

TRUDI CANAVAN

VOICE *of the* GODS

AGE OF THE FIVE: BOOK THREE



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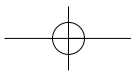
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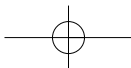
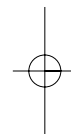
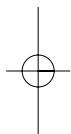
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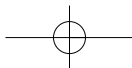
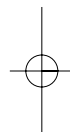
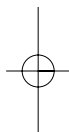
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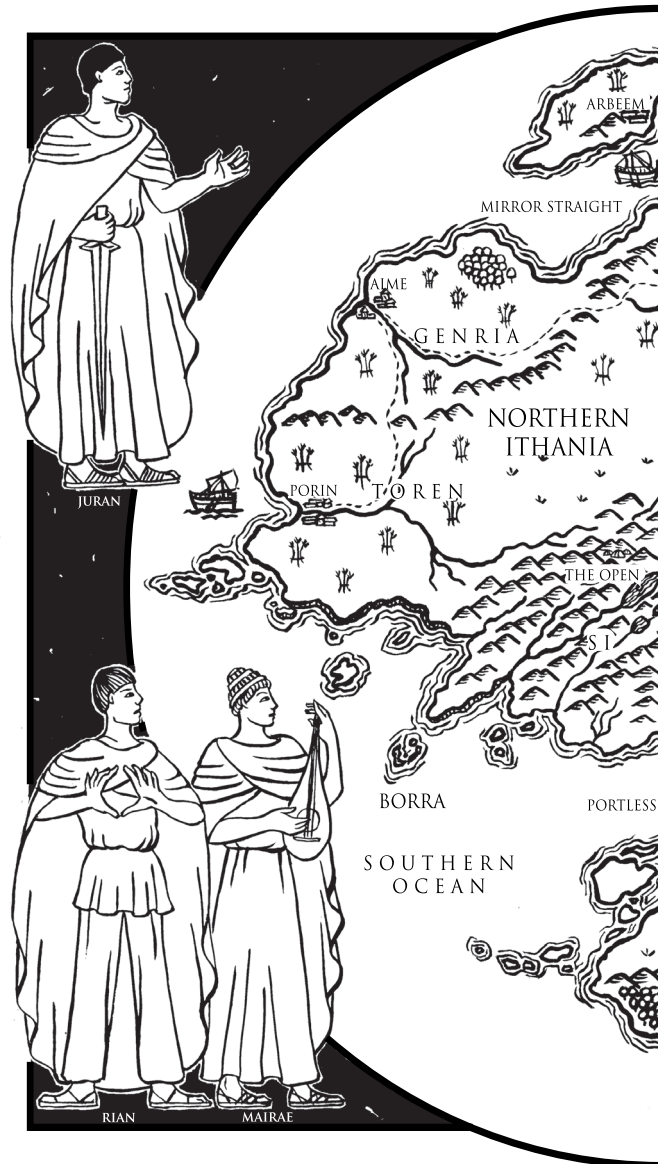
TO MY PA, 'WINK' DAUNCEY,
WHO LOVED TO MAKE THINGS

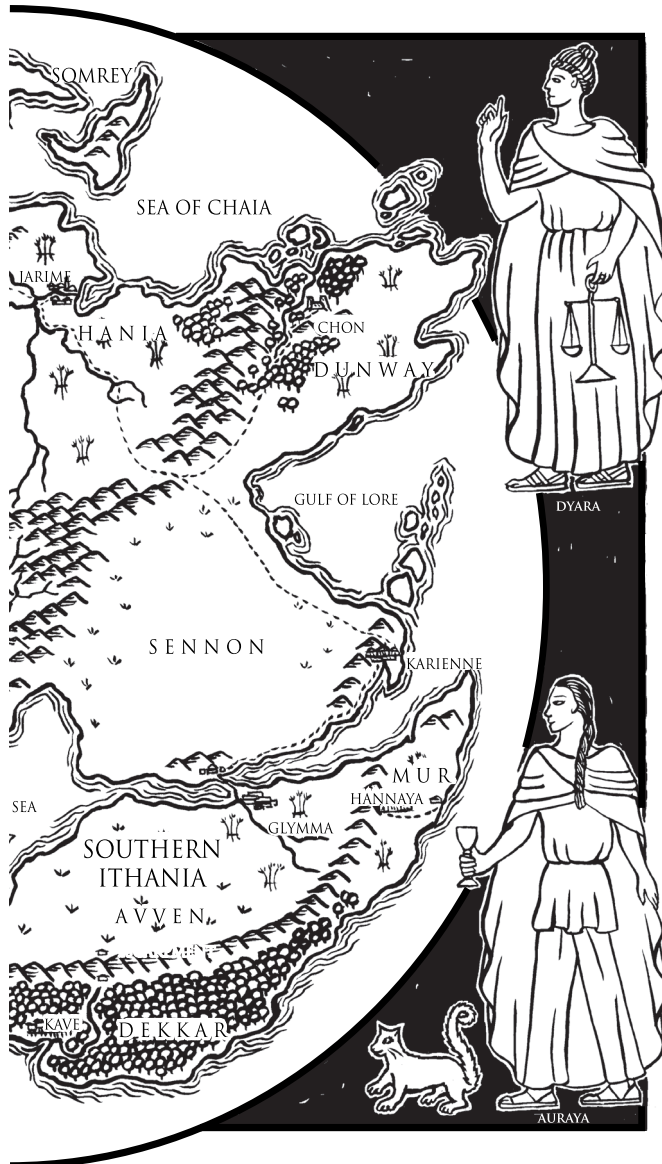


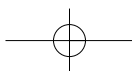
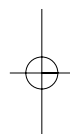
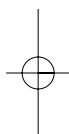


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PROLOGUE

The man staggering through the hospice door was covered in blood. It streaked his face and clothing, and leaked from between fingers pressed to his brow. As the occupants of the greeting hall saw him they fell silent, then the noise and activity resumed. Someone would take care of him.

Looks like that someone will be me this time, Priestess Ellareen thought as she glanced at the other healers. All priests, priestesses and Dreamweavers were occupied, though Dreamweaver Fareeh's bandaging of his patient's arm had quickened.

When the newcomer saw her approaching he looked relieved.

'Welcome to the hospice,' she said. 'What is your name?'

'Mal Toolmaker.'

'What happened to you?'

'Robbed.'

'Let me see that.' He reluctantly allowed her to lift his hand from his brow. A cut to the bone seeped more blood. She pressed his hand back over the wound. 'It needs some stitches.'

His gaze slid to the nearest Dreamweaver. 'You'll do it?'

She suppressed a sigh and indicated that he should follow her down the corridor. 'Yes. Come with me.'

It was not unheard of for a visitor to the hospice to request a Circlian healer, but it was unusual. Most who came here were

prepared to accept any help. Those who did not like or trust Dreamweavers went elsewhere.

Dreamweavers worked with Circlian priests and priestesses readily enough, and vice versa. They all knew they were healing many people who would not have received any help before. But a century of prejudice against Dreamweavers could not be erased in a few months. Ella had not expected it to be. Nor did she even want it to be. Dreamweavers did not worship the gods, so their souls died when their bodies did. She had great respect for them as healers – nobody who worked alongside them could deny being impressed by their knowledge and skill – but their dismissive, distrustful view of the gods irritated her.

I don't approve of blind intolerance either. The tendency in some people to fear those different from themselves to the point of irrational hatred disturbed her more than the common violence and miserable poverty that brought most patients to the hospice.

Recently a new group that called themselves 'true Circlians' had begun harassing the hospice workers. Their arrogant belief that their worship of the gods was more worthy than hers irritated her even more than the Dreamweavers' indifference. The only issue she agreed with them on was the Pentadrians. Unlike Pentadrians, Dreamweavers never claimed to follow gods – gods that didn't exist – or used that deception to convince a continent of people that Circlians were heathens and deserved to be exterminated.

At least this man isn't too proud to seek our help, she thought as she led him down the corridor into an unoccupied treatment room and directed him to sit on the end of a bench. Scooping water into a bowl from a trough of constantly flowing water at one end of the room, she warmed it with magic. She took some cloth from a basket, shook a few drops

of wound-cleaning oil onto it, dipped it into the water and cleaned the man's face. Then she began stitching the cut.

A young priest, Naen, stepped into the doorway when she had nearly finished.

'Your mother just arrived, Priestess Ella.'

She frowned. 'Tell her I'll see her as soon as I'm finished with this patient.' *Yranna, make her stay put until I'm ready. And let her not be in one of her moods.*

:Naen will make sure she does not interrupt you, Ellareen, a voice assured her.

Ella straightened and looked around. There was no sign of the woman she had heard. *Am I hearing voices, like that crazy old man who comes in here all the time?*

:No, you're not crazy. You're as sane as most mortals. Saner, even. Even if you do talk to me all the time.

:Talk to . . . are you . . . Yranna?

:That's right.

:It can't be.

:Why not?

:Well . . . you're a god. A goddess. Why would you talk to me?

:I have a task for you.

A thrill of both excitement and fear ran down Ella's spine. At the same time she heard one of the priests in the greeting room raise his voice.

'There is a crowd blocking the street outside. They won't let us leave the hospice . . . no, we can't . . . best to wait it out.'

Not the 'true Circlians' again, she thought as she tied the last stitch.

:Yes. They have surrounded the hospice.

Ella sighed, then felt a chill of realisation.

:But . . . this blockade must be different to the others, or you wouldn't be asking me to perform a task for you.

:That's right.

:What is it?

:I want you to immobilise the man you are treating. Use magic, drugs – whatever it takes.

Ella froze and looked at the man sitting before her. He stared back at her, his pupils wide. It wasn't just the pain making him edgy, she realised. It was fear.

Her mouth went dry and her heart began to race. He might be more Gifted than her. He was certainly physically stronger than her. If this went wrong . . .

Don't think about it, she told herself. When the gods ask for something to be done, I can only do my best to oblige them.

The force of her magic knocked him against the wall, driving air from his lungs. Pushing him down onto the bench, she held him there, hoping that he was too caught up in fighting for air to use any Gifts he might have.

But he'll recover his wits soon enough. Yranna suggested drugs . . .

Grabbing a bottle of sleep vapour oil, she poured some onto a cloth and held it against his nose until his eyes glazed over. It would subdue him for several minutes, but what then? The blockade might last for hours.

I need a sleep inducer. She searched the room and found a nearly empty jar of sleepeace powder. Mixing up a thin draught from the remnants, she carefully poured it down his throat. It roused him to a semi-conscious state; he coughed, then swallowed the mixture before subsiding into unconsciousness again.

She stood back to assess her handiwork, and realised she had no idea how long such a small dose of the drug would work for. A half-cupful induced a full night's sleep. The dose she'd given might last an hour, if she was lucky. She could find more sleepeace, but it was dangerous and difficult to administer to a fully unconscious patient. It might get into his lungs. She looked down at the man.

Yranna said to immobilise you, she thought, not kill you. What did you have planned, anyway, Mal Toolmaker?

On impulse, she grabbed a few strips of bandages, tied his hands and feet and gagged him. To hide this, she took a blanket and covered the man, leaving only the top of his head showing.

But this would not stop him attracting attention when he woke up. *The others will want to know why I did this. What am I going to tell them?* She was not sure they would believe her if she told them the goddess had instructed her to immobilise a patient. *Well, they might eventually, but in the meantime they'll probably set him free to do whatever he intends to do.*

He'd suffered a blow to the head, so it would be plausible to say he'd experienced dizziness or disorientation. Sleep drugs were not the usual treatment, however. She would have to come up with other ways to explain that.

'Ella!' a familiar voice called from within the corridor.

Ella spun around. Her mother must have slipped away from Priest Naen. She hurried out of the room before the woman could discover her with a bound and gagged patient.

In the corridor a thin greying woman wrapped in a clean, well-made tawl of fine cloth, scowled disapprovingly as she saw Ella.

'Ella. At last. I need to have a little *talk* with you.'

'So long as it is little,' Ella said, keeping her attitude businesslike. 'Come back to the greeting hall.'

'You must stop working here,' her mother told her in a low voice as she followed Ella. 'It's too dangerous. It's bad enough knowing you're constantly under the influence of these heathens, but now it's worse. The rumours are all over the city. I'm surprised you haven't already had the sense to leave this—'

'Mother,' Ella interrupted. 'What are you talking about?'

'Mirar is back,' her mother replied. 'Or haven't you heard?'

'Obviously not,' Ella said.

‘He was – is – the leader of the Dreamweavers. A Wild, you know. They say he wasn’t killed a century ago; he survived. He’s been in hiding and now he’s returned.’

‘Who says this?’ Ella asked, trying not to sound too sceptical.

‘Everybody – and don’t give me that look. He’s been seen by many people. And the White aren’t denying it.’

‘Have they had a chance to?’

‘Of course they have. Now, you listen to me. You can’t work here any more. You have to stop!’

‘I’m not abandoning people who need my help because of a rumour.’

‘It’s not rumour!’ her mother exclaimed, forgetting that she had already called the claims of Mirar’s return such. ‘It is the truth! What if he comes here? Think what he might do to you! You might not even recognise him. He might be working here now, in disguise! He might *seduce* you!’

Ella managed, with difficulty, to keep the smile from her face. *Seduce indeed!* ‘Dreamweavers do not interest me, Mother.’

But the woman wasn’t listening. As the possible threats to Ella’s person grew more preposterous, Ella steered her mother toward a bench in the greeting hall.

‘And now look what’s happened,’ her mother said abruptly, sitting down. ‘Because *he’s* returned, *we’re* stuck in here. Isn’t there a back door to this place? Can’t we—’

‘No. When this happens there are always troublemakers waiting outside the back entrance.’

‘If you were a high priestess they wouldn’t dare.’

Ella smothered a sigh. *Tell me, Yranna, are all mothers like this? Are they ever satisfied with their offspring? If I managed to become a high priestess would she decide I ought to be a White? If by some miracle I became a White, would she start nagging me to become a god?*

She gave her mother the usual answer. 'If I were a high priestess I would have no time to see you at all.'

Her mother shrugged and turned away. 'We hardly see you anyway.'

Only every second or third day, Ella thought. *How neglectful I am. How deprived are my parents. If I ever get like this*, she thought, *please, Yranna, have someone kill me.*

'Have you heard who is going to replace Auraya?' her mother asked.

'No.'

'Surely you must have heard *something* by now.'

How is it she can make even that sound like a failing?

'As you've pointed out so many times before, I am only a lowly priestess, unworthy of notice or respect, or even the deepest of Circlian secrets,' Ella replied dryly, expecting to be scolded for her sarcasm.

But her mother wasn't listening. 'It'll be one of the high priests,' her mother said, mostly to herself. 'We need someone strong – not some frivolous young girl with a liking for heathens. The gods did right to kick that Auraya girl out of the White.'

'She wasn't kicked out. She resigned to help the Siyee.'

'That's not what *I* heard.' Her mother's eyes shone with glee at the gossip she was privy to. 'I heard she refused to do what the gods asked of her, and they took her powers from her.'

Ella gritted her teeth. 'Well, I talk to Yranna all the time, and she mentioned nothing about that. Besides, a good healer doesn't spend work hours gossiping.'

Her mother's eyes narrowed and her chin rose. Before she could speak, however, Ella heard her name called. She looked up and felt her stomach sink as she saw Priest Naen and Priest Kleven approaching. Both were frowning.

‘What happened to the man with the cut brow, Ella?’ Kleven asked.

‘He . . . he became angry when he heard we were trapped here.’

‘So you sedated him?’

Leaving her mother sitting on the bench, she rose and hurried over to Kleven, lowering her voice.

‘Yes. He was . . . *very* angry. I used sleep vapour, and when he showed no ill effects I gave him a tiny dose of sleep ease.’

‘Sleep ease? On a man suffering a head blow?’ Kleven exclaimed quietly. He shook his head and started toward the corridor. Ella felt her heart skip a beat, and hurried after him.

‘Anyone suffering a head injury who displays strange behaviour should be watched closely,’ Kleven told her as he entered the room. He drew the blanket from Mal Toolmaker’s head, exposing the gag.

‘What is this?’ he said. Pulling the blanket away, he exclaimed as the bandages tying the man’s hands and feet were revealed.

‘He attacked me,’ she told him.

He looked at her sharply. ‘Are you all right?’

She shrugged. ‘Yes. He didn’t touch me.’

‘You should have told me about this.’

‘I was going to but . . . Mother distracted me.’

He nodded, then turned back to the unconscious man. A chill ran down her back as he began to untie the bandages. ‘Is that wise?’ she asked hesitantly.

‘Naen will watch him. How much sleep ease did you give him?’

‘Not much. A small spoon’s worth.’

The man’s eyes fluttered in reaction to Kleven’s touch. He wasn’t waking up, but he would soon.

‘Stop,’ she found herself saying. ‘You can’t let him wake up. You have to drug him again.’

Kleven turned to stare at her questioningly. 'Why?'

She sighed. 'It's incredible, but you have to believe me. I was warned about him and ordered to immobilise him by . . .' She grimaced. 'I know you'll find this hard to believe – by Yranna.'

Kleven's eyebrows rose. 'The goddess?'

'Yes. She spoke to me. In my mind. And no, I don't usually hear voices in my head.'

The priest considered her thoughtfully. She saw the doubts in his eyes, but could not tell whether he hesitated to believe her or to risk acting against a god's orders.

'How am I to know you're not making this up?'

'I can't prove it, if that is what you mean. But I can point out that I have never acted with anything but good sense before – or shown signs of madness.'

'You haven't,' Kleven agreed. 'But it does not make sense that Yranna would speak to you but not the rest of us. If this man is a danger to the hospice, we all need to know.'

'That puzzled me, too,' she admitted. 'Perhaps the danger has passed . . . but I'm not willing to take that risk. Are you?'

Kleven looked at the sleeping man dubiously.

'Can I offer any assistance?'

They turned to find Dreamweaver Fareeh standing in the doorway. Ella groaned inwardly. Kleven hadn't finished untying the bindings, and as the Dreamweaver noticed them his eyebrows rose.

'A troublesome patient?'

Kleven looked at Ella. 'In more ways than one.'

The Dreamweaver looked at the sleeping man, then at each of them, and nodded. He began to move away. Kleven sighed. 'Ella here says she was instructed by Yranna to immobilise him.'

Ella turned to stare at the priest in surprise.

‘Ah,’ was all Fareeh said.

Why would Kleven tell him that? Slowly the reason dawned on her. If he doesn’t, Fareeh would know we are keeping something from him. That might change how he deals with us. She shook her head. *This balance of trust and distrust between our peoples is so easily tipped.*

‘Do you believe her?’ Kleven asked.

The Dreamweaver shrugged. ‘I do not believe what I cannot confirm with my own senses, so belief is irrelevant. Either she is wrong, or she is right. Either situation is alarming. I can suggest only that you bring both patient and priestess to the greeting hall so that we can all help to watch and deal with any trouble that arises from this.’

The older priest nodded. ‘Good advice.’

Ella watched anxiously as Kleven lifted the unconscious man with magic and carried him out into the hall. Visitors and healers alike, bored and eager for distraction, watched curiously as this stranger was laid upon a bench. But as time passed and the man did nothing but sleep, their attention soon strayed.

Watching the stranger, Ella wondered what he had planned to do. *Were you going to attack us? Were you going to slip out of the room while we were distracted and open the back door to let your people in?* Every time the man moved, Ella’s heart lurched.

When the man’s eyes finally fluttered open she rose, ready to face any kind of attack with magic.

‘Sit down, Priestess Ella,’ Kleven said calmly, but firmly. She obeyed.

The stranger struggled up onto his elbows, staring groggily about. His gaze fell on Ella, and he shuddered.

‘Wha’ hap’n’d?’ he asked. ‘Sh’, she t’tack’d me.’

‘Stay calm. You are not in any danger,’ Kleven said soothingly. ‘Take a moment to recollect yourself.’

The man's gaze roamed the room. 'Still here. Wh— . . . am I a pris'ner?'

'No.'

He began to struggle to his feet. Kleven stood and steadied the man.

'Let me go.'

'All in good time. You've had a small dose of a sleep drug. Just let it wear off.'

'Sleep . . . why'd you drug me?'

'One of us believed you intended us harm. Is that true?'

The expression that crossed the man's face sent shivers down Ella's spine. *Guilt!* she thought. *He was planning something.*

'No. I just came to . . .' He reached up and touched his brow, flinching as his fingers found the stitches. He drew in a deep breath and straightened his back, then stood up. He swayed a moment, then took a few steps. The drug was wearing off quickly, and nobody was moving to stop the man as he walked with growing confidence across the room and back.

'I'm right,' he said. 'Can I go now?'

Kleven shrugged and nodded. 'I can see no reason why we should keep you here . . . except that there's a hostile crowd outside. You'll get another one of those scratches, at the least, if you try to leave.'

The man looked at Ella pointedly. 'I'll risk it.'

Kleven shrugged. 'We won't stop you, we can only warn you. I will release the door.'

Nobody stirred as the man started toward the door. Ella frowned. She ought to be glad he was leaving, his plan foiled. But something nagged at her. Why would Yranna let this man go if he had threatened the hospice? Yranna had said . . .

Then she realised what it was.

'Stop!' she cried, jumping up. The man ignored her.

'Ella . . .' Kleven began.

As the man put his hand to the door Ella drew magic and sent out a barrier to stop him. He pressed the invisible shield and turned to glare at her angrily.

‘Ella!’ Kleven barked. ‘Let him go!’

‘No,’ she replied calmly. ‘Yranna told me to immobilise him. She didn’t say why. Maybe it was to prevent him harming us. Maybe it was to prevent him leaving.’

The man backed away from the door and turned to face her, his face contorted with anger. She felt Kleven take hold of her arm.

‘Ella. We can’t . . .’

His voice faded and she heard him draw in a quick breath. A rapping came from the door. Kleven let her go.

‘Drop your barrier, Ella,’ he murmured. ‘Rian of the White is here.’

She did as he asked. The door swung open. A man wearing an undecorated circ stepped over the threshold. Rian, the red-haired White, regarded the stranger with ancient eyes.

‘You’ve led us quite a chase, Lemarn Shipmaker.’

The stranger backed away, his face pale. A high priestess stepped into the hospice. At a nod from Rian, she gestured at the man. He walked stiffly past her and through the door, obviously guided by an invisible force.

Rian turned to regard the hospice occupants. ‘The trouble-makers have prudently found other places to be. You can leave safely now. Or stay and continue your work or treatment, as you wish.’

From around the room came several sighs of relief. Kleven stepped forward and made the formal two-handed sign of the circle.

‘Thank you, Rian of the White.’

Rian nodded, then looked at Ella. ‘Well done, Priestess Ellareen. We’ve been looking for this man for months. The



gods are impressed with your loyalty and obedience. I would not be surprised if I heard you had been offered a timely high priestess position.'

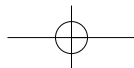
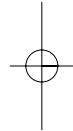
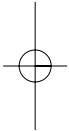
She stared at him in astonishment. He turned away, obviously not expecting a reply, and stepped outside.

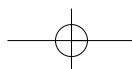
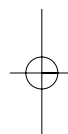
A timely high priestess position? Surely he isn't hinting that . . . no, he wouldn't.

But the Choosing Ceremony for the next White was only a month away. What other reason was there for a promotion to high priestess to be timely?

I have only to wait and see.

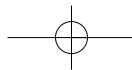
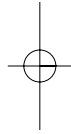
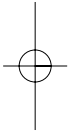
Feeling light-headed, she walked back into the hospice and returned to her work.

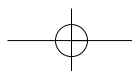
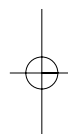






PART ONE





CHAPTER 1

The constant rush of cascading water echoed between the walls. As Emerahl moved further down the tunnel the noise diminished, but so did the light. She drew a little magic and created a spark, then sent it forward to the end of the tunnel and beyond.

Everything was as she had left it: the rough beds in the centre of the cave, made of logs lashed together and tough strips of bark woven into a tight net; the stone bowls Mirar had carved while stuck here last summer, waiting until he could master the skill of hiding his mind from the gods; the jars, boxes and bags of dried or preserved food and cures stacked against one wall, gathered over the months they had lived here.

Only one essential part of the cave could not be seen. Moving forward slowly, she felt the magic that imbued the world about her diminish to nothing and she smiled with satisfaction. Keeping her light burning with the magic she had gathered within herself, she continued to the centre of the room, where magic once more surrounded her. She was within the void.

Sighing, she sat down on one of the beds. When she had returned here last spring, she had noted that the space devoid of magic had shrunk since her last visit over a century ago. Slowly the magic of the world was seeping back to fill it. That

suggested the original void had been even larger before she'd discovered it, and would eventually no longer exist.

For now it would suffice. She had travelled through the rough wild land of Si, a journey which involved a lot more climbing than walking, in order to reach this place. At every second step she had cursed Mirar, her fellow immortal and friend, for talking her into teaching Auraya. Every other step she had cursed The Twins, immortals even more ancient than herself and Mirar, who she had finally met for the first time a few months ago, for agreeing with him.

:We must know what Auraya is, Tamun had said to her in a dream link, the night after Mirar had made his request. *If she becomes an immortal she could also become a valuable ally.*

:What if she can't do it?

:She must still be a powerful sorceress, Surim had replied with uncharacteristic seriousness. *Remember, the gods do not like independent sorcerers any more than they like us immortals. If we do not help her they will kill her.*

:Will they? Just because she has quit the White doesn't mean she has turned against them, Emerahl had pointed out. *Auraya is still a priestess. She still serves the gods.*

:Her mind is full of doubts, Tamun said. *The gods' demand that she kill Mirar without trial weakened her regard for them.*

Emerahl nodded. She knew this herself. Once Auraya had removed the ring of the gods' power her mind had no longer been shielded. With help from The Twins, Emerahl had learned to mind-skim and had occasionally seen Auraya's thoughts.

The trouble is, while Auraya's loyalty toward some gods has been weakened she still feels a need to at least remain on good terms with them. If she discovers who I am, she will know the gods want me dead. And she doesn't have a prior friendship with me to make her reluctant to strike, as she had with Mirar.

Yet Emerahl didn't believe Auraya would kill her unless the

gods ordered it. She had seen enough of Auraya's mind to know the former White did not like killing. If their meeting went well the gods wouldn't even know Emerahl was here. She looked around the room again. The gods were beings of magic, and so could only exist where there was magic. They could not enter these rare, unexplained voids, nor could they see what lay within unless they looked through the eyes of humans standing outside it. Once Auraya was here the gods would not be able to read her mind.

There was still a good chance Emerahl had travelled halfway across the continent for nothing. She could not make Auraya learn anything. She would have to be careful what she told the woman, too. If Auraya left the void before learning to hide her thoughts, the gods would read her mind.

Emerahl shook her head and sighed again. *This is such a risk. It's all very well for The Twins, safely hidden away in the Red Caves in distant Sennon, or Mirar in Southern Ithania. They don't have to worry that Auraya will change her mind and decide killing immortals without due cause is acceptable.*

But The Twins' help was invaluable. Every day and night they reached out to minds across the continents, skimming thoughts, alert to the intentions and actions of powerful people. The pair had honed these skills over thousands of years. They knew mortals so well, they could predict their behaviour with uncanny accuracy.

Mirar had always said that the Wilds – or Immortals, as The Twins called them – each had an innate Gift. Emerahl's was her ability to change her age, Mirar's was his unsurpassed ability to heal. The Twins' was mind-skimming. The Gull's . . . she wasn't sure exactly what his was, but she was sure it had something to do with the sea.

And Auraya's, Mirar claimed, was her ability to fly. Emerahl felt a twinge of interest ease her annoyance at being here. *I*

wonder if she can teach it to others. Mirar taught me to heal, though I can't do it as well as he can. Perhaps I won't be able to fly as well as she can . . . actually, flying doesn't sound like an ability one can safely do less well at. Ineptitude could be fatal.

She snorted then. It's worth a try, though. There has to be some benefit in this for me. It would be easier to like the idea of teaching this girl if I'm compensated for having to put off my search for the Scroll of the Gods.

The Twins had told her that they'd picked up rumours of an artefact that described the War of the Gods from the viewpoint of a long-dead goddess. Emerahl had decided to find it. Such a record might contain information useful to the Immortals. Information that might help them evade the gods' notice, or survive if they failed. It might even give them the means to fight back.

According to The Twins, scholars in Southern Ithania had been searching for the Scroll for decades. They had made progress lately, but were still lacking enough information to discover the Scroll's location. The Twins had assured her that these scholars were not about to find it soon, however. She had time enough to teach Auraya.

She moved to the jars and pots and began looking over the cures and preserved food.

But first I need to gather some food. And then I have to figure out a way to get Auraya to come here, and persuade her to stay for a while, all without arousing the gods' suspicions.

The ship climbed steadily up one side of a wave, paused for a moment at the crest, then plunged down the other side. Mirar gripped the railing, half terrified, half exhilarated. Spray constantly wet him, but he didn't retreat below deck. The wind and water were a welcome relief from the heat in the small passenger compartment.

And the old man doesn't need me around to remind him that he's dying, Mirar told himself.

He'd treated Rikken in one of the small ports along the Avven coast. Tough and wiry, the old merchant had grown anxious at Mirar's assessment of his failing health. It was not the news that he was dying that bothered him, but that he might not expire in his homeland.

So he had asked Mirar to accompany him on his final journey home to Dekkar, in the hope that having a healer on hand would ensure he returned alive. Mirar had agreed out of restlessness and curiosity. He had encountered no hostility toward Dreamweavers in Avven, but the unending sameness of the towns he had passed through had begun to bore him. The buildings were made of mud-coated brick like those in Sennon, but did not vary in colour or design. The people, men and women, wore drab clothing and covered their faces with veils. Even their music was monotonous.

I'm not looking for trouble, he told himself, remembering Emerahl's accusation during their last dream link. *I like to travel and explore. It's been a long time since I was free to do so.* One of the crew hurried past Mirar, nodding and smiling as their eyes met. *And these southerners are friendly,* Mirar added, nodding in return.

He looked toward the coast again. A low rock face had appeared the day before and now it soared higher than the cliffs of Toren. Ahead its shadow abruptly ended, and he was beginning to make out the reason.

Time passed slowly, the ship only allowing a glimpse of the coast at the crest of each wave. Mirar waited patiently. Then, between one wave and another, the end of the cliff came into view.

The high rock face turned abruptly inland, its sheer sides dropping to a low, forested land fringed by gentle beaches. The

change was extraordinary: bare rock to lush vegetation. The cliff continued to the east, folding back and forth into the distance, growing even higher than at the coast.

The sight was startling. It looked as if the land to the west had been levered up in an enormous slab, shifted forward and deposited on top of that of the east.

Is this natural? Mirar asked himself. *Or did some being – god or otherwise – heave up the land long ago?*

‘Dreamweaver?’

Mirar looked for the source of the voice, and found the crewman standing nearby, a rope in one hand. The other hand pointed toward the forested land.

‘Dekkar,’ the man explained. Mirar nodded, and the crewman went back to his work with the speed of long practice.

So this was Rikken’s homeland. Dekkar, southernmost of all countries, was famous for its jungle. The cliff was a natural barrier and border between it and Avven. As if obeying some local law, the seas had calmed. The crew put on more sail, and their pace quickened.

For the next few hours Mirar listened to the men talking, guessing at the meaning of their words. An unfamiliar language was a difficulty he hadn’t needed to overcome in a millennium. The dialects of Southern Ithania were descended from a branch of languages far older than Mirar, and so there were few words recognisably related to those of the main continent. So far he had learned enough basic words of the Avven tongue to get by, and from the Dreamweavers he’d encountered he had gleaned most of what he needed to work as a healer.

His own people were more numerous here than in the north. They did not exist in the numbers they once had, but the general populace appeared to accept and respect them, as they did the followers of other ‘cults’. Even so, he had avoided the few

Pentadrian Servants he had seen. Though local Dreamweavers assured him that Servants were tolerant of heathens, he was also a northerner. Those sick Pentadrians who had learned where he had come from had either refused his help, or reluctantly accepted it if he was in the company of local Dreamweavers. He did not expect the priests and priestesses of their religion to feel any differently.

The cliff that was the edge of Avven loomed over the forest like a great wave that threatened to crash down on Dekkar at any moment. As they sailed further south it withdrew slowly to become a bluish shadow as straight as the horizon. At intervals, buildings appeared along the coast. Standing on high stilts, they were constructed mainly of wood and connected by raised walkways, though here and there, usually in the midst of a town, a stone structure stood out. These stone edifices were painted black with the star symbol of the Five Gods outlined prominently in white.

The sun hung low on the horizon when the ship finally turned toward the shore. It tacked into a bay crowded with vessels and surrounded by the largest gathering of buildings Mirar had seen so far. The broad platforms the houses were built upon connected with neighbours via bridges of rope and slats or, occasionally, brightly painted wood.

Catching the talkative crewman's eye, Mirar glanced toward the town questioningly.

'Kave,' the man told him.

This was Dekkar's main city and Rikken's home. Mirar started toward the hold. The old merchant was being kept alive as much by his own determination as Mirar's help. Now that he was home, it was possible that his determination might fade too quickly to get him to shore.

So he stopped, surprised, when Rikken stepped out of the hold on wobbly legs. Yuri, the man's servant and constant

companion, was supporting one arm. Mirar stepped forward to take the other.

The old man's eyes sought the town and he gave a small sigh.

'The Sanctuary of Kave,' he said. Mirar recognised the word 'sanctuary', but could only guess at the mumble that followed. Yuri was frowning, but he didn't speak as Rikken moved to the rail. From somewhere a crewman produced a stool, and Rikken lowered himself onto it to wait.

The ship worked its way into the bay, dropped anchor, then much fuss was made of lowering Rikken gently into a boat. Mirar collected his bag from the hold and joined the old man.

Crewmen swung down to pick up the oars, and the little boat began to move toward the city. When they reached the wharf, Mirar and Yuri helped Rikken disembark. Mirar noted that the stilts the houses were built upon were whole tree trunks and together they looked like a sturdy, leafless forest.

Yuri arranged for two of the sailors to carry Rikken up a staircase to the platform above. Two others lifted up a litter that had been stowed on the boat. Once they had reached the interconnected platforms of the city, Rikken slumped onto the litter and the four sailors lifted it up. Mirar watched as they started in the direction of the Sanctuary. He bade the old man a silent farewell.

As if hearing Mirar's thoughts, the old man looked back at him and frowned. He croaked something and the men stopped.

'You come with us,' Yuri explained.

Mirar hesitated, then nodded. *I'll accompany him as far as the Sanctuary*, he told himself. *After that I'll take my leave and seek out the local Dreamweaver House.* He followed as the crew carried Rikken from one house veranda to another, watched by the inhabitants of Kave.

A maze of verandas and bridges followed. The sailors could

not carry the litter across the less stable rope bridges, so they were forced to take a winding path. Over an hour passed before they reached the Sanctuary.

It was a massive stepped pyramid, rising from the muddy soil below. Though squat, it had a heavy, sober presence which made even the more robust wooden houses seem small and temporary. Several Servants hovered around the outside. Mirar moved closer to the litter.

‘It has been an honour—’ he began.

Rikken turned to look at Mirar. His face was deathly pale and glistened with sweat. Mirar’s farewell died in his throat as he realised the old man was close to having another seizure. Yuri gave a low gasp and began urging the sailors to hurry.

As the group hastened toward the Sanctuary entrance, Mirar sighed and followed them. *I guess it’s time to find out how these Pentadrian Servants are going to react to a northern Dreamweaver.*

Servants moved to intercept then guide the merchant into the Sanctuary. Once in the cool interior the litter was lowered to the floor. The old man was clutching his chest now. Yuri looked at Mirar expectantly.

Mirar crouched beside Rikken and took his hand. Sending his mind forth, he sensed that the man’s heart was failing. Normally he would let the man die; his only malady was age. But he had been asked to ensure the man reached his home, and he was conscious that many black-robed men and women were watching him.

He drew magic and used it to strengthen the heart a little – enough to steady and restore its beat, but that was all. Rikken’s face regained its colour and his pained expression eased. He took a few deep breaths, then nodded at Mirar gratefully.

‘Thank you.’

Looking up, Mirar found a circle of Servants regarding him and Rikken curiously. Then an older male Servant stepped

through the others and smiled at the merchant. He spoke rapidly in Dekkan, and Rikken muttered a surly reply. The Servant laughed, then began ordering the other Servants about.

Clearly he's in charge around here, Mirar mused.

A chair was brought and Rikken helped into it. From the friendly manner of the old Servant and the merchant, Mirar guessed they knew each other well. He stepped back and looked around the room.

As he did, he could not help feeling a thrill of appreciation. The walls were covered in pictures made up of tiny fragments of glazed pottery, arranged so artfully that they suggested greater detail than they truly gave. The room was five-sided, each wall depicting one of the Pentadrian gods.

Sheyr, Hrun, Alor, Ranah and Sraal. Mirar had learned the names from the Dreamweavers he'd met. Unlike the Circlian gods, these preferred to keep to themselves, only appearing at momentous occasions. They let their followers run their own affairs, so long as they didn't stray too far from the central tenets of their religion.

Which makes one wonder how the Pentadrians came to invade Northern Ithania. Did they make that decision themselves, or is waging war one of those central tenets? They do train their priests in warfare, so I suppose the latter isn't impossible.

He frowned. *If that's true, then it doesn't bode well for Northern Ithania's future.*

'Dreamweaver,' Yuri called.

Mirar looked up and realised the old Servant was regarding him. The man began to speak, but Yuri interrupted him apologetically. The Servant listened, then his eyebrows rose and he looked at Mirar again.

'You from Northern Ithania?' he asked in Hanian.

Mirar blinked in surprise at the man's use of the northern language, then nodded. 'Yes.'

'How long you been in Southern Ithania?'

'A few months.'

'Do you like?'

Mirar smiled. How could any visitor to another land answer that question in any way but favourably?

'Yes. Your people are welcoming and friendly.'

The priest nodded. 'Dreamweavers not welcomed in north, I hear. Now it is more bad.' He looked at Rikken and smiled. 'Here we are not so fools.'

'No,' Mirar agreed. *More bad? Maybe I should contact Dreamweaver Elder Arleej tonight and ask if that's true – and why.*

'You do good work with this man. Thank you.'

Mirar inclined his head to acknowledge the thanks. As the priest turned to Rikken his expression became solemn. He spoke in the local tongue, then traced a star shape in the air. Rikken looked down like a chastised child and nodded with acceptance.

Taking a deep breath, Mirar let it out slowly. The Servant had been friendly and even respectful, despite knowing Mirar came from the north. Perhaps being a Dreamweaver was enough to make up for being a foreigner from an enemy land. Perhaps Servants were more sensible about these matters than ordinary Pentadrians.

Most likely there are just as many Servants inclined to be suspicious of me as ordinary Pentadrians. I've been lucky enough to meet one who isn't. He smiled grimly. *And the longer I stay in Southern Ithania, the better the chances I'll encounter one who is.*