

Prologue

The screaming woke Surya. Her eyes flicked open and she was out of bed, flinging back the furs and reaching for her robes, before her mind had even registered the noise. She had become used to the sound of screaming that winter, and her body knew what it had to do.

It would be the Sedorne again. Whoever they had caught would need her help.

Ignoring creaking joints that had aged forty winters in the chill of the mountains, she wrapped herself in a practical, dun-coloured habit, with only the golden band at the waist to show her rank, and shoved her feet into fur-lined boots. Before she could catch up her long braid of crinkly, greying hair and hide it under the noirin's gold headdress, there was an urgent clapping outside the curtain of her room.

“Come,” she called, already stepping forward to pull back the heavy fabric.

“Noirin Surya.” The young woman outside was a novice namoa, barely sixteen, the dark skin of her face greyed with fear. She sketched a hasty bow. “They’re attacking Aroha.”

Surya felt a cold trickle of fear that lifted the small hairs all over her body. Aroha was the seat of Ruan’s government. “Then – they’ve invaded?”

“Yes! There are survivors coming up through the hills. They say ... they say the palace is burning.”

Surya swallowed. “The rei? His family?”

“I don’t know.” The young holy woman wrung her hands. “There’s a woman from their household and she’s demanding to see you. She’s badly burned, but she won’t let anyone near her – she just keeps saying we have to fetch you.”

“I’ll come at once.” Surya stepped over the threshold, paused, then turned back and quickly caught up the short, curved sword hanging from the wall. Her fingers closed into their familiar places on the hilt and she found herself relaxing, her breaths slowing as a battle-ready calmness settled over her. The worn leather grip was cool against her callused palm, and she realized she was sweating.

She turned back to the novice namoa, and they ran together along the corridor and down the steep, slanting steps into the octagon room. The sound of panicked

shouting, hoarse voices lifted in pain and children crying made Surya wince as she entered.

Dozens of smoke-stained, bleeding people sat in forlorn clusters on the floor. The doors were flung open onto the courtyard and the room was flooded with the tarnished, flickering light of the great tapers burning outside. The inner gates beyond were open and a steady trickle of survivors filtered in, guided – in some cases almost carried – by some of the red-robed namoa from the outer walls.

Surya shook her head. “So many...”

The novice heard her. “This is only the beginning, Noirin. The hills are swarming with people.”

More namoa weaved efficiently through the refugees, bringing food and water, blankets, and treatment for their injuries. The everyday odours of herbal remedies and spiced chickpeas wafted through the air, mixing oddly with the smells of burning and blood and fear. Rubbing the chill from the back of her neck with her free hand, Surya ran a practised eye over the arrangements, returned the hasty greetings of the supervising namoa, and then nodded, satisfied.

“Where is the woman?”

“In the courtyard, Noirin. She wouldn’t come in.”

They picked their way swiftly along the outer edges of the room to the inner courtyard of the temple complex. The air was sharp. Surya’s breath turned to frost in her mouth as they crossed the flagstones, their shadows

warping and jumping strangely under the capricious candlelight. Never in her life had she seen so many tapers lit in one night. She glanced up and saw the great arc of the sky turned dusty grey against the flames.

In the darkest corner of the courtyard a woman huddled, a swathe of cloth wrapped around her body, covering her head and trailing on the floor. She looked up at their approach and Surya sucked in a sharp breath as she saw the blistering burns covering the left side of the woman's face. The undamaged side of her face was the pale toasted almond brown of a lowlander, her smooth skin marking her as a young woman, perhaps not yet into her thirties.

"Let me see," Surya said briskly, stepping forward. The woman cringed back and Surya stopped in bewilderment. "What's wrong with you?" she demanded, pity making her voice rough. "Why come to the House of God if you want no healing?"

"I didn't come for me." The woman's voice crackled like dry leaves. "Are you the head of the Order? The noirin?" Her eyes dropped to the gold belt at Surya's waist and returned to her face in sudden hope.

"I'm Noirin Surya, yes. Why did you ask for me, then, if not for yourself?"

"Send her away." The woman looked at the novice namoa, and Surya, with a sigh, gestured at the girl to leave them. The novice shook her head and walked reluctantly away.

The woman shuffled further into the shadows. Frowning, Surya moved closer until her body shielded the woman from the view of the rest of the courtyard. The woman reached up with one blistered hand and pulled back the bulky fabric from her chest.

“I came for her.”

The cloth fell away to reveal an unconscious child draped limply over the woman’s shoulder, dressed in the charred remains of a nightgown. The small, delicately featured face was obviously female and might once have been beautiful. It would never be beautiful again. A horrific burn ruined the left side of the girl’s face, turning the skin of her eyelid into a twisted, purpling mess.

“She’s the last one,” the woman was muttering frantically. “The others were dead, all dead. There was nothing I could do. I could only get her out – only get her here.”

“In God’s name, woman! You should have brought the child to our attention the moment you arrived.”

Surya began to turn away, her hand lifting to signal to the others, but before she could finish the gesture, the woman’s hand had clamped over her wrist, the shaking, blistered fingers exerting amazing strength as she pulled Surya’s arm down.

“No!” she whispered. “No one else must know! They’re hunting for her – if they find her she’ll be dead too.”

“Hunting for...” Surya stiffened. “The Sedorne are hunting her?”

“She’s the last one. The only one. Little Zahira. I saved her.”

Surya looked at the woman’s desperate face, and then again at the child.

Zahira.

At that moment, the girl’s good eyelid flickered, revealing a cornflower-blue eye, vivid against the honey gold of her skin. Surya took a sharp breath. The rei’s wife was a golden-haired Sedorne, married in happier times, when the two nations were friends. It was said her eyes were blue as cornflowers – and that her children had inherited them.

“You’re telling me that this is the rei’s youngest daughter?”

“The others are all dead. And the rei. In their beds, in the night.” The words tumbled over one another in their eagerness to be heard. “Little Zahira had a nightmare so she slept with me, in my room. I woke when the fire started. I tried to get out, but the soldiers were there so I had to go the other way. Through the fire. A beam fell on us; it hit her head. Please help her. She’s the last one. She’s the reia now.”

Surya nodded, dazed. The child must be taken somewhere safe, quiet, hidden... She looked around, saw that no other survivors or namoa were near. “Come – now, while no one’s looking. Follow me.”

Still clutching the sword, she picked up her heavy robes and ran, the woman a shadow in her wake as they raced out of the courtyard, past the octagon room, along the inner wall of the temple.

“Where ... where...?” the woman panted.

“Somewhere no one will look.”

Surya led the woman round the curve of the wall to an alcove, and pressed an almost invisible indentation in the stone. There was a hollow click, and a panel, made of wood but cunningly faced with stone that acted both as camouflage and armour, slid back with a faint grating noise from the runners. They moved through the opening, out of the orange light and the noise into the darkness and quiet of a hidden passageway.

“What happened? What happened at the palace?” Surya demanded as she led the woman along the narrow corridor, her feet finding the faint depressions in the stone that told her which direction to take. “Treachery?”

“Yes.” The woman’s voice was almost noiseless as she struggled for breath. “The Sedorne ... their rei ... he came to talk – to negotiate, he said. Claimed that the raiders attacked us ... without his knowledge. Wanted to ... stop ... the fighting. Wanted to make a treaty. Stayed in the palace – as a guest. Then ... in the night ... the fire.” The woman made a small sound, half sob, half gasp. “No warning.”

Surya swallowed and shook her head. “Say no more

now. Come this way.”

They pattered quickly up a narrow flight of stairs, took another turn, and then climbed another, narrower run of stairs. Surya was horribly aware of the laboured, rasping breaths behind her. The woman needed medical help, probably just as much as the child she carried. The child ... dear God.

They reached the top of the stairway, and Surya pulled back a thick brocade curtain. A gust of cool air blew into her face. She breathed it in gratefully.

“What is this?” The woman inched forward.

“It’s the shrine. The shrine of the Holy Mother of Flames.”

“Am I ... am I allowed?”

“I would not have brought you, else. There’s nothing to fear from God, child – She is your mother, just as She is mine. Come on.”

The woman following hesitantly behind her, Surya ducked under the heavy wooden lintel of the entrance. The moss underfoot was springy and thick, crushing with a faint, astringent odour. There was no trace of snow anywhere. Snow did not fall in the shrine.

Light shone here day and night, a warm glow that glinted, starlike, through the boughs of the ancient lir trees. The circle of trees was over four hundred years old, their roots trained up into giant curlicues that snaked and twisted around the papery silver trunks and almost blocked the centre of the shrine from view.

Surya led the woman forward through the gap between two of the curved trunks.

This was the heart of the House of God. It lay at the very core of the complex, hidden and protected by the lives of every *namao*, Surya most of all.

Cut deeply into the smooth, round belly of earth at the centre of the tree circle was a stone-lined pit. It was the source of the light. Flames the colour of a peacock's feathers pulsed lazily in the pit. The air above the fire rippled gently, like a heat haze, and yet the fire shed no heat. Surya heard a soft exhalation from the woman – a sigh not of awe but of contentment.

“Give her to me,” Surya said, dropping the sword and reaching for the girl. The woman did as instructed without question, her eyes filled with the light of the flames. “There now. Rest. Lean against the tree.”

As Surya took the warm weight of the child into her arms, the woman sank down and settled against one of the *lirs*. Her burned face was peaceful as she watched the fire. Surya spared a moment to look at her, and what she saw was worrying. But the *reia* must be her first concern now.

Surya went down on her knees and carefully laid the little girl on the moss, then turned and reached into the shadows under a bulging section of roots in the nearest tree to pull out a wooden case. All new healing equipment – from bandages to ointments to sharp needles – was placed in this circle for one turn of the moon before

it was used, so that God might bless it. The cavernous spaces under the tree roots served as storage places. Surya opened the case she had retrieved and sighed in relief at the contents. It held all that she needed.

She turned her attention back to the little girl. She had not stirred. Something in the way the child lay, so limp and still, reminded Surya dreadfully of the dead rabbits she used to remove from her father's traps when she had been a child herself. This wasn't a natural sleep; it wasn't even the shocked, unconscious state some injured people entered. But the fire seemed to have left her unscathed, except for the awful burn on her face. Surya knew that would require attention soon, but there was probably no hope of saving the child's eye, so she put it aside for the moment.

Swiftly she cut away the rags of the nightgown from the girl's body. There was nothing more than a bruise or two on her, and those probably from the nursemaid's desperate grip. Lifting the lid of the good eye, Surya saw that the pupil was huge, massively dilated against the blue iris. It did not react when she shaded it with her hand. She lifted the little head, propped it against her knee and began probing the scalp for injuries.

Almost immediately her fingers found the source of the child's unnatural stillness. It was a dent – as long as Surya's thumb – in the back of her skull. The area was thick with clotted blood, pulpy and soft to the touch.

Despair filled Surya as she realized how massive the

blow must have been. Even a grown man could not take such an injury and survive. She sat back on her heels, pushing a stray wisp of hair out of her face with a shaking hand. This child ... this poor, tiny child. If what the woman said was true – if the whole Elfenesh family were dead – this child was Ruan’s last hope. And she was dying. What would become of them now?

“What is it?” The woman had managed to tear her eyes from the sacred flames and was examining Surya’s expression. “What’s wrong?”

“I cannot save her,” Surya said roughly. “There’s nothing to be done.”

“No!” The woman lurched to her knees and began to crawl towards them. “No – please. *Please*. She has to live! I’ve given my life to save her. It can’t be for nothing. She can’t die!”

Surya shook her head, unable to answer for the tears that choked her throat. Oh God.

The flickering of the flames in the pit stilled as if they were listening.

“Do something!” the woman pleaded, raising her blistered hands. “Anything!”

My daughter.

The voice was deafening, painful, ringing in Surya’s head with the joyful roar of wildfire and the terrible, triumphant scream of hunting birds. She had never heard it before – had never hoped to hear it – yet it was so familiar to her that it might have been the echo of her

own voice. Without realizing she had moved, Surya was flat on the ground, her face pressed into the earth, her heart jumping into a shocked, irregular rhythm. There was a soft thud behind her as the other woman copied her movement.

“My ... my Mother?” Surya whispered hesitantly.

You cry, daughter. What would you ask of me?

“I—I am sorry. I never meant...”

Daughter.

Warmth and comfort settled over Surya’s trembling body, as if God’s hand had touched her. Even in the midst of her turmoil, she felt a smile curving her lips, tears of joy welling in her eyes and soaking into the moss. She took a deep breath, easing herself up from her prone position to look down at the fragile, dying shell of the child reia.

“Holy Mother. Please. I do not want the little girl to die. Can she be saved, Mother? Can you save her life?”

If you ask the gift of me, my faithful one, I will grant it.

There was a gentle warning in the voice.

Surya hesitated. She knew the laws of balance as well as any living woman. Life and death must always be even. If the Holy Mother intervened, then the equilibrium of the world would be disturbed. What life was given ... must also be taken. A shiver went down Surya’s spine.

“What – what are the consequences?”

Zabira was born for this death. If instead she lives, many

other lives will also be changed, now and for ever.

“Can you tell me what her fate may be?”

I cannot.

Surya winced at the finality of the answer. “No. I’m sorry. Mother, can you tell me – should I ask this?”

I can only tell you what you already know. There must be balance. If Zabira is to live, my daughter, there will be a price.

The beautiful, terrible voice of God paused. Then it named a price that made the noirin’s heart bump wildly in her chest. She slowly lifted her gaze from where it rested on the reia’s pallid face, and stared into the sacred fire. The flames were so still now that the green and blue ripples looked like the surface of a calm pool of water. A myriad thoughts burst into her head in that one instant, even as her lips were opening to frame the reply.

“Great Mother, I ask you to save her life.”

There was a sigh, a sound of sorrow that stirred the dry leaves of the lir trees.

Then the voice came again.

Bring her to me.