

PREFACE

*From the hand of Teacher Prahm, Imperial librarian and tutor
of His Majesty, Kygo, rightful heir to the Imperial throne.*

A WISE MAN once wrote: *In war, truth is the first casualty.* It is for this reason that I write a true account of the seizure of the Imperial palace and throne by High Lord Sethon, a day after the death of his brother, our revered Emperor of Peace and Harmony.

I was present during the army's brutal attack on the palace and saw many of my eunuch brethren slaughtered, although they held no weapons. I saw the harem invaded, the Imperial Guard cut down, and the royal household assaulted. To my eternal grief, I also saw the infant second heir to the throne and his mother murdered by High Lord Sethon himself. It has been officially reported that Prince Kygo—the first heir, who was anointed Pearl Emperor before his uncle's savage coup—was

killed in the battle. However, no body has been found, and I have heard that he escaped with the remnants of his guard; may this be a truth from the gods' lips.

I can confirm a report that Lord Ido—the Rat Dragoneye—was instrumental in killing almost all of his fellow Dragoneyes and their apprentices in the quest for their power. I saw the bodies, and we have all felt the tremors in the earth and the thunder across the sky that is no doubt the sorrow of their ten dragons. Now the only Dragoneye Lords alive are the treacherous Lord Ido and the new Mirror Dragoneye, Lord Eon, who was seen escaping the Palace. Lord Ido's apprentice—Dillon—is also believed to have escaped. It is not known if Dillon shares his master's lust for power, but if he is indeed alive, he may become the Rat Dragoneye very soon. Lord Ido tried to double-cross High Lord Sethon and is now in the Imperial cells. It is said he cannot call his power and is at the mercy of the High Lord's rage.

No one knows the whereabouts of Lord Eon. I pray that he is hidden far from the City. I know that he was under the protection of Ryko, one of the elite Shadow Men guards, and Lady Dela, a twin soul with a man's body and a woman's spirit, whose resourcefulness is legendary among the courtiers. It can only be hoped that their combined skills will keep the young Dragoneye safe. Amid all the fear and lies circulating the Palace, a foul whisper has arisen that Lord Eon, a brother eunuch, is in fact a girl. I have been in the presence of the new lord, and his delicate features and frame are usual in one of our kind who has made the sacrifice so young. I mention this rumor only to stop the profane idea of a female dragoneye from spreading

through our wounded land and creating more panic.

I do not know how our Empire can survive with only two Dragoneyes and their beasts to control the elements, especially when one Dragoneye is an imprisoned traitor and the other an untrained boy. Although Lord Eon is quick and clever, he cannot control the earth energies by himself. For as long as can be remembered, it has taken the combined power of eleven Dragoneyes and their beasts to nurture the land. When the missing twelfth dragon—the Mirror Dragon—returned from exile and chose Lord Eon as the first Mirror Dragoneye in five hundred years, it was seen as an omen of renewed strength and good fortune. I pray that this is so, and that the return of the Mirror Dragon to the Circle of Twelve spirit beasts is not an omen of annihilation. A resistance force has long been gathering against High Lord Sethon's brutal war-mongering, but now they will have to stand against the entire army, and such a struggle will tear our land apart.

I will endeavour to get this account out of the palace. If you are reading this, I beg you to spread its truth as far as you can. I also ask that you offer a prayer to the goddess of death for my spirit. One of my eunuch brothers has betrayed me to High Lord Sethon and told the false emperor of my close association with his nephew. I am cornered in my library, and although I know nothing, I will soon be just another tortured body among the many in the High Lord's search for the Pearl Emperor and Lord Eon.

—Written by Prah, son of Mikor,
on this twentieth day of the new Rat Dragon year

CHAPTER ONE

THE DRAGONS WERE CRYING.

I stared across the choppy, gray sea and concentrated on the soft sound within me. For three daybreaks, ever since we had fled the conquered palace, I had stood on this same rock and felt the keening of the ten bereft dragons. Usually it was only a faint wail beneath the golden song of my own Mirror Dragon. This morning it was stronger. Harsher.

Perhaps the ten spirit beasts had rallied from their grief and returned to the Circle of Twelve. I took a deep breath and eased into the unnerving sensation of mind-sight. The sea before me blurred into surging silver as my focus moved beyond the earthly plane, into the pulsing colors of the parallel energy world. Above me, only two of the twelve dragons were in their celestial domains: Lord Ido's blue Rat Dragon in the north-northwest, the beast's massive body arched in pain, and my own red dragon in

the east. The Mirror Dragon. The queen. The other ten dragons had still not returned from wherever spirit beasts fled to grieve.

The Mirror Dragon turned her huge head toward me, the gold pearl under her chin glowing against her crimson scales. Tentatively, I formed our shared name in my mind—*Eona*—and called her power. Her answer was immediate: a rush of golden energy that cascaded through my body. I rode the rising joy, reveling in the union. My sight split between earth and heaven: around me were rocks and sea and sky, and at the same time, through her great dragon eyes, the beach surged below in timeless rhythms of growth and decay. Silvery pinpoints of *Hua*—the energy of life—were scurrying, swimming, burrowing across a swirling rainbow landscape. Deep within me, a sweet greeting unfurled—the wordless touch of her dragon spirit against mine—leaving the warm spice of cinnamon on my tongue.

Suddenly, the rich taste soured. We both sensed a wall of wild energy at the same time, a rushing, shrieking force that was coming straight for us. Never before had we felt such driven pain. Crushing pressure punched through our golden bond and loosened my earthly grip. I staggered across uneven rock that seemed to fall away from me. The Mirror Dragon screamed, rearing to meet the boiling wave of need. I could feel no ground, no wind, no earthly plane. There was only the whirling, savage clash of energies.

“Eona!”

A voice, distant and alarmed.

The crashing sorrow tore at my hold on earth and heaven. I was spinning, the bonds of mind and body stretched and splitting. I had to get out or I would be destroyed.

“Eona! Are you all right?”

It was Dela’s voice—an anchor from the physical world. I grabbed at it and wrenched myself free of the roaring power. The world snapped back into sand and sea and sunlight. I doubled over, gagging on a bitter vinegar that was cut with grief—the taste of the ten bereft dragons.

They were back. Attacking us. Even as I thought it, a deeper part of me knew I was wrong—they would not attack their queen. Yet I had felt their *Hua* pressing upon us. Another kind of terror seized me. Perhaps this was the start of the String of Pearls, the weapon that brought together the power of all twelve dragons—a weapon born from the death of every Dragoneye except one.

But that was just a story, and I was not the last Dragoneye standing. The Rat Dragon was still in the celestial circle, and that meant at least one Rat Dragoneye was still alive, whether it be Lord Ido, or his apprentice, Dillon. I shivered—somehow I knew Lord Ido was not dead, although I could not explain my certainty. It was as if the man was watching me, waiting for his chance to seize my power again. He believed another story about the String of Pearls—that the union of his power and body with mine would create the weapon. He had nearly succeeded in forcing that union, too. Sometimes I could still feel his iron grip around my wrists.

“Are you all right?” Dela called again.

She was at the top of the steep path, and although she was unable to see or sense the dragons, she knew something was wrong. I held up my trembling hand, hoping she could not see the afterwash of fear. “I’m fine.”

Yet I had left my dragon to face that bitter wave of need. There was little I could do to help, but I could not leave her alone. Gathering courage with my next breath, I focused my mind-sight and plunged back into the energy world.

The crashing, rolling chaos was gone; the celestial plane was once more a smooth ebb and flow of jewel colors. The Mirror Dragon looked calmly at me, her attention brushing across my spirit. I longed to feel her warmth again, but I let her presence pass by. If our communion had somehow called the grieving dragons from their exile, I could not risk their return. I could barely direct my own dragon’s power, let alone manage the force of ten spirit-beasts reeling from the brutal slaughter of their Dragoneyes. And if these sorrowing creatures were now lying in wait for our every union, I had to find a way to fend off their desolation or I would never learn the dragon arts that controlled the elements and nurtured the land.

In his place in the north-northwest, the blue dragon was still curled in agony. Yesterday I had tried to call his power, as I had in the palace, but this time he did not respond. No doubt the beast’s pain was caused by Lord Ido. As was all our pain.

With a sigh, I once again released my hold on the energy plane. The pulsing colors shifted back into the solid shapes and

constant light of the beach, clearing to reveal Dela’s approaching figure. Even dressed as a fisherman, and with her arm in a sling, she walked like a court lady, a graceful sway at odds with the rough tunic and trousers. Since she was a *Contraire*—a man who chose to live as a woman—her return to manly clothes and habits had seemed like an easy disguise. Not so. But then, who was I to talk? After four years of pretending to be a boy, I found my return to womanhood just as awkward. I eyed Dela’s small hurried steps and elegant bearing as she crossed the sand; she was more woman than I would ever be.

I picked my way across the rocks to meet her, finding my footing with a smooth ease that made my heart sing. My union with the Mirror Dragon had healed my lame hip. I could walk and run without pain or limp. There had not been much time or occasion to celebrate the wondrous gift: one dawn sprint along the beach, each slapping step a shout of exaltation; and tiny moments like this—swift, guilty pleasures among all the fear and grief.

Dela closed the short space between us, her poise breaking into a stumbling run. I caught her outstretched hand.

“Is he worse?” I asked.

The answer was in Dela’s dull, red-rimmed eyes. Our friend Ryko was dying.

“Master Tozay says his bowels have leaked into his body and poisoned him.”

I knew Ryko’s injuries were terrible, but I had never believed he would succumb to them. He was always so strong. As one

of the Shadow Men, the elite eunuch guards who protected the royal family, he usually fortified his strength and male energy by a daily dose of Sun Drug. Perhaps three days without it had weakened his body beyond healing. Before the coup, I had also taken a few doses of the Sun Drug in the mistaken belief it would help me unite with my dragon. In fact, it had done the opposite, by quelling my female energy. It had also helped suppress my moon days; as soon as I stopped taking it three days ago, I bled. The loss of such a strong drug would surely take a heavy toll on Ryko's injured body. I looked out at a heavy bank of clouds on the horizon—no doubt caused by the dragons' turmoil—and shivered as the warm dawn breeze sharpened into a cold wind. There would be more rain soon, more floods, more devastating earthquakes. And because Lord Ido had murdered the other Dragoneyes, it would all be unchecked by dragon power.

"Tozay insists we leave Ryko and move on," Dela added softly, "before Sethon's men arrive."

Her throat convulsed against a sob. She had removed the large black pearl that had hung from a gold pin threaded through the skin over her windpipe—the symbol of her status as a *Contraire*. The piercing was too obvious to wear, but I knew it would have pained Dela to lose such an emblem of her true twin soul identity. Although that pain would be nothing compared to her anguish if we were forced to abandon Ryko.

"We can't leave him," I said.

The big islander had fought so hard to stop Lord Ido from seizing my dragon power. Even after he was so badly wounded,

he had led us out of the captured palace to the safety of the resistance. No, we could not leave Ryko. But we could not move him, either.

Dela wrapped her arms around her thin body, cradling her despair. Without the formal court makeup, her angular features tipped more to the masculine, although her dark eyes held a woman's pain—a woman forced to choose between love and duty. I had never loved with such devotion. From what I had seen, it brought only suffering.

"We have to go," she finally said. "You can't stay here, it's too dangerous. And we must find the Pearl Emperor. Without your power, he will not defeat Sethon."

My power—inherited through the female bloodline, the only hereditary Dragoneye power in the circle of twelve. So much was expected of it, and yet I still had no training. No control. I stroked the small red folio bound against my arm by its living rope of black pearls. The gems stirred at my touch, clicking softly into a tighter embrace. At least I had the journal of my Dragoneye ancestress, Kinra, to study. Every night, Dela tried to decipher some of its *Woman Script*, the secret written language of women. So far, progress had been slow—not only was the journal written in an ancient form of the script, but most of it was also in code. I hoped Dela would soon find the key and read about Kinra's union with the *Mirror Dragon*. I needed a Dragoneye's guidance and experience, even if it was only through an ancient journal. I also needed some counsel; if I put my power in the service of Kygo to help him take back

his rightful throne, then wasn't I breaking the Covenant of Service? The ancient agreement prohibited the use of dragon power for war.

Putting aside my misgivings, I said, "Did you see the imperial edict? Sethon is already calling himself Dragon Emperor, even though there are still nine days of Rightful Claim left."

Dela nodded. "He has declared that both the old emperor's sons are dead." I heard the rise of doubt in her voice. "What if it is true?"

"It's not," I said quickly.

We had both seen High Lord Sethon murder his infant nephew as well as the child's mother. But his other nephew, eighteen years old and true heir to the throne, had escaped. I had watched him ride away to safety with his Imperial Guard.

Dela chewed on her lip. "How can you be so sure the Pearl Emperor is still alive?"

I *wasn't* sure, but the possibility that Sethon had found and killed Kygo was too terrible to contemplate. "We would have heard otherwise. Tozay's spy network is extensive."

"Even so," Dela said, "they have not found his whereabouts. And Ryko . . ." She turned her head as if it was the wind that brought tears to her eyes.

Only Ryko knew where his fellow Imperial Guards had hidden the Pearl Emperor. Ever cautious, he had not shared the information. Now the blood fever had taken his mind.

"We could ask him again," I said. "He may recognize us. I have heard that there is often a brief lucid time before . . ."

"Before death?" she ground out.

I met her grief with my own. "Yes."

For a moment she stared at me, savage at my denial of hope, then bowed her head.

"We should go to him," she said. "Tozay says it will not be long now."

With one last look at the heavy clouds, I gathered up the front of my cumbersome skirt and climbed the path behind Dela, snatching a few moments of muted joy as I stretched into each strong, surefooted step.

The sturdy, weather-bleached fisher house had been our sanctuary for the past few days, its isolation and high vantage giving a clear view of any approach by sea or land. I paused to catch my breath at the top of the path and focused on the distant village. Small fishing boats were already heading out to sea, every one of them crewed by resistance with eyes sharp for Sethon's warships.

"Prepare yourself," Dela said as we reached the house. "His deterioration has been swift."

Last night I had sat with Ryko until midnight, and I had thought the islander was holding his own. But everyone knew that the predawn ghost hours were the most dangerous for the sick—the cold, gray loneliness eased the way of demons eager to drain an unguarded life force. Dela had taken the early watch, but it seemed that even her loving vigilance had been unable to ward off the dark ones.

She hung back as I pushed aside the red luck flags that

protected the doorway and entered the room. The village Beseecher still knelt in the far corner, but he was no longer chanting prayers for the ill. He was calling to Shola, Goddess of Death, and had covered his robes with a rough white cloak to honor the Otherworld Queen. A paper lantern swung on a red cord between his clasped hands, sending light seesawing across the drawn faces around Ryko's pallet: Master Tozay; his eldest daughter, Vida; and faithful, ugly Solly. I coughed, my throat catching with the thick clove incense that overlaid the stench of vomit and loose bowels.

In the eerie, swinging lamplight, I strained to see the figure lying on the low straw mattress. *Not yet*, I prayed, *not yet*. I had to say good-bye.

I heard Ryko's panting before I saw the over-quick rise and fall of his chest. He was stripped down to just a loincloth, his dark skin bleached to a gray waxiness, his once muscular frame wasted and frail.

The tight linen bandaging had been removed, exposing the festering wounds. His hand, resting on his chest, was black and bloated: the result of Ido's torture. More shocking was the long gash that sliced him from armpit to waist. Swollen sections of flesh had torn free from the rough stitching, showing pale bone and vivid red tissue.

The herbalist shuffled through the inner doorway. He carried a large bowl that trailed an astringent steam, his deep voice murmuring prayers over the slopping liquid. He had sat with me for some of my vigil last night, a kind, perpetually exhausted

man who knew his skill was not up to his patient's injuries. But he had tried. And he was still trying, although it was clear that Ryko was walking the golden path to his ancestors.

Behind me, I heard Dela's breath catch into a sob. The sound brought Master Tozay's head up. He motioned us closer.

"Lady Dragoneye," he said softly, ushering me into his place by the pallet.

We had agreed not to use my title for safety's sake, but I let it pass without comment. The breach was Tozay's way of honoring Ryko's dutiful life.

Vida swiftly followed her father's example and shifted aside for Dela. The girl was not much older than my own sixteen years, but she carried herself with quiet dignity, an inheritance from her father. From her mother came her ready smile and a practical nature that did not recoil from oozing wounds or soiled bedclothes.

Dela knelt and covered Ryko's uninjured hand with her own. He did not stir. Nor did he move when the herbalist gently picked up his other, mutilated hand and lowered it into the bowl of hot water. The steam smelled of garlic and rosemary—good blood cleaners—although the whole arm looked beyond help.

I signaled to the Beseecher to stop his calls to Shola. There was no need to bring Ryko to the attention of the death goddess. She would arrive soon enough.

"Has he roused again? Has he spoken?" I asked.

"Nothing intelligible," Tozay said. He glanced at Dela. "I am sorry, but it is time you both left. My spies have Sethon head-

ing this way. We will continue to care for Ryko and look for the Pearl Emperor, but you must go east and seek safety with Lady Dela's tribe. We will rendezvous with you once we have found His Highness."

Tozay was right. Although the thought of leaving Ryko was a hundredweight of stone in my spirit, we could delay no longer. The east was our best chance. It was also my dragon's domain, her stronghold of power. Perhaps my presence in her energy heartland would strengthen our bond and help me control this wild magic. It might also help the Mirror Dragon hold off the ten bereft dragons if they returned.

Dela shot a hard look at the resistance leader. "Surely this discussion can wait until—"

"I am afraid it cannot, lady." Tozay's voice was gentle but unyielding. "This must be your good-bye, and it must be swift."

She bowed her head, struggling against his blunt practicality. "My people will hide us beyond Sethon's reach," she finally said, "but the problem will be getting to them."

Tozay nodded. "Solly and Vida will travel with you."

Behind Dela, I saw Vida square her shoulders. At least one of us was ready for the challenge.

"They know how to contact the other resistance groups," Tozay added, "and they can act the part of your servants. You'll be just another merchant husband and wife on a pilgrimage to the mountains."

Dela's focus was back on Ryko. She lifted his inert fingers to her cheek, the swinging lamplight catching the shine of grief in her eyes.

"That may be," I said looking away from the tender moment, "but our descriptions are on the lips of every news-walker, and tacked to every tree trunk."

"So far you are still described as *Lord Eon*," Tozay said. His eyes flicked over my straight, strong body. "And crippled. The description for Lady Dela cautions everyone to look for a man or a woman, making it just as useless."

I was still described as Lord Eon? I was sure Ido would have told Sethon I was a girl, either under duress or as a bargaining tool. It did not make sense for him to protect me. Perhaps the Mirror Dragon and I had truly changed Ido's nature when we healed his stunted heart-point and forced compassion into his spirit. After all, that first union with my dragon had also mended my hip, and I was still healed. I pressed my hand against the waist pouch where I kept the family death plaques of my ancestors Kinra and Charra: a wordless prayer for the change to be permanent. Not only Lord Ido's change, but my own wondrous healing. I could not bear to lose my freedom again.

"Sethon will not only be looking for you, Lady Dragoneye," Master Tozay murmured, a touch to my sleeve drawing me a few steps away. "He will be seeking anyone close to you that he can use as a hostage. Give me the names of those who you think are in danger. We will do our best to find them."

"Rilla, my maid, and her son Chart," I said quickly. "They fled before the palace was taken." I thought of Chart; his badly twisted body would always attract attention, if only to drive others away before his ill fortune tainted them. I felt a small leap in my spirit: never again would I be spat on as a

cripple or driven away. “Rilla would seek somewhere isolated.”

Tozay nodded. “We will start in the mid-provinces.”

“And Dillon—Ido’s apprentice—but you are already searching for him. Be careful with Dillon; he is not in his right mind, and Sethon will be hunting him for the black folio, too.”

I remembered the madness in Dillon’s eyes when he had wrenched the black folio from me. He’d known the book was vital to Ido’s plans for power and thought he could use it to trade with his Dragoneye master for his life. Instead, he had brought Sethon and the entire army upon himself. Poor Dillon. He did not truly understand what was in the small book he carried. He knew it held the secret to the String of Pearls. But its pages held another secret, one that terrified even Lord Ido: the way for royal blood to bind any Dragoneye’s will and power.

“Is that all who may be at risk, my lady?” Tozay asked.

“Perhaps . . .” I paused, hesitant to add the next names. “I have not seen my family since I was very young. I hardly remember them. Perhaps Sethon would not—”

Tozay shook his head. “Sethon will try everything. So tell me, if they were found and held, could Sethon coerce you with their lives?”

Dread curdled my stomach. I nodded, and tried to dredge up more than the few dim images I had of my family. “I remember my mother’s name was Lillia, and my brother was called Peri, but I think it was a pet name. I can only remember my father as Papa.” I looked up at Tozay. “I know it is not much. But we lived by the coast—I remember fishing gear and a beach—and

when my master first found me, I was laboring in the Enalo Salt Farm.”

Tozay grunted. “That’s west. I’ll send word.”

Beside us, the herbalist lifted Ryko’s dripping hand from the bowl and laid it back on the pallet. He leaned over and stroked Ryko’s cheek, then pressed his fingertips under the islander’s jaw.

“A sharp increase of heat,” he said into the silence. “The death fever. Ryko will join his ancestors very soon. It is time to wish him a safe journey.”

He bowed, then backed away.

My throat ached with sorrow. Across the pallet, Solly’s face was rigid with grief. He raised a fist to his chest in a warrior’s salute. Tozay sighed and began a soft prayer for the dying.

“Do something,” Dela said.

It was part plea, part accusation. I thought she was talking to the herbalist, but when I looked up she was staring at me.

“Do something,” she repeated.

“What can I do? There is nothing I can do.”

“You healed yourself. You healed Ido. Now heal Ryko.”

I glanced around the ring of tense faces, feeling the press of their hope. “But that was at the moment of union. I don’t know if I can do it again.”

“Try.” Dela’s hands clenched into fists. “Just try. Please. He’s going to die.”

She held my gaze, as though looking away would release me from her desperation.

Could I save Ryko? I had assumed that Ido and I were

healed by the extra power of first union between dragon and Dragoneye. Perhaps that was not true. Perhaps the Mirror Dragon and I could always heal. But I could not yet direct my dragon's power. If we joined and tried to heal Ryko, we could fail. Or we could be ripped apart by the sorrow of the ten bereft dragons.

"Eona!" Dela's anguish snapped me out of my turmoil. "Do something. Please!"

Each of Ryko's labored breaths held a rattling catch.

"I can't," I whispered.

Who was I to play with life and death like a god? I had no knowledge. No training. I was barely a Dragoneye.

Even so, I was Ryko's only chance.

"He is dying because of you," Dela said. "You owe him your life and your power. *Don't fail him again.*"

Hard words, but they were true. Although I had lied to Ryko and betrayed his trust, he had still guarded my back. He had fought and suffered for the hope of my power. Yet what was the good of protecting such power if I did not have the courage to use it?

I gathered my skirt and kneeled beside the pallet, instinctively seeking more contact with the earth and the energy within it.

"I don't know what will happen," I said. "Everyone must stand back."

The herbalist hurriedly joined the Beseecher in the far corner of the room. Tozay ushered his daughter and Solly away

from the bed, then turned back for Dela, but she ignored his outstretched hand.

"I'm staying." She saw the argument in my eyes and shook her head. "I will not leave him."

"Then don't touch him while I am calling my dragon." The first time I had called the Mirror Dragon, the wild surge of power had ripped through Lord Ido as his body locked mine against the harem wall.

Dela released Ryko's hand and sat back.

Perhaps the key to this healing magic was to touch Ryko, just as Ido had been touching me when the dragon and I had forced compassion into his stunted spirit. Gingerly, I placed my palm on the wasted muscle of Ryko's chest, above his heart. His skin was hot, and his heartbeat as fast and light as a captured bird's.

Taking a deep breath, I drew on my *Hua*, using the pulsing life force to focus my mind-sight into the energy world. There was a sudden shift in my vision, as though I had lurched forward. The room shimmered into the landscape of power that only a Dragoneye could see, swirling in intricate patterns of rainbow colors. Silvery *Hua* pumped through the transparent energy bodies of my friends and around the room, the flow irresistibly drawn east to the huge power presence of the red Mirror Dragon, and returning in abundance from the great beast. Over my left shoulder I caught sight of the coiled form of the Rat Dragon in the north-northwest. His energy was sluggish and thin.

There were still no other dragons in the celestial circle. Were they waiting for another chance to rush to their queen?

Grimly, I pushed away that fear and opened my inner pathways to the Mirror Dragon, calling out our shared name. She answered with a flood of energy, and the sweet spice of her greeting filled my senses until I could no longer contain my delight. A joyous laugh broke from me.

Across the bed, the transparent figure of Dela straightened. The power center at the base of her spine flared red with anger, the emotion igniting the other six centers that lay in line from sacrum to crown. I could see it as though she was made of glass; each spinning colored ball of energy stoking the next, bright with misunderstanding.

Although I stifled my joy, I did not stop to reassure Dela; the ten bereft dragons could return at any moment. I gave myself over to the Mirror Dragon's power, and was swept into a dizzying gold spiral. For a moment, all was bright, rhythmic color and a single pure note—the song of my dragon—then my vision split between earth and heaven.

Through dragon eyes high above, I saw the fading life force of Ryko, the light within each power center guttering like a spent candle. From my earthbound body, I saw my own transparent hand, flowing with golden *Hua*, touching Ryko's chest above his pale green heart point. Just like I had touched Ido. I focused all of my being into one thought: *Heal*.

Then I was more than a dragon conduit.

We were *Hua*.

As one, we understood the massive physical injuries that were too heavy for the weakened life force. There was not much time; Ryko was near the spirit world. Our power sought the delicate pattern of life that repeated in tiny twists of complexity. We sang to them, a silent harmony of healing that wove golden threads of energy into each intricate braid, quickening the cycle of repair. We drew power from the earth, from the air, channeling it all into his body, knitting together damaged flesh and sinew, broken bone and spirit.

“Holy gods,” the herbalist gasped from the corner of the room. “Look, his wounds are closing.”

His words penetrated the song, breaking my concentration. The lapse shivered through my connection with the Mirror Dragon. I felt my mind-sight waver, my vision narrowing back into the limits of my earthly body. The flow of *Hua* faltered.

Ryko wasn't healed yet; there was still so much to do.

I groped for a hold on the energy world, the thread of the song slipping from my clumsy grasp. I knew only one dragon command; the call of union. I screamed it out—*Eona*. Within the roar of my despair, I heard her song sharpen and hook my flailing focus, drawing me back into the golden melding of our *Hua*.

Even as our joy rang out once more, an influx of sour energy buffeted our union. The ten dragons. We braced against their heavy pressure, caught between Ryko's desperate need and their hammering power.

If the song broke again, Ryko would die.

We sang his healing, barely withstanding the savage energy that clawed at our connection. Around us, the ten bereft dragons shimmered into pale, howling outlines.

The Rat Dragon suddenly reared from his corner, his tense pain replaced by sinuous speed. He rammed the opaque Ox Dragon beside him, then launched above us, sweeping in a circle that drove back the other advancing dragons. Deep inside we felt another voice, screaming with effort.

Lord Ido.

We recoiled from the acrid orange taste of his power, but this time he was not seeking control. He was defending us.

The Rat Dragon reared again and met the wild energy of the ten bereft dragons. The roof of the fisher house exploded, raining wooden shingles and dust into the room. A beam plunged to the floor, crushing the Besecher. The silvery flow of his *Hua* flickered and was gone.

“Get out,” Tozay bellowed, dragging Vida toward the door. The herbalist scrambled up from the dead holy man and ran after them.

Dela threw herself over Ryko, shielding him from the falling wreckage. Chunks of wood showered my earthly body, but there was no pain. Tozay pushed Vida into Solly’s arms.

“Get away from the buildings,” he yelled, then turned back to Dela.

With the roof gone, we were suddenly beyond the room in a dizzying embrace of dark sky. Through dragon eyes we saw the bright figures of Vida, Solly, and the herbalist clear the house

and run for the village road. We rolled through the black thundering clouds, feeling brutal power slamming into us. Our claws connected, ripping and throwing dragon bodies. Beside us, the Rat Dragon blocked the Snake Dragon, the clash of *Hua* shearing off the edge of a cliff far below.

Focus. It was Lord Ido’s mind-voice, piercing the frenzy. *Block!* How? I didn’t know how!

My mind-sight plunged into the earthbound room—Tozay hauling Ryko upright—then lurched back into dragon-sight and the rolling battle across the sky. Below us, the sea was a boiling mass of energy, ramming tiny boats against the rocks and sweeping away a line of waterfront cottages. A dozen or so bright dots of *Hua* ran from the village buildings, the wall of water crashing over them, extinguishing their light.

“Eona.” It was Dela, pulling at my earthly body.

For a moment, I came to myself and met her wild eyes. The walls were collapsing, creaking under the pounding power of a searing wind.

“Move,” she yelled, pulling me toward the doorway as Tozay carried Ryko out into the courtyard.

Eona! Ido’s mind-scream wrenched me back into the Mirror Dragon. We swirled, claws flailing against the agile pink Rabbit Dragon. Above, the Rat Dragon collided with the Tiger Dragon, the impact resonating through Ido’s mind into our union.

For a bewildering second, we were in another room—a stone room—wrists and ankles shackled, pain pulsing through our flogged and broken body. Ido’s body. Another shock wave as

Ido's dragon slammed into the other beast again, and suddenly we were small, crouched under a bush, black book open, dark words burning our mind—Dillon, screaming, *Find Eona, find Eona, find Eona*. Then he was gone, and we were back in the sky above the crumbling fisher house, claws slashing, shrieking our defiance. Around us the ten bereft dragons were closing the circle.

They must not close the circle, Ido's mind-voice rasped with pain and alarm. *Give me your power.*

No!

Below, Dela staggered out into the courtyard, half carrying my earthly body.

They will tear you apart. You will die. Give me your power!

No!

The combined power of the ten dragons battered us. We could not hold out much longer, but we could not give our power to Ido. Not after his brutal grab for it at the palace.

Help me stop them! Fear sharpened Ido's mind-voice.

Ten stark songs of mourning pounded against us, searching for the relief of union.

There was nowhere else to go. We did not have enough power, enough knowledge. With a howl of despair, we opened our pathways to Ido.

His desperate power burst through us, drawing up all our golden energy. We were emptied, defenseless. As one, the ten bereft dragons rushed at us, their need circling like a vise. With iron control, Ido and the Rat Dragon gathered our energies, binding them with the shrieking wind and crashing water.

Prepare! Ido's mind voice yelled.

He threw the massive weight of power outward, the strain searing through his mind into us. The booming explosion ripped through the circle of dragons, knocking them backward. Below us, the remains of the fisher house spun into the dark sky, the rest of the cliff collapsing into the sea.

Block now! Ido roared.

But we did not know how. The shockwave of power hit us like a hammer, slamming me back into my own body. For a moment, I saw Dela's face above mine, her strong arms cradling my head. I screamed, pain pulsing through every part of my being. But the agony was not all mine.

Help me, Ido's mind-voice gasped. *I can't—*

Then swirling blackness dragged me away from his tortured scream.