

## CHAPTER 1

*There is a bridge between the finite and the Infinite. This Bridge is the Meri, the Spirit of the Spirit of the Universe, which men call God. Nothing may cross that Bridge: neither day nor night, nor old age, nor death nor sorrow nor evil nor sin.*

*Only the pure of heart may cross that Bridge, because the world of the Spirit is pure. In the crossing of this Bridge, the eyes of the blind will see, the wounds of the ailing will be healed, and the sick Man will become whole.*

*To the crosser of the Bridge, the night becomes day, because in the world of Spirit there is everlasting Light.*

— The Book of the Meri, Chapter I, Verses 34-36

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It was not lost on Meredydd-a-Lagan that she was the only girl at Halig-liath. It was brought home to her every morning at Assemblage where she stood, front and center in the huge cobbled yard, Surrounded by the other Prentices—boys, all of them.

It hadn't been so bad when she was younger; she had been almost indistinguishable then—cropped chestnut hair, tunic hung loosely on a slender, angular frame. But she was fifteen now, and in the last year, many things had grown apace with height and hair.

This morning was particularly bad; she felt completely alien, awkward and unwelcome. In the warmth of a fine spring morning, she stood out from the others like a briar among roses—her bare arms hairless, her light tunic betraying mounds and bends and curves no other Prentice possessed. She sensed eyes on her as they murmured their congregational prayers and prepared for a day of lessons.

She dared to glance up at the Osraed in their gallery high up on the imposing stone wall of the Academy. They were looking at her too—Ealad-hach, Calach and her guardian, Osraed Bevol. She got Osraed Bevol to meet her eyes and he smiled. She forgot her awkwardness in an instant and filed away with the others for classwork.

"She's gotten to be such a tall girl," said Osraed Calach. "Taller than some of the boys."

"She's still a girl," Ealad-hach reminded him, and glanced at the silent, smiling Bevol. "She will always be a girl. She should be training in the domestic arts. Training to be the wife of an Osraed and the mother of Prentices."

"And why," asked Bevol, "should she do that when she could become Osraed, herself? She has absolutely no talent for the domestic arts, Ealad. None. But she is already practicing the Divine Arts with some skill."

"You should not let her practice."

"Why not? You let your personal favorite practice and Meredydd has shown far more natural talent and inclination than he has."

Ealad-hach wrinkled his knife-blade nose.

"Ah?" Bevol pressed, pointing a finger at that oversized feature. "Ah now, admit what you cannot deny. Meredydd is second to none in her class."

"And it goes to her head. A bad condition for a girl."

"If it went to her head and *if* she were an ordinary child—of either sex—I would agree, but neither is true."

"The Meri will not accept a female Prentice, you know that."

"I know nothing of the sort. There is nothing in the Books that denies Prentice-ship to girls."

"There is tradition—"

"Pah! Old folk tales, hearsay—"

Osraed Calach cleared his throat. "Do you intend to abandon your students in favor of this ancient argument?"

Osraed Bevol smiled and wagged his head. Snow-streaked copper, his hair and beard rippled with the motion, cascading over the azure of his robe. "I will never abandon my student," he said pointedly, and led the way from the gallery into the Academy.

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Meredydd was not watching Aelder Prentice Wyth scratching illustrations of aislinn symbology on the whitewall. She was watching a spider apply warp and woof to the corner of an open window. The web had been taking shape for the entire morning and was nearly complete. Sunlight ran like blazing golden liquid down its pristine fibers—more delicate, more gleaming, more glorious than the finest silk. Meredydd imaged herself in a robe of the stuff—so fine and light.

She could see herself upon the sill, the size of a butterfly, lying back in the sleek, shining hammock, where bees would bring her nectar and ambrosia and the spider would play duans for her upon a harp of his own design. She could almost hear its song—light as down, shimmering, whispers of melody.

It was a shame, she thought, that the Arts didn't run to miniaturization. Then again, maybe they did and it just wasn't something the Prentices were permitted to know. After all, it wouldn't do to have them practicing Shrinkweaves on each other. The thought made her grin.

"Prentice Meredydd. Could you tell me what you are studying that you find my lesson beneath your notice?"

She jumped quite nearly from her skin and blinked up into the Aelder's stern face. "Why—aislinn symbols, Aelder."

"Aye, that is what the rest of us were studying, *cailin*. But you, I think, were not." He straightened and turned toward the whitewall, and Meredydd thought how spiteful he was to remind her (and everyone else) that she was a girl.

Cailin, he called her—but only when Osraed Bevol was out of earshot. He had used the word once in the Osraed's presence and Bevol had referred to him as "boy" for a fortnight, refusing to dignify him by using either his name or his title.

At the whitewall, now, stood Aelder Prentice Wyth and lifted a bony, linen-clad arm to point at the group of symbols rendered there in blue oilstick. They were very well drawn, Meredydd had to allow. "Meaning, *Prentice* Meredydd. Give this aislinn meaning."

That was easy. "The horse," she said, "is life, events. Strong emotions. The rearing horse especially connotes difficulty in maintaining control of one's destiny."

Wyth's lips pursed. "And this?" His finger tapped a set of wavy lines.

"Water in motion," she replied. "Emotions, such as love or great passion are symbolized thusly. A stormy sea would indicate violent emotions or a fear of them—especially, a fear of passion."

"At least you studied."

"I always study, Aelder Wyth."

He peered at her, narrow-eyed. "A man dreamed," he said, "that he went upon Pilgrimage. And when he reached the shore of the Western Sea, he lay upon the sand and slept. When he awoke, a beautiful cailin urged him to rise up and follow her into the sea. He rose and walked after her and entered the water and *did not get wet*." He emphasized the last words with a smile and folded his arms across his chest. "Interpret this aislinn."

Meredydd glanced quickly about the semi-circle of Prentices and wriggled uncomfortably on her bench—not because she couldn't interpret the dream, but because she *could* interpret it and suspected it was the Aelder's own.

"Are you certain, Aelder Wyth, that you wish me to interpret *this* dream?"

"Why else would I have directed you to do so?" he asked sarcastically and drew a snicker from the other Prentices.





Meredydd set her shoulders and sat stiffly upright, steeling herself. "Pilgrimage—"

Wyth held out the bluestick. "Come to the wall and illustrate your Tell for the class."

She swallowed and gave the teasing spider web a last, longing glance, then rose and went forward. She took the bluestick, erased the existing symbols with the blotter and began her illustration.

"Pilgrimage," she said, drawing the symbol:



"-is the journey toward the heart's desire. The Sea (Sea sym.) is where the journey leads, to the Pilgrim's Post from which the true seeker awaits the Meri . The Sea is also symbolic of deep emotion; love, devotion, faith, passion. Sleep  is forgetfulness or a lack of acceptance. The maiden who wakes the sleeping Pilgrim  is someone or something which provides the catalyst for the continuance of the quest—a prodder, such as the conscience. The conscience wakes the sleeper and he enters the relationship  with the Object of Pilgrimage but..."

"But?"

The classroom was so silent, Meredydd was certain she could hear the wind pass through the spider web. At least she could have if the breathing of the ten other Prentices was not so deafeningly loud.

"But," she continued, "no effect is obtained." There. It didn't sound so bad when you cloaked it in academic terms.

"Sum up."

She turned the bluestick in her fingers and watched it go round and round, then she pretended to study the group of figures on the wall. "The Pilgrim attains his heart's desire, but it has no effect upon him. He...enters the Water of Life, but remains dry. I would read this as a fear dream. Perhaps the dreamer is afraid he will not be able to...absorb the bounties of the Meri or perhaps he does not need to absorb them."

Aelder Wyth's face was whiter than his fine linen robe. That he had not so interpreted the aislinn was obvious.

"Terrible," he finally managed to say. "Prentice Meredydd, you obviously need to improve your understanding of the aislinn symbology. Therefore, you will read Aelf-raed's treatises on the Water Signs and present a written summation of your findings to me for tomorrow's lesson. Then, I'll give you another dream to Tell."

Meredydd's numb fingers nearly dropped the bluestick. Aelder Wyth had always been difficult to please, but he had never shown such ego, nor had she ever known him to be vindictive. She was about to protest his out-of-hand rejection of her Tell, but his attention was already elsewhere. He swiveled his head, his eyes leaping lightly over the class. They landed on Brys-a-Lach, known, in chatter circles, as "Aelder's Pet." He was a big, handsome boy—a man at sixteen—and he was almost as impressed with himself as Wyth was.

The Aelder Prentice smiled at his favorite student and said, "Now, Prentice Brys, will you kindly interpret this dream? I will allow that Meredydd's illustrations are correct; you needn't repeat them."

Brys stood, broad-shouldered and impressive, and Meredydd sighed inwardly. It was so much easier for a comely young man to succeed in second level classes at Halig-liath than it was for a homely or undersized youth or—Heaven's help!—a girl. It was the system, of course. The first level classes were taught by the Divine Counselors themselves, the second level by Aelders—Prentices like Wyth who had not yet been accepted to become Osraed, and who most likely never would. The Osraed knew that good looks and physical charm had naught to do with prowess in the Art, but the Aelders were so fresh from the classroom themselves-

"It is clear," said Brys-a-Lach in a voice that would ring well from the gallery, "that the vision pertains to spiritual greatness. So devoted is the Pilgrim that he spends his last dregs of energy on the Path to the Quintessential Ocean and falls asleep, heedless of his own needs. Now, we also know that it is in sleep that an Osraed often receives instruction from the Meri, so this may also be interpreted as the Pilgrim opening himself to Her will. So spiritual is this Pilgrim that a special envoy is sent to awaken him to his destiny. So pure is he that he walks directly into the Ocean itself, without even having seen the Meri. So transcendent is he that the waters fail to discomfit him—even as the Book of Pilgrimages says: 'a knower is he who is dry in the sea.' This Pilgrim overcomes even the Ocean."

"But the whole point of Pilgrimage," blurted Meredydd, "is to *see* the Meri. Sleep does not symbolize greatness in any other context, why should it be any different here? Traditionally, it symbolizes lack of vigilance, lack of ardor, perhaps an inability to face reality. The arduous Pilgrim would be wakeful and vigilant against the Meri's appearance. This poor fellow would lose his chance—the Meri could rise up and dance all about him while he snored in the sand."

The class found this a humorous image and burst into laughter. Red-faced, Aelder Wyth silenced them.

"A spurious interpretation-" he began.

"Nonsense," said Meredydd, forgetting all but the problem of interpretation. "A rational interpretation according to the texts. Furthermore, the Pilgrim is presumptuous; he enters the Sea of the Meri without the Meri's permission. He immerses himself in the Waters of Life and doesn't even allow himself to be touched by them or absorb their influences. This can mean only one thing: This Pilgrim misses the entire point of his own

Pilgrimage. Extrapolating on that, I would say that the dream expresses the spirit's fear that this Pilgrim is drawing no spiritual benefit from his quest."

"Sagacious!" exclaimed one of Wyth's homely, undersized students—a freckled red-head named Lealbhallain. He applauded lightly and alone. Aelder Wyth and Brys-a-Lach both glared at him while the other boys ogled.

"So this Pilgrim has missed the point, has he?" asked the Aelder Prentice after a long, rending pause.

Meredydd shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other, wishing Wyth hadn't left her standing, exposed, at the front of the class. "That is my Tell."

"This pointless Pilgrim is considerably chastened. The dream is mine."

There were a few gasps from those who hadn't already guessed this.

Aelder Prentice Wyth narrowed his eyes. "Do you wish to rethink your interpretation, Prentice Meredydd?"

If he sought to humiliate her, he did an admirable job, notwithstanding he had caught himself in the backwash. She felt very small and alone. She could take it all back, she supposed—wanted to with all those eyes on her. She glanced at

Lealbhallain. His green eyes were enormous in his elfin face and he had caught his lower lip between his teeth.

*He's probably holding his breath, too, she thought, and if I wait too much longer, he'll faint.*

"No, Aelder Prentice Wyth," she said finally, "I do not. I stand by my Tell. To do otherwise would be cowardly and self-serving."

He did not commend her for her integrity. She ended up with a triple reading assignment and the onerous task of sorting organic medicinals for the Apothecary. Poor Lealbhallain was commissioned to help her.

"You're very brave," he told her while they were up to their wrists in lakeweed. "I would have cried to have Aelder Prentice Wyth so furious at me."

"I'm not brave, Leal, just stupid and querulous. I should have...." She pulled lakeweed from the pail silently for a moment, trying to think of what she should have done. It would have been disobedient to refuse to interpret the aislinn outright. It would have been lying to Tell the dream as Brys had. Not that Brys was lying, of course. His Tell was different, that was all. But if she had given *his* interpretation instead of her own....

She sighed volubly. "I don't know what I should have done. Apologized to Wyth, I suppose. My Tell wasn't very flattering."

Lealbhallain gave her an innocently penetrating glance. "Was that the purpose of the Tell? To flatter Aelder Prentice Wyth?"

Meredydd chuckled. "No, Leal. It was not. But I suppose I could have apologized all the same. I'll have to ask Osraed Bevol what the correct course would have been."

Lealbhallain gave her a look of deep, admiring envy. "You are so fortunate, Meredydd, to have your own Osraed to ask."

She glanced down at the little piles of lakeweed that lay in puddles on the white crystal counter. "I know, Leal. And I wonder why that is, when I am so undeserving."

The boy's eyes widened. "Oh, no, Meredydd! I didn't mean- Why, you're a prodigy! You have so much natural talent-"

"No, Leal," she said, laughing a little at his zeal. "I have Osraed Bevol. That is what I have."

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"And you said what, then?" asked Osraed Bevol, sipping his broth.

Meredydd laid the baps out on the table and glanced back toward the kitchen.

"Bring the butter pot, won't you, Skeet?"

Then I said that there was only one thing it *could* mean and that- What?" she asked, seeing that the Osraed was shaking his head.

He set down his broth bowl. "How many times, Meredydd, must I tell you: There is never but one interpretation for any *aislinn*. Hm?" His crooked finger pointed at a spot in the air as if she might look there for the exact number.

She reddened. "Many times, Master."

"Correct. And this is a condition which also applies to other realities—to all things—whether spoken or unspoken. Even Pov knows this. Isn't that so, Pov?"

Skeet responded slowly to the use of his given name under most circumstances, but the Osraed Bevol was proof to his stubbornness. The boy let his great Master use the homely name that meant simply, "Earth," though everyone else, Meredydd included, must acknowledge him as fleet Skeet if they didn't wish to be completely ignored. Now, he smiled sweetly and set out the butter bowl.

"Aye, Maister. I do so know. Seventy times seventy meanings do a' things hae."

Meredydd sat in her place at the table and stared at her green-stained hands. "I let my horse rear up and carry me off, Master. I spoke out of turn. I should have let Brys-a-Lach have the last say about Aelder Wyth's *aislinn*."

The Osraed's dappled brows fluttered up his forehead. "Oh? Then did you think it the correct Tell?"

"Well, of course I didn't or I wouldn't have got so.... I spoke out of turn," she repeated and fell silent.

"You spoke up," corrected Osraed Bevol. "You stood by your interpretation, which, while not the *only* one, was at least spiritually appropriate. Prentice Brys was currying favor, not searching for the truth." He looked at her, eyes sharp, azure.

"Pardon, Master, but is it appropriate to judge Prentice Brys's motive?"

Bevol pointed at her. "No, it is not. But it is entirely appropriate for you to question my judgment of him. And if it is appropriate to question my interpretation of young Brys's motives, then it is appropriate to question his interpretation of a vision."

"I wasn't impertinent?"

"It was a classroom exercise, *anwyl*," he told her, softening his criticism with the endearment. "You were impertinent to cast your Tell as the only one, but if Prentice Wyth had wanted to avoid embarrassment, he should never have used his own *aislinn* as the subject for a reading."

Meredydd glanced up from her soup. Skeet was already half-way through his. "Perhaps he didn't expect a negative Tell."

"Eh? Well, perhaps he's possessed of a superior detachment, hm? A man of rare humility." His eyes crinkled at the corners.

Skeet laughed, his own dark eyes glinting. "Aye, rare," he said.

After dinner, Meredydd helped Skeet clear the table. Sun still slanted through the kitchen window, burnishing the pale cobbles, and she felt the pull of a place to the east, almost in the fork of the Halig-tyne where it gave birth to the dancing Bebhinn. She glanced about as she entered the great hall, straining to keep her footsteps light on the flagstones. The hall was empty and she thought she could hear the Osraed rustling in his parlor. She drew a soft cloak from the pegs by the front door and reached for the latch.

"Be back in time for your studies," said Bevol's voice behind her.

"Yes, Master." She opened the door and slipped out quickly, knowing his eyes followed her down the path and up the lea. The solid oaken door was no impediment to those eyes.

He never told her not to go, however much he wished to, and it was beyond her to grant him that unspoken wish. So she fled eastward to the Fork, to the place where one river became twain.

It was called Lagan—"the Little Hollow"—and there had been a homestead there once. A fine homestead with an ample cottage and a big barn and a great forge. There was only burnt rubble now, and tall grass and wildflowers that waved sorrowfully in the wind.

Every spring the mounds of shattered brick and stone and crumbled masonry were less apparent beneath the green carpet that encroached and obscured. Every spring the charred beams were more overgrown with vine and bramble. But the pain in Meredydd's heart was never overgrown and her rage was never obscured.

She picked wild roses from the tangle that embraced the fallen chimney. She pricked her fingers on the thorns and bled in penance for making Osraed Bevol so unhappy. What she could not do penance for, even by coming here and bleeding upon the thorns every day of her life, was her absence on a particular afternoon seven years past.

On that afternoon, a day of worship, Meredydd-a-Lagan had left her parents at the Cirke in Nairne and gone home through the Bebhinn wood. She had been told to go straight home and had promised to do just that, but the wood had wooed and won her before she'd even left the Cirke-yard.

Along the Bebhinn—so named for the musicality of its swift-moving waters—she had come across an amazing pool of the most beautiful, clear, sparkling water and had stopped there, as she was told never to do. After all, who knew what wolves or boar or wild dogs or other were folk inhabited the woods late on Cirke-dag? So warned her elders, who little understood that to a precocious little girl, such threats are promises.

She had taken off her shoes by the little pool and thrust her feet into the icy water and let the most wonderful aislinn images flow through her waking brain. She'd sat long, day-dreaming. How long, she never knew. But in time and delight a tendril of mist had risen from the pool, captivating her with its graceful, spiraling pirouettes. As she watched it, imagining it to be all manner of wonderful things, it assumed, finally, the form of a white-robed maiden.

This was a very wonderful and magical thing to a little girl, and it became more wonderful, still, when the beautiful mist-cailin spoke to her. Her voice was a musical whisper and it told Meredydd she would seek the Meri. She would become a Prentice.

It was such a startling, engaging idea—that a girl, a blaec-smythe's daughter, would study the Divine Art—that little Meredydd jumped to her feet in amazement, dropping her shoes into the pool. The white cailin dissolved back into a wisp of mist and the afternoon into sudden, cool twilight.

Looking frantically about, Meredydd suddenly realized that the sky was darkening rapidly toward evening. High above the trees, a burnished light flickered uncertainly in the mists of twilight.

Affording the lost shoes only a moment's mourning, she climbed carefully out of the pool hollow, climbed until she stood atop a slight rise among the ash and fir. Looking southeast, toward home, she could see what caused the pulsing, rippling light. Wild breakers of flame leapt above the crest of the lea, as if shattering upon an inland reef.

Her heart suddenly in her throat, Meredydd tore through the wood, heedless of her cold, bare feet, her eyes clinging to those leaping waves of incandescence. She found the main path, broke from the verge of the wood and streaked up the intervening hill.

At the crest she was stopped as if by invisible hands and stared, terrified, into the vale. Lagan was ablaze. The forge, the barn, the cottage, all burned with the brilliance of the morning Sun. She could feel the heat even atop the hill.

Figures moved about the buildings, but they carried no buckets, went nowhere near the well. She made no sense of that, at first. It was only when she turned her eyes to the well itself that the full horror became clear. Lying beside it upon the ground were her mother and father, unmoving, unattended by the three dark-clad men who watched Lagan die.

Meredydd reached out her arms, straining forward, willing her feet to move. But they would not move and she hung there as if held fast, her hands stretched toward her home and family. Then, the men stirred. They lifted the limp bodies that lay by the well and dragged them toward the disintegrating forge.

Meredydd thought she had plumbed the depth of horror, but knew, with sudden conviction, that it had no depth. It was bottomless. She screamed, her voice sounding like the shrill of the hunting hawk. She screamed again and heard the tortured cry of the mountain cat in her ears.

The activity below ceased and the dusky people peered around, their muffled faces all eyes. One looked up the hill, paused and pointed.

Meredydd screamed a third time, her cry piercing her own heart like a lance and spreading on the hot wind of Lagan's destruction. The men stared as one man. Two of them retreated back a step, then two. The third turned away, then back, away, then back. Suddenly they were all three running away into the dark toward the river fork. They disappeared like a flock of demons, trailing thunder from their horses' hooves.

As if released by the pressing hands, Meredydd fell forward onto her face, tumbling several yards before she could stop herself and clamber to her bleeding feet. She moved down the gentle slope through wild wheat that caught at feet and ankles. She fell and rose and fell again, finishing her journey in the mud of the barnyard crawling on hands and knees to where her parents lay.

There was blood on them. Blood on her mother's sky blue dress. It spread in a horrid dark stain across the bodice. Blood on her father's best white shirt—so much that little white could be seen. She knew they were dead without knowing how she knew and she could contemplate no existence without them. They were her entire world. Her goal was only to reach them; merely to lay herself between them in the cool mud and die.

The ooze sucking at her legs, Meredydd put out a hand to touch her mother's face. Something blocked the touch. Something in a long, soft cloak, now filthy and soaked at the hem. Little Meredydd stopped, teetering, her hand clutching, her eyes blurred with stinging tears, her mind unable to accept this intrusion.

Mewing like a kitten, she struck at the obstruction again and again. A hand grasped her shoulder, gently. She looked up, then, into the face of the Osraed Bevol.

He touched a forefinger to her forehead and she collapsed, face first, into the mud.

It was two weeks before she spoke. She cried nightly, nursing her grief, fighting nightmares and day-horrors. But the Osraed had loved her and cherished her and instructed her. The deep pain passed and found consolation in loving the Osraed in return. It also spawned an abiding rage—the first words the eight year old spoke after her long silence were, "I want them to die. I want to kill them."

It was Bevol who convinced her she must learn powerful secrets to be able to even discover her parents' murderers, for no one knew who they were or why they had attacked a peaceful homestead. And she, remembering the aísinn she had experienced at the forest pool, followed his urging and began the study of the Divine Art.

She'd learned many things in her tenure with Osraed Bevol, more, even, than the average student of Divine Art at Halig-liath. She had him to instruct her in the Telling of dreams and visions, the Healing, the Runeweaving, the secret duans, the speaking to the unspeaking. She could divine ailments and prescribe the cure; she could forecast the weather; she could follow the bees to their honey, then enlist their cooperation in retrieving it. She knew the courses of the stars and planets and the ways of animals, large and small. All these things she had learned and more, but she could not see the faces or know the names of the men who had killed her parents and changed her life.

She watched the blood bead, dark, on one pierced finger and brought herself back from the past. It was darkening now, and the breeze came cool and spicy from the Western Sea. Meredydd raised herself from the grave her parents shared, her hands absently arranging the flowers upon it. She stared a moment at the well that served as their headstone—pondered the weather-worn beam and rope. There was no time for the rest of the ritual today. It would wait until Cirke-dag—the anniversary of the death of Lagan.

She got home just at dark, the lamps along the walkway coming on at her approach, the hall lighting as she opened the door. That had seemed an absolute miracle to her once, now it was only a welcome convenience—a fine bit of the Art, if she thought about it any deeper than that. But tonight she noticed the little lamps—noticed that their flames, though warm and bright, failed to make her feel that way. She stared at one fiery sprite in its glass enclosure and thought of the Meri.

"There is a bridge between the finite and the Infinite," said the Book of the Meri, "This Bridge is the Meri, the Spirit of the Spirit of the Universe, which men call God. Nothing may cross that Bridge: neither day nor night, nor old age, nor death nor sorrow nor evil nor sin."

She would like to find a place where there was no night, no death nor sorrow nor evil nor sin. She would like to cross that Bridge—to see the Meri.

Osraed Bevol had seen Her, of course, many years ago on his own Pilgrimage. And now Meredydd longed for that privilege—Pilgrimage. It was something she'd almost taken for granted once, but now, as she crossed the threshold of adulthood, she realized it was not nearly so certain a destiny as she had imagined. She was old enough this year, it only depended now on her worthiness.

She had to pass on her marks at Academy, first of all, then the Osraed of Halig-liath must approve her. Once that was done, it devolved upon Osraed Bevol to determine if and when she was ready. She wondered if that would be soon. She wondered if she would be one of the fortunate few to see the Star of the Sea rise. And if she did set eyes upon the Meri, what gifts would she receive? What knowledge?

One thing she knew she wanted—the gift of Clear Sight. With that talent, with the knowledge and power of an Osraed, she would be able to look back and see the faces of those three masked riders.

"What does the flame tell you, Meredydd?" asked the Osraed Bevol from the parlor doorway. "What answers lie in the fire?"

She blinked and turned to face him, a royal purple salamander wriggling before her flame enchanted eyes. "No answers, Master. Only daydreams."

He looked at her for a moment, then nodded toward the parlor. "I have tea on the fender. Come, it's past time for your lesson."

The room was fire-warmed and comfortably cluttered—books tumbled in symmetrical abandon like awkward crystals from every shelf and ledge, and everywhere lay evidences that this room belonged to a practitioner of the Art. A bird skull, here, beside it a magnifying lens; a handful of colored crystals—poorly formed rejects; a bundle of old star charts. It was the books that reminded Meredydd of Aelder Prentice Wyth's assignment.

"What is it, anwyl?" asked Bevol, seeing that she had paused in the doorway.

"I was to read," she said, "the Aelf-raed essays on the Water Symbols. For Aelder Wyth. And write a paper on it...by tomorrow."

"You've read them."

"Two years ago."

"Have you forgotten the material?"

"No, of course not."

"Then-? All you need do is write a paper. What length?"

"He didn't say."

The Osraed shrugged. "Well, then?"

"He'll ask, first, if I actually did the reading assignment. I can't lie."

Bevol chuckled. "But you *did* do it. You merely did it two years before he asked you to. A most precocious student."

Meredydd laughed. "Ah, but he also wants me to Tell another dream.... Perhaps I'll be very ill tomorrow and the next day and by the time we are past Cirke-dag, Aelder Wyth will have forgotten all about my punishment."

"Doubtful."

"Then perhaps I can manipulate his dreams so the next one he makes me interpret is less controversial."

Bevol looked at her awry. "That is more feasible," he said and then waved a long-fingered hand at her. "Go. Go on and do your assignment. I must not interfere with Aelder Wyth. We will pursue our studies tomorrow."