

CHAPTER 1

My first abiding memory is of the chain. My every waking moment was dominated by it, and often it touched my dreams as well. It was, I calculated, some six feet long, a heavy thing made of iron, so heavy that I must have been four years old before I could lift it off the ground. By the time of those first recollections, it was already a part of me, a burdensome extension of my being as familiar as my hands and feet, so that I could not imagine what life might be like without it. At one end of the chain was an iron ring, which was placed around my right ankle the moment the birth fluid had been wiped from my newborn body. At the other end was my mother, shackled as I was by a similar ring around her wrist.

It didn't take me long to understand that my mother loathed me, her firstborn son, as much as she loathed the chain that bound us to each other. Never once did she speak directly to me, and she only looked at me when she had no alternative. I suckled, so I am told, in silence, with a cloth over my face so that she would not have to see me at her breast. When she went around the compound I was slung on her back, the weight of the chain as it dragged on the ground causing the fetter to cut into my tender flesh.

Babies grow of course, so every week or so a man, a servant of Lord Corvan, my father, would come to examine the ring, replace it if it became so tight that it might damage my leg. At the same time he would run his hand along my body, using his gift to shelter my fragile bones from harm. He never smiled or spoke, but his touch was gentle, his coming one of the few things that gave me pleasure. Apart from those few minutes every so often I was never free of my restraint, and the ring around my mother's wrist was never removed.

Some time later, when the gift came to me, that man was given to me as a servant in my own household. I think it was a deliberate act on my father's part. Lord Corvan knew, I am sure, that my curiosity would lead me to seek out the images of my first years, draw them from the mind of the man who had once been my only comfort. Thus, I observed my early struggles from the vantage of the intervening years, through the memories of one who witnessed them. On reflection, perhaps I should have let them lie undiscovered.

As I grew and began first to crawl, then to walk, I learned quickly to keep pace with my mother's purposeful stride. If I didn't I was simply dragged along until I was able to scramble back onto my feet. Her only acknowledgement of me was the scraps that she threw from her plate and which were my only form of sustenance – that, and the occasional dousing in a bucket of freezing water when I became too filthy to ignore.

I remember the time when I realised that other children were not restrained as I was. I would watch them running and shouting in the courtyard from my place a foot or so behind my mother, where she wouldn't have to look at me. None of them ever spoke to me, which was just as well, for although I understood speech well enough I didn't use it, and I would have had nothing to say to them in any case.

I say I did not use speech, but that is not the entire truth. I didn't know it then, of course, but my bloodline had bestowed on me an unusual intelligence, a thing that was later to become both a blessing and a curse. Having nothing else to occupy my time, my days were spent listening intently to the talk of the women. At night, when my mother fell asleep, I whispered the words to myself, remembered the expressions, the cadences of the voices, and so I learned the language of adults rather than the childish prattle of others of my age. When my mother was awake, silence ruled my life, and the result of my breaking it was usually the sting of a well aimed stone.

In due course I began to wonder why I had been singled out for such treatment. The fact that my mother hated me I took for granted, but search as I might I could not think of any reason why I should have incurred such displeasure. The other women might have been able to tell me, but they seemed afraid of us and seldom came near, although I often caught their

pitying glances as they passed by. It was to be many years before I learned the true cause of my mother's bitterness. Now, when I look back it is with admiration for her, and understanding, although forgiveness is perhaps beyond my reach.

My mother's name was Mira, and she was beautiful, the most beautiful creature in the settlement in those times. She was the younger sister of Amala, the only woman ever to leave the Family. I say 'leave' – the truth is, she did the impossible – she escaped from what must have been the most closely guarded place on earth, and ran straight into the arms of the man who was to become our sworn enemy, Derlan, the leader of the most gifted of the southern tribes.

When Mira was born, no one could doubt the source of the seed that made her. If the strength of her gift were not evidence enough of Corvan's blood, the honey tint of her skin, unusual in females of all but his line, was an indisputable proof. She was a small, delicate thing, as all the women of the Family are, with her mother's golden hair and bright green eyes. As soon as she was born she was closely guarded, her unwanted protectors keeping watch over her day and night. It is not surprising, given what had happened to her sister. In Amala, Corvan had glimpsed the beginning of the fulfilment of his ambition, one with the gift to cross into the future and foresee events. But at the very moment of his triumph his prize had escaped him, and he wasn't going to let it happen a second time.

As soon as Mira's gift appeared she was confined alone, with only her guards for company. From the start it was clear that she was a woman of extraordinary power. It was from such women that our kind was named – Dancers, after the skill to enter and navigate the great Dance of life, to see the delicate balance of events in places way beyond the boundaries of our human senses. Her mind ranged far beyond our borders, and she could follow the threads of many lives at once, even, it was claimed, across the water to the Western Isles.

I am told that she was possessed of the gift of memory, and that she found her long dead sister Amala, the source of all my father's rage, and spoke with her. Thus she learned of her sister's unique gift to see what had not yet happened, and realised that she was destined to be mated with her own father in his attempt to regain what her sister had denied him.

Such was the fate of many of our women. The furthering of the blood could only be achieved through the distillation of power from those of the greatest gift. Whether brother, sister, parent or child, it made no difference. The nature and the strength of the gift were all that mattered.

Three decades passed before Corvan finally came to Mira. Even then she was young, according to the measures of our people. They say that when, finally, my father took her, she resisted so violently that he had to call on his servants to hold her still. When she conceived she threatened to do all she could to ensure that the monster inside her was not born, and that if it was she would refuse to care for it, or throw it from a high window to its death. In response Corvan immediately picked out six women, all with child and all of lesser blood. He brought them before her and told her that should she seek to carry out her threats both they and their children would be put to death. So it was that one savage Highland winter's night, two years following the succession of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, I was born and, on a whim, remembering Mira's last words, my father had us chained together.

My life continued thus for some seven years, spent mostly trying to remain as invisible to my mother as I could, until I saw my father for the first time. My mother was sleeping, and I, as usual, was curled up under a blanket at her feet. I heard the door open and the sound of the two guards walking away across the courtyard. That was unusual, as we were never left alone. Then came the soft click of the door closing, and an almost inaudible tread coming towards us, stopping just by my head. I felt my mother stiffen, and huddled under the blanket trying to keep still. A hand grasped the blanket and pulled it away, and then

I felt arms lifting me to my feet. I looked up and found myself staring straight into Corvan's eyes.