



CHAPTER
ONE

OUTSIDE THE WALLS OF GARMASHING, CAPITAL OF GYONGXE
IN THE CANYON OF THE TOM SHO RIVER
FAR TO THE EAST OF WINDING CIRCLE TEMPLE
IN THE MONTH OF CARP MOON

Two boy-men sat on the river's eastern bank, where an open-fronted tent gave them shelter from the chilly spring wind. It whistled down the canyon, making the banners around them snap.

Briar Moss was the older of the two, sixteen and a fully accredited mage of the Living Circle school in Emelan. He was the foreigner, his skin a light shade of bronze, his nose long and thin, his eyes a startling gray-green in this land of brown-eyed easterners. He wore a green silk quilted tunic patterned with light green willow leaves, gold-brown quilted breeches, and the calf-high soft boots that were popular in the mountains. He sat cross-legged on cushions with a traveling desk on his lap, but his eyes were fixed just now on the events across the river.

There five shamans from the Skipping Mountain Goat Tribe stood before a sheer rock face on the cliff opposite Briar and his

companion. Crouched near to the shamans were two horn players, a drummer, and three players of singing bowls. The musicians sounded their instruments. Briar would not call what they produced “music.” The shamans — three men and two women in dark brown homespun robes — shuffled, turned, and hopped, ringing the small cymbals that were fixed to their hands. As they did, Briar started to feel a quiver under his rump. The longer the shamans danced, the more pronounced the quiver grew.

“What are they *doing*?” he asked the boy who sat nearby. “Aren’t you worried?”

The God-King looked up from his own desk. The ruler of Gyongxe was an eleven-year-old boy with the ruddy bronze skin, long brown eyes, and short, wide nose of his people. He was dressed even more simply than the shamans in an undyed, black-bordered long-sleeved tunic, undyed quilted breeches, and black boots. Like most Gyongxin boys and girls, he wore his shiny black hair cut very short, with one exception. From the moment he had been chosen as God-King, he had grown the hair at the crown of his head long. He wore it in a braid, strung with rings of precious metals or semiprecious stones, each a symbol of the eleven gods he served. He also wore eleven earrings, six in one ear, and five in the other, made of the same materials.

“Why should I be worried? I told you what they’re doing,” the God-King reminded Briar. “They’re calling a statue for their temple out of the cliff. It does involve a little bit of shaking.”

Briar looked at the ink in the dish by his side. It quivered, too. “What if the cliff falls on us?” he demanded. “How do you know they’re doing it right?”

The God-King chuckled. “They always do it right. That’s

why there's more than one dancer, so if one gets a step wrong, the others correct for it. People have been getting statues from Gyongxe's stone for generations, Briar. They haven't pulled the cliffs down yet." He nodded to a waiting messenger and held up a hand for that young woman's scroll.

Briar scowled at the river, then at the dancing shamans. "This kind of religion is too odd for me," he muttered to himself.

He looked at the group of people near the shamans, trying to spot his student, Evvy. There she was with some of the local stone mages and the warriors who had escorted the shamans. Evvy was standing far too close to the cliff for Briar's liking. Suddenly he grinned. First Dedicate Dokyi, head of Gyongxe's Living Circle temple and a stone mage himself, wound a big fist in Evvy's tunic and gently towed her back from the cliff. Ever since Briar and his companions had arrived in Garmashing between blizzards four months ago, the busy First Dedicate had made time in his day to instruct Evvy. That morning he had told Briar that he, too, wanted to see how the shamans worked — it was very different from the way the scholar-mages did their magic — and so it would be his pleasure also to keep an eye on Evvy.

Briar was grateful. Evvy had frustrated the few other Earth dedicates they had met who specialized in stone magic. Like Dokyi, they worked their magic with charts, books, and spoken words, letting the magic they were born with pass through stones that responded. Evvy, like Briar and Briar's mentor Dedicate Rosethorn, drew her magic directly from the outside world. Stones gave Evvy her power, just as plants gave their magic to Briar and Rosethorn. Dokyi at least had spent years with the shamans and in other lands. He could adjust to a mage who worked

in a different way. He could show Evvy the books, charms, and spells of stone magic that could strengthen what she did. He could also sense when she tried to experiment on her own and stop her before things got out of hand. His special stones helped him with that.

“Should I make Evvy come here?” Briar asked the God-King, who was reading his message scroll.

“Hmm?” The younger boy looked up and grinned. “Let her stay. Dokyi can handle her. Ah, they make progress.”

If “progress” meant “more noise,” Briar agreed. Small rocks and sand fell down the cliff face, though nothing appeared to land on the shamans, musicians, or other mages who waited there. Briar suspected that Evvy was sending the stones away from the people, particularly when he saw one large rock arc away from the cliff to drop in the river.

Needing something to occupy his hands, Briar picked up one of a number of stones that Evvy had left with him before she had crossed the river with Dokyi. She was always collecting bits of rock and handing them to him or Rosethorn while she gathered more. Before they moved on there would be a painful session at which she would have to choose the pieces she could not do without and those she would have to abandon.

After nearly two years in Evvy’s company, Briar knew limestone when he held it. The surprise lay in the image embedded deep in its surface: a curved section of leaf much like a fern. Interestingly, it was unlike any fern that Briar knew — and after five years of Rosethorn’s teaching, he knew many. He stared at the cliff across the river, not really noticing the twenty-foot-tall rectangular crack that was writing itself into the rock face.