memory. The battle had been dreadful, and I still woke terrified from time to time with the vision of Akor's silver scales drenched with bright blood. In the end Akor and his soulfriend Shikrar had found a way to defeat Marik. I don't know how or why it worked, but they broke his mind. He was mad and helpless, and like to remain so as long as he lived.

I never lost any sleep over that.

Perhaps it seems unnatural, to feel so little for him, but I had never known him until that journey, and he had tried to kill me and those I loved more than once. What would you? To my sorrow, he was, with my mother, the creature who made me—but in every sense that mattered, my true father sat now across from me, an eyebrow lifted, amusement dancing still behind his eyes.

“And where have you been wandering, my Lanen?” he asked, smiling. “I know that look. You’re a hundred leagues away from here.”

“You know me far too well,” I said, grinning. “But I’m back now, so no matter. Is there any more of that soup?”

Varien and I helped Jamie with some of the chores—feeding and brushing the horses, cleaning tack, spreading straw—until Varien walked up to me and gently but firmly took the pitchfork out of my hands, took me by the arm and led me into the house. I was confused, for I tried to ask him what he was thinking and he would not answer aloud, and hushed me when I tried to speak. He seemed both intense and amused, a most curious combination. When I finally thought to bespeak him I was astounded by the depth of the feelings that I sensed—his mind roiled with his longing combined with the greatest good humour as we moved into the bedroom and he shut the door behind us.

I could hardly believe the passion in his kisses, in his body as we moved apart only enough to undress. It felt—I shivered—somehow, for the first time it felt like the depth of passion that had joined us in the first place, love and honour and desire strong as the bones of the earth. I was moved almost beyond words—how can I describe it to you? It was the first time I realised that the impossible was true: I was wed to *Akor*, a thousand years old, wise and strong—and celibate until very, very recently.


I laughed in the midst of our passion. “You do learn quickly, for such an old man!”

He smiled, a fierce joyful smile, and replied—well, you may imagine as you will what he replied, for the sweet things said in a marriage bed are not to be repeated.

ii

The Place of Exile

Hear now the words of the Eldest, the Keeper of Souls of the Greater Kindred. Here I commit my soul to the Winds and give you my name for truth-fasting: I am Hadretikantishikrar of the line of Issdra. Hear now the truth of those times that changed the world.

 I woke in darkness with a start and knew that something was wrong. I had been drowned deep in the healing Weh sleep, so that struggling back to awareness was not unusual in itself—but the air tingled and the ground felt strange beneath me. The Weh always leaves a feeling of new health and strength, especially in one as old as I, but this was different. My heart was pounding and fire grew within me, a reflection of what I could only think was fear. Why?

Then the noise that had wakened me struck my ears again, moments after I felt it—a low rumble that started below hearing, a vibration through the deep earth. Without thinking I was out of my chamber and had launched myself into the night before I realised what was happening. I called out in truespeech to the one living soul dearest to me.

“Kédra, my son, where are you?”

“Father? Blessed be the Winds! I called and you did not answer, I feared you still kept the Weh sleep. Are you healed?”

“Nearly, my son. Strong and well enough to fly, at any rate. Where are you, and did you feel the shaking of the ground?”

“I am aloft my father, with Mirazhe.” He sounded almost as if he laughed, and was a little out of breath. “Fear not, your grandson Sherók is in my arms. He is much grown since last you saw him, and this excitement is thrilling him. He has never flown before. Listen.”

Sherók, Kédra’s littling, was far too young yet to use full truespeech, but through Kédra I listened to his son. What I heard was closer to emotion than to speech or thought, but the littling was no more than a few months old—and he was full of pure delight. “How long have I kept the Weh?” I asked, calmed and pleased by this link with young Sherók. I could just imagine him in my mind’s eye—his tiny scales yet soft, his back ridge still forming and hardening, his stubby tail thrashing in delight. In colour he was a blend of Kédra’s and my dark bronze and his mother Mirazhe’s bright brassy

hide. His soulgem was covered as yet, as was true of all younglings. Sometime in the next nine months the scale that protected it would fall away—but his eyes were golden, a rare colour among our people and most wonderfully beautiful. Not that I am biased, you understand; but grandsires know these things.

“Less than three moons, Father,” he replied. “Are you but now roused?”

I tried to gather my scattered thoughts as I sought out the scant winds of the winter’s night to help keep me aloft. My flight muscles were stiff, surely, and my shoulder ached from the wound the *rakshadakh* Marik had given me—ah, that was an evil memory!—but both were recovered enough to heal without further time spent in the Weh sleep.

“The ground has shaken twice?”

“Yes.”

“Then the first woke me from deep sleep. It was the second that set me flying.” I had been listening but had not heard that threatening rumble again.

A soft voice touched my mind. *“Think you it safe to return to the ground yet, Eldest?”* It was Erianss, a lady some centuries older than Kedra but still far younger than I, and she sounded annoyed. I stifled the laughter that came to my mind. *“I know exactly as much as you do, Erianss. It has not been so many years since the last earthquake, surely you remember.”* Still, perhaps she had a point. I spoke in the broadest truespeech, that all might hear. *“Let those who wish to speak of this meet at noon on the morrow at the Summer Field, away in the south. This is not a Council meeting. I make no demand of any.”*

“Then I will see you there, Father,” said Kedra. *“Where are you bound for the rest of this night?”*

I had already begun climbing, pushing myself to rise in the cold night air. I would pay for this overexertion tomorrow, but now was the best time to investigate. The fires of the earth are more clearly seen in darkness. *“I go north, Kédra, to see what Terash Vor is doing. I will let you know what I have seen.”*

“Good hunting, then. Mirazhe and the kitling and I will meet you at the Summer Field tomorrow. Mind you keep high and safe in the firewinds, my father.”

I hissed my amusement, loud enough for Kédra to hear it in my truespeech. *“So I shall, my son, and I thank you for your concern.”* I did not remind him who had taught him about downdrafts near the firefields, or how long ago. The experience of age can be so burdensome to the young. *“Bear my love to Mirazhe.”*

“I will. Fare you well, Father,” said Kédra, and his voice was gone from my mind as it was never absent from my heart. As I worked my way high and north, I thought for a passing moment of those other two whose lives were so closely intertwined with Kédra’s and mine—Varien Kantriakhor, my soulfriend Akhor in his new self, and his lady Lanen Kaelar. I had meant to bespeak them the moment I woke from the Weh sleep, but for now this was the more important task. Still, I wondered how they fared, even as I flew through the cold winter’s night towards Terash Vor, the Breathing Mountain, to see what the future held for us all.

Terash Vor is in the centre of the western half of the range of mountains that divide the north of the Dragon Isle from the south. The divide is abrupt where the gentle hills rise sharp and sudden into high peaks five times their height. From the shapes of the mountains it is clear that in the distant past they must all have been of the same kind. I

remember hearing my father, Garesh, speak of other mountains in the range burning as well, from time to time.

My people, the Kantri, the Greater Kindred, whom the Gedri children call True Dragons, had lived on this island for nearly five generations—that is to say, as many thousand years—ever since our self-imposed exile from the four Kingdoms of Kolmar on the Day Without End, burned in the memory of our race forever. On that day one single child of the Gedri, the human known only as the Demonlord, arose in a great darkness, and in the space of only a few hours the world was changed.

In those times the Kantri and the Gedri lived together, short lives and long intertwined to the great benefit of each: the long lives of the Kantri gave a sense of time outside their own brief lives to the Gedri, the humans; the swift-living Gedri kept the Kantri from forgetting to live each passing moment for all the joy it held and would never hold again. However, on that dark day a young man, a healer, reached the final abyss of his discontent with the small gifts granted him by the Lady, the great mother-goddess Shia worshipped by the Gedri. He longed to be among the great of his people, but he was not granted that excellence by the Winds—or, the Gedri would say, by the hand of the Goddess that shaped him. In his fury and frustration he made a dreadful pact with the Rakshasa, the Demon-kind, third of the four original peoples (the fourth were the Trelli, all dead long ages since). In exchange for his soul, his very name was taken from him and from all the world for all time, and the Demonlord was granted a hideous power over the Kantri. He began by killing many of his own people, moving with a speed beyond flight from one kingdom to the next, until he murdered Aidrishaan, one of the Kantri, and for some unknown reason stayed beside the body. Aidrishaan's death scream had reached his mate, Tréshak, who told the rest of us instantly through truespeech—for the Kantri are blessed with the ability to speak mind to mind—and we rose, four hundred strong, to destroy this murderer or die in the process. It was not courage, for we have wings and claws, our armour and the fire that is in us and sacred to us: the Gedri are tiny, naked and defenseless before us. No, it was in no sense courage. It was anger. That one of the Gedri should dare to destroy one of the Kantri!

Tréshak arrived first, on the wings of fury, and she dove at the Demonlord, claws outstretched, fiery breath scorching the ground whereon he stood—but he was unharmed by her flames, and with a gesture and a single word, Tréshak was *changed*. Even as she flew she dwindled to the size of a youngling, her blue soulgem blazing as she cried out in torment. She fell from the sky, for her wings would no longer bear her up, and as she fell her soulgem was ripped from her by a horde of the Rikti, the minor demons.

It would have been better had the rest of the Kantri stopped to consider what had happened, for clearly no Gedri had ever withstood our fire before, far less done so evil a thing.

We did not.

The fire that is life to us blazed out of control in our madness, and four hundred of the Kantri flew straight at the Demonlord, setting fire to the very air as they flew. The Demonlord spoke rapidly, the same word over and over, and full half of the Kantri fell from the sky and had their soulgems torn from them.

He could not kill us all, even so. It is said he laughed as he died, as the Rikti around

him disappeared in flame—they are the weaker of our life-enemies the Rakshasa and cannot withstand simple dragonfire—but whether he laughed from the heart of his madness at death and pain, or because some darkness in his soul believed even then that he would triumph in the end, we do not know. His body was trampled and torn until the youngest of us, Keakhor by name, called out, “He is dead, we cannot kill him more. For pity’s sake look to the wounded.”

The Kantri turned then to those who had been crippled by the Demonlord and his servants. We tried to speak to them, but in vain. The truespeech that allows us to speak with one another as we fly, where the rushing winds could not carry speech, also allows us to sense emotion as well as thought, but there was no reason, no trapped mind to touch—simple fear was the only response to our desperate attempts to speak with them. Among the ashes of the Demonlord were found the soulgems that had been ripped from our mates, our children, our parents—and even then the gems bore the taint of their demonic origin. In the course of nature, the soulgems of the dead resemble faceted jewels, and when the Kin-Summoning is performed by the Keeper of Souls they glow from within with a steady light. The summoner may then speak briefly with the dead. These soulgems gleamed—to this day they gleam—at all times from within with a flickering light.

We believe that the souls of our lost Kindred are trapped within, neither alive nor resting in death, and despite endless years of toil and trying they are yet bound.

The bodies of our brothers and sisters had become the bodies of beasts. We could not kill them, for old love, but we could not bear to see them either. They were first called on that day the Lesser Kindred, and it has become our only name for them. They breed now like beasts and live brief, solitary lives. Several among us try to contact the newly born every year but none have had any response. Never in all the long weary years since that time has there been even a shred of hope that one among them might have heard or tried to respond in any way.

We left Kolmar that very day, for already several innocent Gedri healers had been killed by Kantri wild with grief. Those who kept their heads in the midst of evil knew that the two peoples must be sundered until the Kantri who were left could see a human without needing to take swift and fatal revenge for the deeds of the Demonlord.

It has been almost five thousand years since that day, and there are among the Kantri still those who cannot bear even the thought of the Gedri without a fury rising in them. It does not matter that there are now none left alive who were even the grandchildren of those who were witness to the deed: the cry that Tréshak gave when her soul was ripped from her echoes down the aeons, its fury and despair as wrenching and poignant as if it had happened not a day since. The Kantri live for two thousand years, if disease or injury or accident do not intervene, and the great-grandsons and great-great-grandsons of those who were there know the story in the marrow of their bones. Forgiveness is difficult, especially now that—alas!—especially now that our race is failing.

My son Kédra’s youngling Sherók was born in the autumn—ah, he is a perfect littling, you should see his eyes!—but until his birth, the Kantri had gone five hundred years without issue. Our King and my soulfriend, Akhor, has long pondered our decline, but even he with wisdom beyond his years could not tell whence arose this barrenness, or why. We were grown desperate now, lest our race should die out

entirely. I prayed to the Winds that Akhor's miraculous transformation might have some great purpose beyond that of uniting him with the soul he loved, that perhaps he might learn from the Gedri something that would succor his own people. If he did not, the black truth was that we were doomed, and Sherók would be the last of us.

I shook my head, breathing deeply of the night air, taking myself through the Discipline of Calm even as I flew, dispersing such darkness of heart. Such thoughts would catch no fish nor lift me a talon's breadth higher as I flew. I tried to concentrate on the problem at hand. I nearly succeeded.

Some have occasionally wondered if the murmuring ground might have anything to do with our present plight. The ground beneath our feet on the island was seldom quiet for long and we were accustomed to its shaking, but it had been growing more disturbed over the last several hundred years, and such violent movement as awakened me from my Weh sleep was rarer yet and demanded investigation. Never mind the fact that my own curiosity would have sent me to the same place, and as quickly—now that I stood in the stead of Akhor, our King who was among the Gedri, I had to think of all of my people. It was a curious feeling. I wondered as I flew whether Akhor had ever grown accustomed to this sense of bearing the Kantri on his wings and in his talons wherever he went, whatever he did.

The sky above the mountain was red and grew redder still as I approached. I had expected something of the sort. When I was still far distant, however, I found that I was not prepared for all. Terash Vor was sending its fiery breath high into the air, one vast stream of fire flowing upwards only to fall again to the ground, like a single burning feather from a bird the size of the sky. I kept my distance as I flew round about it, to learn if there was aught else to see. To my surprise, there were several smaller flows on the north side of the mountain, and a few distant red glows on others in the range showed that this was but the surface of a deep disturbance. I called upon Idai, an elder of the Kantri and an old and trusted friend.

"Idai, may I bespeak you?"

"Of course, Shikrar," came the familiar voice of her thoughts. *"What troubles you?"*

"I am at Terash Vor and I would that you might see what I have seen. Will you come to me here? I shall await you at the Grandfather."

She replied simply, *"I come. I shall be with you in the hour."*

The Grandfather was the name of the mountain nearest the south, the first that rose dark above the quiet hills below. It was so called for that it had, in some lights, the seeming of a vast black dragon. There was a large ledge on the south side—what would have been part of a back, or a folded wing—where two could stand and speak together. It was often used as a meeting place. I used it on occasion but I never was comfortable there.

We of the Kantri are long-lived, as I have said, seeing as many as two thousand winters in the natural course of things. We are thus not inclined by our natures to take note of anything so short as an hour. However, time passes for us as it does for all creatures, and while I waited for Idai I decided to dare my wings again and take another quick look around the fire plain. By the time I returned to the Grandfather to await her I was deeply troubled.

I had often been to Terash Vor. It usually happened that some time in every kell—