

AMÁNE
OF
TERAVINEA
THE CHOSEN ONE



D. María Trimble

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To my dad, who met with his ancestors before I could finish the series. I'll meet you on the other side when it's my time and let you know how it ends.

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*Behold the mighty Dragon hatch,
It has chosen one, has found a match.
By gazing into eyes that spin,
The Chosen One will be drawn in.
Like lightning strike the venomous fangs,
The Chosen's life in balance hangs.
Burning venom spreads like fire,
The hope to die is the One's desire.
If both shall live, then they will soar,
Together linked ... forevermore.*

~ Dragon Hatching Song

CHAPTER ONE

I raised my sword to block and deflect yet another blow. The dark armored lord set upon me throwing strike after strike. My breath became short and raspy as I struggled for air. With no time to thrust or lunge, I could only parry his attacks. I couldn't hold him much longer. His bulk towered over me as he pushed me back. Back toward the precipice that would finish the battle. *Why hadn't help arrived?*

Sweat stung my eyes, my head throbbed where the flat side of his sword had made contact. My muscles no longer burned, but had reached the stage where they would no longer obey. The end was close. The void from the edge of the cliff echoed behind me as I lost ground.

With a gleam of death in his eye, my enemy lunged for his final blow. I stepped back but my boot couldn't find footing. The ground broke away and I tumbled backwards. I felt the swish of his sword as it just missed taking off my head. Helpless, I grabbed at nothing — both arms beat the air. My stomach leaped to my throat as I plummeted into the chasm.

From out of nowhere a large fiery dragon swooped in. Its talons wrapped around my waist as it snatched me from the air. At that same instant, I jolted upright in my bed. My nightclothes stuck to the sweat that drenched my body. My breathing matched that of my dream. The throbbing in my head was real.

Lately, my dreams always ended the same — rescued by a dragon. But there haven't been any dragons in our skies for a long time. In truth, I'd never seen one in my nearly fifteen years. That fact did not lessen my hope of the future for which I longed — one filled with weaponry, swordplay and a distinct journey all my own — which included dragons. Ever since I can remember, I'd aspired to be brave and strong; to have a mission in life; to be worthy of a quest. But one problem plagued me — I was born a girl.

CHAPTER TWO

“Amáne,” my mother called. “It’s a market day. Get up. I need you to help me load up the cart and hook up Ezel.” Ezel was our donkey.

My mother, Catriona, made fine ceramic utensils, bowls and plates that she sold in the marketplace. Her wares were not unknown throughout the kingdom. Her family’s guild had made the tableware for the House of Drekinn, the royal family that had ruled Teravinea for the last several hundred years — before Galtero seized the throne by treachery.

We rode into town together and she dropped me off at the Dragon’s Fang Tavern. It was a classroom by day and a pub by night. People were frugal in our township of Dorsal. They saw no purpose in a building where the sole use was for academics. A pub was a perfect location — students occupied the place from early morning until early afternoon, at which time the pub patrons would start trickling in. They caroused until the wee hours of the morning — vacating just in time for the students the next day. It worked.

Like other girls of Teravinea, I was educated. In addition to reading and writing, we were expected to learn our history songs and ballads, although most of them had been altered and had lost their beauty and power. They had deviated from the beautiful works our ancestors had written. My mother took it upon herself to teach me the original songs. I was thankful for her efforts because it is in ignorance that we lose our direction.

Entering the tavern, I took my place on a bench at one of the long tables. The stench was enough to aggravate my progressing headache. The straw on the floor had probably been there when the last dragon lived — which was a few years before I was born — and had only been added to instead of changed. The spilled ale, wine, urine and whatever scraps had fallen on the ground, along with the heat and the rare humidity, made the odor nearly unbearable. It certainly didn’t improve my mood.

A new teacher arrived in town only a few weeks before. My mother contended he had been sent to Dorsal from the City of Teravinea to try to bend or break us. Evidently our previous teacher lacked in forceful persuasion. We were unwilling to move too quickly into accepting the usurping King Galtero, never mind he had been on the throne for over seventeen years. If this teacher could indoctrinate the younger

generation, in a matter of a short time we would forget our ancestors and our history, and yield completely to Galtero's corrupt rule.

My headache refused to relinquish its hold — I struggled with it for most of the day through writing and calculating figures. I just wanted to close my eyes and make it go away, but found myself, instead, staring at the confusion of carvings in the table. Decades and decades of "art," some quite rude, scarred the long tables of the Dragon's Fang Tavern. Lost in thought, I contemplated the unsung stories of the people who had sat here.

The sudden silence in the room brought me out of my musing. To my horror, I realized the teacher had called upon me. His angry glare confirmed he had tried more than once to get my attention.

"I beg your pardon, Teacher," I said, standing up too quickly, which caused my head to feel like it would explode. "I didn't hear you."

"I asked you to sing the ballad of *The Battle of Sregor's Field*," he said, "which I hope you have been studying, as I gave you two weeks in which to learn it."

I felt the heat rise in my face. Being called to sing in front of the class always made my stomach churn. I became paralyzed whenever attention was drawn to me. But I had to comply with Teacher's request. To my consolation, the *The Battle of Sregor's Field* was one of my favorites — I knew all of the verses.

"Yes, Master Teacher." My hand clutched the table to steady myself. I closed my eyes so I could imagine I was alone, and began to sing in a shaky voice.

The ballad described a battle that took place in a field owned by Hon Sregor, near the City of Teravinea. It told of how Nara, the last dragon rider, and her famous dragon, Torin, had swooped into the battle at the last moment when things looked bad for King Emeric. Flaming the forward line of the enemy army, Torin and Nara gave King Emeric's soldiers the inspiration they needed to rally in one last heroic effort. With Nara and Torin's help, they turned the tide of the battle and allowed victory for King Emeric.

I had not gotten far into the ballad when Teacher shouted, "Stop singing! Those are not the proper words."

"Excuse me. With all due respect, sir, these are the proper words, written by a minstrel who was present at that battle. My mother told me."

"Don't be insolent, girl. Now sing the proper words."

I felt the eyes of my fellow students — their interest sparked in our exchange — alert and eager to hear my response.

Under his breath I heard Teacher say, "This is the result of a child being raised solely by her mother. There should be a law against that."

Only with extraordinary effort did I manage to hold my tongue. How dare he insult my mother. I started again, and sang it the way my mother had taught me.

"Silence!" He pounded his fist on the table. "Those are the antiquated words and you will not sing it as such. King Galtero has forbidden it."

Fully aware of how he expected me to sing it, I refused to offend my ancestors. The ballad had been revised and completely left Nara and Torin out in an effort to brainwash the youth with the lie that dragons never existed. Instead, it boasted the battle was won only by the intervention of King Emeric's step-uncle — Galtero. I would pierce my foot with my dagger before I would sing anything in honor of that

man.

“Now, Amáne, will you sing it correctly?” He was losing his patience. I had already lost mine.

“Yes, Master Teacher, I will sing it correctly.” My eyes blazed as I locked eyes with him. My head pounded and I began again. I sung it — the way it was originally written.

The girl beside me gasped.

The teacher charged at me with the stick he was in the habit of carrying and struck my arm, leaving a welt. He roared, “Out, you contemptuous girl! You may not set foot in my class again until your mother comes and speaks with me. I want a written apology from both you and your mother.”

I was more than happy to leave. I didn’t care if I ever stepped foot in his class again. Gathering my satchel, I stormed out without giving him the satisfaction of my tears, or the acknowledgment of the painful sting he had inflicted on my arm.

CHAPTER THREE

Being born here in Dorsal is truly the only way anyone could love and understand this place. The furthest township from the throne, we have our traditions passed on from generation to generation. We're loathe to part with them any time soon, regardless of the efforts of our current king — or any teacher intent on changing our ways. Our allegiance, in reality, should be to King Galtero, but our allegiance in our hearts remains with King Emeric of the House of Drekin, who has rested with his ancestors since before I was born.

Perched at the edge of the desert, Dorsal is a modest seaside township on the southernmost tip of the Kingdom of Teravinea. It overlooks a large bay of sapphire blue, dotted with a scattering of islands — an incomparable view.

Not to be misled by its beauty, our seemingly alluring corner of the kingdom truthfully presents a harsh environment with draconian shifts in the weather. One minute the bay shines as smooth as glass, the air dead calm with unbearable heat. Then, without warning, white caps appear — breaking the tranquility of the sea. Suddenly, the furious wind lashes out with a vengeance — like a scorned female who has lost control of her temper. Anything not secured is tossed about, only to be found battered and broken at quite a distance from its point of origin. Then, satisfied with the punishment inflicted, her anger abates with no apology. We call this wind a Valaira. She commands our respect and is never to be underestimated.

On more than one occasion I heard my mother lament the fact she named me Amáne and not Valaira.

Despite the weather, and our small size, our township boasts quite a bustling location. Merchant ships still find it worthwhile to gamble on the temperament of a Valaira and enter our harbor, depositing their goods in trade for our fine crafts as well as salt and other delicacies of the sea.

It was just the two of us, my mother, Catriona, and myself, living in a small cottage outside the walls of Dorsal, at the southwest end of the township. My father, Duer, left on a mission for the king shortly after I was conceived. He never returned. Personally, the fact he was involved in this king's business left me feeling fortunate I never knew him — King Galtero will be the ruin of our once-great kingdom. Duer's affiliation with him, and his abandonment of my mother and me, would be his life's

greatest regret if he were still alive — and I were to meet him face to face. I vowed he would have no mercy from me. My mother, knowing my feelings, didn't speak often about Duer, but when she did, it was without animosity. She never fully got over him. I think she always had hope he would return. I, however, shall never forgive him for deserting us.

Once girls reached fifteen, most parents began to look for suitors for their daughters. Thankfully, my mother didn't believe in that archaic practice. Instead, she supported my inclinations and did what she could to make me feel like I wasn't a complete oddity for my gender. We never made public my attraction for learning the arts of weaponry and defense.

I didn't have many female acquaintances as my interests varied too greatly from those of the other girls. There was a group I would join occasionally. We wandered the marketplace and flirted with the handsome young men who tended the colorful stalls. We were thrilled if we caught the eye of a rich young foreign merchant. Then I would enjoy their fantasies as they dreamed of being whisked away to live forever in a palace in some exotic kingdom.

One of the girls, Fiona, whose disposition matched the sweetness of her looks, was the closest of my acquaintances. Although we didn't spend much time together, we were comfortable in each other's company. I could more or less be myself. But, there remained one thing of which I was extremely envious of Fiona — her younger twin sisters, Rio and Mila. Twins were rare in our community because of the high mortality rate, unless they were delivered by the Healer. It just so happened my mother assisted the Healer in their birth. Rio and Mila were about five years younger than I. Being an only child, I longed for siblings. They were my ideal of the perfect sisters — little ones who would look up to their older sister with such love and admiration in their eyes. It pained me to know I would never be the recipient of that kind of devotion.

Unusually perceptive, not much got past Fiona's discerning eye, even when there were quite a few of us together. It was just the day before our group had stopped at every stall selling silk, ribbons and lace, for which I had very little enthusiasm. My inattention was not lost on her. However, when we passed a stall with an inventory of swords, partisans, polearms and daggers, I would hang back and feast my eyes on these masterpieces of the cutler. Then my own fantasies formed in my head. Instead of being whisked away by a handsome foreign merchant, I would travel throughout the kingdom, join in raging battles to save lives and put all things to right.

"Amáne," Fiona brought me out of my reverie. "You would do better paying attention to the ribbons and lace — you'll never find a suitor looking for a wife who wields a blade."

"Unless it's a six-inch blade to cut the meat and vegetables for his meal," piped in one of the other girls. We all laughed, but I kept it to myself I was not the least bit interested in finding a husband.

I had one male acquaintance, Kail, the grinder's youngest son, who was a year or so less than I. I referred to most of my peers only as acquaintances, because "friend" was a much more powerful relationship than I held with anyone in Dorsal. Only my mother deserved that title. Kail was a rebellious young man, and it seemed he lived to fight authority. This worked out to my advantage as he was only too happy to

take issue against the king's edict of no swordplay for females. This gave opportunity for him to dissent. He happily taught me the art of sword fighting. We practiced most afternoons behind my mother's workshop. She made sure to keep a close eye on us. She held some concern at how much larger and stronger Kail was than I — and at his lack of restraint when we fought. We never used metal swords for our practice. Instead we'd spar with the wooden ones called wasters. Our practice often ended in large bruises for me, but I could smugly say he never left our sessions unscathed. In my efforts to avoid bruises, I learned very quickly. I knew I could learn more from fighters who were more skilled than myself — and Kail was quite capable in the defensive arts. Again, it was to my benefit, as my lessons in self defense were more enhanced. What hurts, teaches.

My mother also offered verbal lessons and critiques to help me improve. I loved that she also had an interest in defense. Her knowledge of weaponry was impressive.

Although I preferred the masculine education and conventions, I was completely satisfied with the gender into which I was born. Never would I be that helpless maiden in search of a husband to take care of me. If and when I finally decide to find someone, contrary to what Fiona might think, he would be someone who accepts a wife who wields a blade. But such a topic was so far in my future, it was almost non-existent. I never wasted much time or effort dwelling upon it.

CHAPTER FOUR

I didn't think it possible my day could get any worse. Storming out of the Dragon's Fang Tavern, I made a concerted effort to hold my tears until later, when I could confide in my mother. Heading to her stall in the marketplace, I hoped she would want to leave the market early. When I arrived, I found her booth empty and sealed up for the day.

The man who sold teas and spices in the neighboring stall noticed me as I stood before her deserted booth. "Amáne, your mother went home early. She said she wasn't feeling well."

Alarmed, I rushed away.

Disregarding my headache, I ran most of the way home. I burst in the door of our cottage and found her in bed, wincing in pain. Something was seriously wrong and the sight of her pale face terrified me. She was my rock and my strength, and was not supposed to get sick ... she was my mother.

"Mother," my voice trembled, "what's wrong? I'm going back into town for the Healer."

"No, Amáne, that's not necessary, yet. Please, just stay with me and let me rest. If I'm no better tomorrow, then you can go first thing in the morning. I'll be okay tonight." She calmed my uneasiness. It couldn't be as serious as I had feared. Needless to say, I didn't burden her with the events of my horrible day. I tucked the incident away in a safe place to bring out later when she felt better.

At the break of day, after a feverish night for my mother, she sent me on my way for the Healer. I'm small for my age, but I'm fast and I love to run. I decided I would get there more quickly on foot than if I had ridden Ezel, our donkey. Running in a gown, however, posed problems for me, so whenever I took a path where I would meet with few passers by, I would tie a sash around my waist and pull the back of my skirt forward through my legs, bringing it up and tucking it into the sash. It made it much easier to run. So, I tucked up my skirts and headed for the Healer's apothecary shop. I went as fast as I could, running most of the way.

The Healer — the only name I've ever known her by — lived at the most northeastern corner of Dorsal, inside the town walls. I had known her all my life and her age was debatable — at times she seemed ancient and at other times she gave the

impression she was as young as my mother. A highly respected member of our township, I suspected she was well known throughout the kingdom. Her past was shrouded in mystery. The Healer took care of the ills and injuries of the inhabitants of Dorsal, but yet there was more to her — a certain vigilance or protectiveness about her. I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

I turned in at the east gate, and zigzagged through an alley, and then one more lane, finally arriving at her apothecary shop, which took up the front room of her large residence. She had a substantial expanse of land that started at the lane on which her shop opened. Then it stretched back and butted up against the cliffs to the north.

I charged in the door, breathless, and found her assistant, Gallen, at the front counter grinding herbs with a mortar and pestle. I had known and loved this man all my life — he was the closest to a father figure I'd ever had. Many hours were spent in this front room of the apothecary shop as I watched him prepare herbs and seeds. It was he who had acquainted me with the dragons who had been the heart of Teravinea. He told of how dragons hatched and linked to their riders. Along with those of my mother, his accounts had kept the lore of dragons alive for me. The fact he lamented their absence was not lost on me, but he never shared his theories regarding their disappearance.

“Good morning, Gallen. I need to see the Healer, please.” I didn't waste time with the formalities and manners of greeting him. I knew he would understand my abruptness. Before I finished my sentence, the Healer came in through a door at the far end of the room.

“Greetings, Healer. Please, my mother has sent me. She said to tell you that she is now at the stage you discussed with her, and she will need to see you.” I didn't really know what my message meant, but delivered it as instructed.

The Healer was a very good friend of my mother's — and had been such long before I was born. I caught a deep sadness in her eyes at my message. She exhaled quickly and her shoulders dropped. I got the feeling she was expecting me.

Because of the urgency of the situation, the Healer announced, “Meet me in the courtyard. We'll take Thunder and you'll ride with me.” She quickly exited the way she had come.

Confused by her haste, I looked with shock at Gallen and was met with sympathetic eyes. He remained silent and with a hand of comfort on my shoulder, he led me back through the kitchen to the courtyard. Their behavior had only solidified my terror that my mother's illness was life-threatening — they didn't convey much hope. I refused to believe it.

Thunder was the Healer's beautiful grey stallion that ran like the wind. I used to imagine he could outrun a Valaira. No one that I knew of had ever ridden on Thunder, besides the Healer. On any other day I would have been elated with the expectation of being the only one to ever fly with them — which was the appearance they gave as they glided over the land. But this day did not allow any excitement, I was too busy building a corner of my mind to hide in — denial was my only hope.

The Healer and Thunder rapidly approached from the barn. Upon reaching the courtyard, the Healer put her arm down. Hardly slowing she locked wrists with me, and with ease swung me up behind her. “Hold on!” she shouted as she gave Thunder the reins.

I wrapped my arms around her waist and off we shot. Her horse was well-named. His powerful legs pumping and his hooves striking the ground echoed like peals of thunder. My stomach lurched and I bit my lip to keep the scream in my throat that was fighting for release. The experience was exhilarating, but again, in a dulled version, as I couldn't allow myself to enjoy it. We arrived at our cottage before I even realized where we were.

I waited alone outside while the Healer spent time with my mother. Finally, the old woman came out, looking most ancient. She turned to me with eyes full of sorrow and pity.

“Your mother has some things she needs to tell you.”

She gave me a lingering hug, walked slowly to Thunder and was gone before I could ask anything.

In terror, I rushed to my mother's bedside. She smiled weakly and beckoned me closer, taking my hand in hers. I couldn't hold my tears back, I couldn't face what, in fact, I knew was inevitable. I let out a moan of despair, and tried to will away the fact I knew my mother was preparing to rest with our ancestors — how could this be happening? Panic and anger fought for command of my emotions.

If I closed my eyes it would go away. It was my standard solution to situations of which I wanted no part. She waited patiently while I struggled for composure — to get a hold of my anger, which continued to be my own worst enemy. If I lived for a hundred years I'm not sure I would ever be able to fully master it.

I had every right, I thought, *to be angry*. It was not fair that my best friend, my mother, was being taken from me. In truth, I had no choice but to resolve myself to that conclusion — she will be joining our ancestors. Finally, with great effort, I was prepared to listen to what she had to say.

“Amáne, my only child — sometimes as unruly as water — most of the time obedient — always my strength. I've known for a while now I would soon be leaving this life. I'm sorry I kept it from you, but I didn't want you to have to suffer any sooner than necessary.”

My heart threatened to break. I earnestly hoped this was one of my bad dreams, and I would wake up soon to the smell of her bread baking in the oven.

“Your fifteenth birthday is quickly approaching. Don't worry, I haven't made marriage arrangements for you.” A corner of her mouth turned up as she tried to make this as light as possible. I breathed a sigh of relief — my mother knew me too well. “But I've discussed your care with the Healer and she insists you stay with her. She has been a close friend and soon you'll understand our friendship. I know you will continue to make me proud.”

She took a shallow breath, “I want to give you my blessing. I see a monumental change coming in your life, a fire burning in your soul, a time of decision and perhaps danger.” My mother was somewhat prophetic and not often wrong. “Be sincere of heart, Amáne. Accept whatever befalls you, in great misfortune be patient; for in fire gold is refined.

“Now you're nearly of age. I'm sincerely sorry I will not be able to watch you turn into the beautiful young lady you're already becoming. You'll need to use your intuition and your intelligence in deciding which paths you choose — remember to follow your heart. In your resolutions, please do not neglect your own happiness. Your

life is in your hands. Direct it well.”

Her weak smile faded and her expression turned serious, “I want you to know, my sweet Amáne,” she paused to make sure I was truly listening to her. “You need not worry about me. I’m at peace with this and I will see you on the other side with our ancestors when it is your time. Do not forget that, my precious daughter.”

She is at peace with this? What about me? I selfishly thought. *I’m the one being left alone!*

And then she finished off with one devastating request. “But the one thing I ask of you, please, I do not want you present when I take my last breath.”

“No!” I cried out. This request was more than I could take. “I am not leaving your side. I’ll be here until the end. You can’t tell me not to be here, Mother, please!”

No more was said on that subject.

So, the days went by, slowly creeping one day after the next. I struggled to exist as my world got darker, but I couldn’t let my mother see my sorrow. She was at peace with her fate. I wasn’t, but couldn’t let it show each day she held on became another day I couldn’t bear. I put on a brave face in her presence and took care of her as she slowly drifted closer to our ancestors. I read to her and talked to her to pass the long hours, but still she remained here in this life.

Every few days the Healer would arrive on Thunder to check in on us. Hoping knowledge of what my mother was going through would help me in my suffering, she explained, “The body will shut down slowly, as each organ finally gives in. Crossing to our ancestors is different with each person. Some go quickly and for some reason, others do not. It is a mystery.”

She advised me to keep talking to my mother, because even if she couldn’t respond, she could hear me from whatever path her departing spirit traveled. I told my mother that I loved her and accepted that she was leaving, then assured her I would be fine. She taught me well, to persevere until I achieved my goal — whatever I set my mind to. We were fighters, she and I.

I silently cried myself to sleep every night, but it was a fitful sleep — it did not restore or revitalize. Instead, I tossed and turned, listened to my mother’s labored breathing and wondered which breath would be her last. But she would not let go. My agony increased.

One day, no different than the rest that had dawned grey and dreary, the Healer came to visit. She held me in her arms for a few minutes and then looked at me closely. She could see I was not doing well.

“Amáne, I would like to ask a favor of you. First, you need to clean yourself up. You look a fright, child. Go wash your face and change your clothes. What would your mother say if she could see how you looked now?” She held up a small leather pouch and said, “Please take this to Dorjan, the blacksmith’s home. Their baby is sick and these are some herbs to help him. I will sit with Catriona and watch. It shouldn’t take you long. Now go.”

“What?” I asked with less civility than I should have. Was I to believe that while I was numb with grief, this woman dares to ask me to leave my dying mother’s side to take some herbs to a sick baby?

“I can’t do this! They live all the way on the other side of Dorsal, outside the west wall. I can’t leave my mother when any moment could be her last. I won’t chance

it,” I said, trying in vain to control my anger. I realized with increased remorse, the disrespect I directed toward the Healer.

I was mortified by my bad behavior, yet not enough to hold my tongue. Surprisingly, she didn’t reprimand me as I deserved, but simply tilted her head, looked with pity into my eyes, and said gently yet incontestably, “Amáne, go clean yourself up.”

I sidled off in shame and went to make myself presentable to deliver the herbs. Taken aback, I stared in shock when I saw my reflection in the glass. My eyes had dark circles under them and my unbrushed hair hung in a tangled brown mass, as twisted as the sage brush that grew outside. I hadn’t realized how bad I looked. I scrubbed myself, brushed my hair and changed my clothes.

Back at my mother’s bedside, I took her cold hand and put it to my cheek where a fresh flow of tears was unleashed. Explaining to her what I was about to do and that the Healer would stay with her, I kissed the palm of her hand and then her forehead. I told her I would be back soon. Feeling an ever-so-small twitch from her hand, I knew she understood. I took the herbs from the Healer, charged out the door, tucked up my skirts, and ran toward the blacksmith’s home.

As I ran, I almost let myself enjoy the feel of the wind on my face. My hair blew in long waves behind me. The Healer was a wise woman. I don’t know how long I had been in that house, suffering. I actually felt better than I had for days — it may have even been weeks since I came home to find my mother in her bed.

I delivered the herbs to the thankful mother, and felt good about it. I knew it was something my mother would have encouraged me to do. She would never hesitate to help a needy family, no matter the sacrifice to her.

As I stepped back on the path to head home, I heard a dog’s mournful howl in the distance. My heart skipped a beat and my stomach twisted in a knot. I ran faster than I had ever run before. The tears started again, stinging against my cheeks as the wind hit the salty wetness that flowed from my eyes.

I bounded up the path and rushed into our cottage. The old Healer’s eyes told me all. It was over. My mother was now at rest. A pressure that started at the bottom of my lungs released itself in a wail drawn from the very depths of my heart. At that moment, even a Valaira could not have muffled the sound that came from me.

I ran to her bedside and threw my arms around her now cold body. “Mother. Mother. No. Don’t leave me.” Although I thought I was ready to accept this moment, no amount of preparation could possibly lessen the devastation of this ultimate separation. My body shook with uncontrollable weeping. I cried until I was spent. My sobs continued, even though there were no more tears left in me. My mother was gone. I had never experienced anything so shattering.

The Healer lit her herbs and candles around the room, softly sang her dying songs and waited patiently until I was silent. Mother was her good friend — this death was obviously difficult for the Healer as well. She took me by my shoulders, gently guided me away, and lovingly pulled the burial cloth over my mother’s now peaceful face. My grief renewed, she held me as my shoulders heaved while I sobbed dry tears. Staying with me for quite a while, she watched and waited until I at last calmed down.

She had come prepared with her donkey and cart to take my mother away. It is our custom for the Healer to take the deceased, to prepare the body for crossing, and

then to cremate it. Once a year, when the desert flowers bloom, we have a gathering in the fields outside the south wall to celebrate the lives of those who had passed that year. The deceased's family is then given the urn that contains their loved one. It's a beautiful celebration, but much easier if it was not your own mother's ashes being handed to you. I was not looking forward to the next Life Celebration Gathering.

Another solemn practice we have in Teravinea is called a memorial journey. It's a pilgrimage in honor and thanksgiving for our loved ones. The family must decide on a location significant to the deceased, and travel there to sing our memorial songs. It could be far or close, of short duration, or long. As it was only Catriona and myself and no other family, I would make my memorial journey alone. I wasn't in the least opposed to going by myself.

I assisted as the Healer dressed my mother in her favorite gown. The one I will always remember her in — the blue one. She was fond of saying it was her favorite, because it matched my eyes. We gently lifted her into a box that waited on the cart. The colorful cloth lining will forever echo in my memory. The Healer slowly let the lid down, as I caught my last glimpse of my best friend, my mother.

Trudging back inside, the Healer followed me. She put a hand on my shoulder and turned me to face her, "Won't you ride with me back to my home and begin your stay with me? It would be better that you don't stay alone tonight. Also, if you need me, I would be honored to accompany you in your memorial journey, when you decide to go. I've always considered you and your mother as family."

"No thank you, Healer, I'll be fine by myself here ... and when I make my journey. I'll come and stay with you afterwards." I wanted nothing more than to be alone with my misery.

She hesitated and appeared to struggle with my decision, but then relented. I felt she left something unsaid, but with a look of intense sorrow, she left my home and climbed onto her cart. She clicked to her donkey and rode off slowly. I stood at my doorway and watched until the cart was no longer visible as my mother — my life, was taken away.

At that moment I forced myself to face the fact I was truly alone. I turned, closed the door, and looked around our humble little home as I tried in vain to fight off the approaching depression. Maybe I should have gone with the Healer.

My breath then caught in my throat. I could barely breathe. The stark realization hit me as suddenly as a Valaira — Mother hung on for so long because of me! It was my fault she wouldn't let her spirit go. Her words echoed in my head, "... please, I do not want you present when I take my last breath."

A wave of guilt and desolation spiraled around me as darkness wrapped me in its embrace. I had not honored her dying wish. I never left her side after she said that. Not until the wise old Healer gave me the bag of herbs to take to the sick baby. The Healer, for whom I had shown such disrespect, knew my mother didn't want me to witness her last breath. She sent me away, so Catriona could finally rest. This truth was more than I could bear. I crumpled to the floor, wrapped my arms around my legs and curled into a ball in the corner of the room, succumbing to despair. I lost track of time — I didn't care if it was day or night. It was all the same to me as I headed down a tunnel of shadows and nightmares. My mother wandered in and out of my dreams as if she was attempting to lighten my heavy load. She drew near to me with a loving