

Chapter 2

S'Lua

The violet pre-dawn lightened, already an orange tint showing on the horizon, a fine thread of fire where it met the eastern horizon of the planet. The undersides of the low cumulus formations reflected both blue and orange, with graded shades of green between. And, above this, violet, scattered with silver dust, thick streamers here, and isolated pin-pricks there. Fire, emerald, and indigo coruscated in iridescent splendour on the broad surface of the lazy river. Reeds stood in stark relief against the brightness, their leafy umbrellas forming a horizontal barrier between the river and the sky, the slim vertical stems creating rainbow panels of randomly varying width.

S'Lua sat on a smooth rock just yards from the water line on the gently sloping bank. She sat with legs folded and tucked in, body slightly bowed in the direction of the river, as still as the reeds in the windless pre-dawn, her hands one in the other, palms up, in her lap. Her crown of fine hair was haloed in fire, then emerald, as the ripples reflected first one then the other in her direction. Her eyes, unfocussed, gazed in the general direction of the river, seeing nothing, or perhaps seeing everything. Her slight figure remained unmoving, a slender statue lit by the rising suns, until blue Warrior was clear of the horizon and amber Mother, four times larger, had half emerged, turning the river into liquid honey. A gentle breeze came from sunward, stirring the fronds of the reeds into a gently hissing sway, breaking the spell.

S'Lua breathed deeply, her exhalation merging with the susurrant of the reeds, her body swaying in harmony, her hair a mobile corona of orange-gold. Her amber eyes slowly lost the glazed, unfocussed, stare and dilated against the increasing brightness. She felt elated, as always, and at one with her surroundings, a part of the river, the reeds, the golden rays from above. Tendrils of other awarenesses crept into her consciousness, as gently as the zephyr which stirred the fronds ahead of her. She focused inwardly on one, a timid, questing, presence. She held the thread, gently, and drew it in, gently, oh so gently. Ahead, a reed

trembled, and the grass below parted as a small furry shape emerged, a puff-ball of subdued silver, with two large round ears just behind a small pink, quivering, pointed snout. Two round eyes gazed into her own, as the creature stopped a few paces away. *Come, Chua, come.* S' Lua identified, the mouse came, scuttling forward on its tiny legs, a trail of dark dew-swept grass behind, until it arrived at her knees. Then, sitting up on its hind legs, it placed its forepaws on her legs, and hopped up into her lap. S' Lua gently raised a hand, and scratched *Chua* behind the ears. With her free hand she deposited a small amount of grain in her lap, just ahead of *Chua's* snout. The tiny forepaws scrabbled in the grain, the questing snout tucked between them, and soon S' Lua revelled in a sensation of satisfaction and content, emanating from the little rodent.

Suddenly, the mouse froze, broadcasting terror, and made himself as small as possible, shrinking into S' Lua's lap. Simultaneously, S' Lua detected blood-lust, a cruel ferocity, arriving at a great speed. Her head jerked up, reflexively, in time to see a stooping hawk directly overhead. Her right hand whipped up, palm upwards, as though to protect herself. *No, Chil!* The thought arched upwards, and the bird's plummeting descent was checked in a clap of displaced air as both wings extended immediately, beating fiercely downwards, until the hawk settled gently beneath S' Lua's raised arm. Wings now folded, the hawk looked accusingly at S' Lua and then at his intended breakfast - who, fur flattened against its skin, was still striving for invisibility - and then back at S' Lua. Still holding *Chua's* awareness with a part of her mind, projecting comfort, S' Lua grappled with *Chil's* hunger-lust, trying to erase the image of the silver rodent from the bird's mind, substituting a vague food-need in its place. Lowering her arm, she reached into her pocket and produced a strip of dried meat, intended for the omnivorous *Chua*, and offered it to the bird. Head cocked on one side, hooked beak open, the hawk looked disdainfully at the proffered morsel, then deciding that the mouse did not look quite as large or as appetising as he had imagined, plucked the meat from S' Lua's hand, and using one foot to anchor it to the ground, proceeded to devour it, apparently with relish. S' Lua kept projecting images of repletion at *Chil*, while stroking his feathered back. *Chua*, still frozen, had burrowed down between S' Lua's legs, invisibility almost accomplished. Breakfast finished, the hawk looked again at S' Lua with slightly less disdain this time, and, on an

illusion of a full belly, took wing again. When he had become a dot in the sky, S' Lua scooped little *Chua* out of her skirt, and gave him her full attention until the fear vibrations had died away. She then rose, carrying the little rodent in the palm of her hand to the edge of the reeds where she gently lowered him, and watched him scurry away.

The suns had risen well past the Eastern horizon, and S' Lua' s life-awareness had dimmed more than usual. The effort of consciously fighting the hawk' s natural instincts had left her drained, her mind blunted by the bird' s blood-lust. This was not her first experience of commanding a creature, but she preferred to control by persuasion and trust rather than by force of will. It was always easier and more rewarding to establish a rapport with a bird or animal than to fight a will, particularly one that was part of a creature' s nature. Protecting herself was easier by far than saving a beast from another - her Talent took over without any conscious effort on her part, though the aftermath was frightening, and she couldn' t stop shaking for hours. Seeing herself in the creature' s mind as the object of it' s hunger, blood-lust, or even fear, was a terrifying experience.

A wolf had tried once, an animal injured by the men of her village while raiding their poultry. She had been caught unawares on one of her dawn excursions, her mind focused on a small doe which had come to drink at the river. Suddenly, breaking through her rapport with the doe, came a feral desire for her own flesh, a thirst for her blood, and a hatred for her kind. Wrenching her awareness away from the doe, which had picked up the same signals and fled, she had turned around to see the grey shape almost on her. She had thrown her hands forward, palms out, towards the wolf, in a gesture of self-protection. The animal, slavering and now snarling deep in its throat, had recoiled as if struck by a weapon, yelping in pain. She had stood there, arms outstretched, and watched the animal writhing in pain, almost at her feet, until finally, frothing pinkly at the mouth, it had quivered and lain still, quite dead. Only then had she lowered her arms. Since then, some unconscious reflex had enabled her to project a deterrent to all hunting creatures, which prevented any attack on her person. She became aware of this, on occasion, but could not decide if it was due to her instinct for self preservation or her aversion to hurting any creature, even those which intended to hurt her.

S' Lua turned wearily, and eyes downcast, started making her way up the shallow river bank.

As she neared the top, she looked upwards, and froze in shock. Standing at the top, an expression of dismay - almost horror - on her face, was S' Tela, her mother. Wordlessly, S' Tela extended a hand to help her nine-year-old daughter up the incline, and then, kneeling, embraced her tightly, tremblingly. She then rose, and taking her daughter' s hand, led her back towards Stil, no word passing between them on the homeward route.

Another Talent had been uncovered.

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