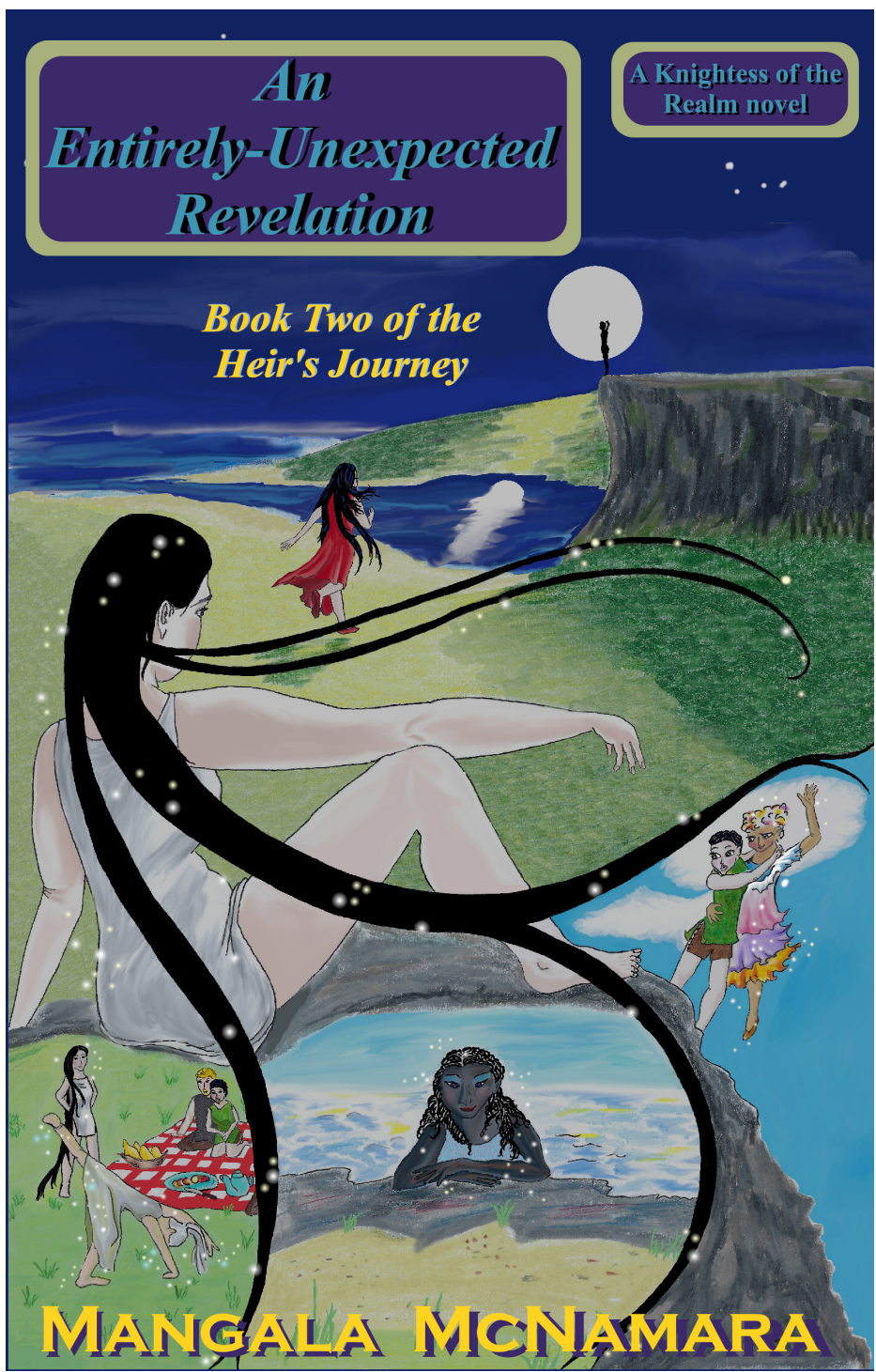


A SNEAK PEEK THROUGH CHAPTER ONE!!

*An
Entirely-Unexpected
Revelation*

A *Knights of the
Realm* novel

*Book Two of the
Heir's Journey*



MANGALA MCNAMARA



*“You must ask the Goddess to heal him.
That’s a fatal wound, Karana. His skull is cracked and blood pools
against his brain.”*

“No!” Karana gasped, her strength quite wrung out. Kefen lay unmoving, his head in her lap, the huge purpling bruise standing out from his forehead by nearly an inch.

“And to each their time must come. Perhaps it is simply his time.”

The words were almost harsh, but the tone somehow carried a compassion that was... beyond human. As if this strange, silvery woman knew of sorrow and loss beyond what others could comprehend.

“No!” Karana cried again. “It can’t be!”

“And why not?” the strange, silvery woman asked, seeming merely curious.

“Because – because–” Words failed the knightess, and she bent her head.

“Because?”

“Because I don’t want him to die,” Karana whispered.

“We never want those we cherish to die,” the silvery woman said calmly. “And yet they all do. Why not this one? Why not now? What is he to you that you would ask the Great Goddess to save him?”

Karana shook with tears she could not shed. “He is my Bound Companion.”

*What else could she say after all?
It was Ivan’s ring on her finger. All Karana had of Kefen was an
unsigned contract under review by a coterie of lawyers.
And kisses and... more... and a lifetime’s worth of promises in eyes
that were molten chocolate when they met hers...*



*AN
ENTIRELY-UNEXPECTED
REVELATION*

Book Two of the Heir's Journey

(A Knightess of the Realm Novel)



MANGALA MCNAMARA

RISING DRAGON BOOKS

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, places or people, living or dead, is coincidental.

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*For my most faithful fans who bought copies
of A Not-So-Simple Mission in Summer 2023
(there's a special offer in the Author's Note just
for you!)*



*And for my friends who have learned startling
things about themselves and their pasts and
handled it all with grace and humor and
understanding. You are proof that love is a
product of Nurture.*



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Prologue

A Reminder of What Came Before

S EVEN YEARS AGO, A TERRIBLE out-of-season storm wracked the Merutian Sea on Midsummer's Day.

In Wave, on the far southwestern coast of Dawil, one young girl had anxiously awaited her captain-mother's safe return. Karana got her wish, but Restella Endeiroff Metreedi's legendary career was ended with a triply-broken leg that would never properly heal. She'd brought her entire crew home safe and sound and would be forever after known as *'The Captain,'* not only to the Metreedi fleet, but to *all* the fleets.

A paltry trade, to a woman who had lived for the sea.

And a daunting reputation for her young daughter to follow on.

Some thousand miles inland, on that same Midsummer's Day, the province of Taridawil vanished – people and all – to be replaced by a desert of black sand.

Unlike the storm, the reason for the appearance of the desert was clear: an Evil Wizard, who styled himself 'Henig,' had appeared before the King's Court in Tallspire on Midsummer's Eve. Henig had made dire demands of King Theolore, threatening to turn his most prosperous vassal-province – the original province of Dawil and the home of the Realm's most ancient kings – into a desert were his demands not met.

A more preposterous claim had never been heard, since Dawil was the most magickless country on the Merutian Sea. A thousand years earlier, perhaps, when magick had been rife throughout the land, but surely it wasn't possible *now...*

MANGALA McNAMARA

The king had refused the Wizard's demands... to devastating effect.

The Desert of Blackness encompassed a third of the Realm, including the most productive farmland – a minor famine was precipitated not only across Dawil, but across the known world when Taridawilm wheat was no longer available for export. Some two hundred thousand people – including Duke Randall Saralath, his lady Leone, and his daughter and Heir, the Ducal-Princess Yelena – vanished at the stroke of midnight.

Taridawil's vassal-fiefs were not directly affected, though some eventually had to be abandoned because there was no way to get safely around the desert to reach them. The king, as Lord of Tallspire province, and various Great Lords and Ladies of other, contiguous, provinces 'adopted' the 'orphaned' fiefs – accepting their tax monies in return for representing their needs to the Royal Council.

And Duke Randall's twelve-year-old son, who was serving as a page in the royal castle – and was also orphaned at the stroke of midnight – collapsed in shock.

King Theolore sent knights and armies to deal with the Evil Wizard.

They knew where to find him. Henig had sent word that he was lairing in what was left of Duke Randall's capitol and castle, the fabled Keep of Taridawil, the only structure in the world built entirely of Living Stone.

But the Wizard had drawn about him vile monsters and the heat and sands of the Desert were deadly in and of themselves. Those few who managed to actually confront Henig's hordes – after wandering aimlessly and seemingly endlessly – were too mazed with thirst and exhaustion to present a credible threat.

At last, a détente was accepted.

The king sent no more warriors.

The wizard created no more havoc... though surely there was no assurance he would not or could not.

Four years passed in this manner, with Dawil – and the world – slowly recovering from the terrible loss. Dawil's economy continued to bleed like an open wound, and only the efforts of the Metreedi Family and Lord Andros of Wave could even attempt to staunch the outflow of talent and money to other lands where the nobles seemed more able to protect their people against such incursions.

One of the efforts of the Metreedi Family to do this involved sending the Head of House's daughter and Heir – Karana, now sixteen years old – to marry a member of the nobility in distant Mountainmeadow province. The plan was to use her marriage to leverage her crusty and conservative father-in-law-to-be, Lord Jaycoff Torvalds, and build new trade-routes to the kingdoms that lay beyond his demesne. New trade routes, which might prove a lifeline to struggling northeastern Dawil.

However, it was not to be.

AN ENTIRELY-UNEXPECTED REVELATION

The caravan of Metreedi cousins and ‘out-cousins’ (men and women closely related, but who didn’t bear the name) escorting Karana and her parents to her betrothal was set upon in the Forest of Ryylyn on Midsummer’s Day, less than a day’s carriage-ride from their destination. Restella Endeiroff Metreedi lived up to her fearless reputation and stood beside her husband and kin – after requiring Karana to hide in a secret compartment of the carriage.

Karana was the only survivor.

She emerged into a scene of horror... none of the remains of the caravaneers were identifiable. Some few of the slain were, however, distinct... and distinctly not-human. Because surely blood had never flowed in those colors, nor skin looked like... *that*. Monsters, in form and behavior, and Karana recalled that her mother had guessed that these were minions of the Wizard Henig... though how Restella had guessed, her daughter had no idea.

Traumatized and terrified, the young woman – for surely after seeing this she couldn’t be a *girl* anymore – searched the area exhaustively for survivors. She gave up and fled only as night began to fall and scavengers started to gather.

And thus began a year’s-long travail, for try as she might – and she *was* nearly a journeyman navigator in the most particular fleet in the world – Karana could not find the King’s Road. At such close distance to Thimblestone Keep – Lord Jaycoff’s ancestral home – she should have been able to find help almost immediately.

Instead, she was forced to scabble for survival, relying on skills she’d never wanted – inland survival skills learned under the tutelage of shepherds tasked to teach her as a punishment for her misbehavior at sea. The southern girl who had never so much as *seen* snow was forced to endure an entire season of it with no better shelter than a drafty, abandoned shed... and no more nourishment than what animals she could bring down with the bow and arrows she had managed to salvage from the massacre and what roots and plants she could identify in the strange-to-her northern clime.

When at last – in what seemed to be late Spring – she found the Road again, it was barely a stone’s-throw from the hut she had huddled in. And she was no longer a short walk from Lord Jaycoff’s castle, but rather nearly a thousand miles south and west and in sight of the king’s Crystal Castle in Tallspire.

After gathering herself, Karana made her way to the King’s Court – it luckily being an Audience Day, when all and sundry might beg His Majesty’s attention – and demanded justice for her slain kin.

To her dismay, King Theolore informed her that there was no such justice to be had.

MANGALA McNAMARA

In fact, he intended to hand her over to Henig – regretfully, but immediately. The Evil Wizard had appeared here a year ago – on Midsummer’s Day – in a rage. He had demanded that the king locate and surrender ‘a maiden named Karana’ within three years of that day or he would render the whole of Dawil – from frozen Sea’sHaven in the north to prosperous Wave in the south – as much of a desert as he had done Taridawil.

Horrified at being turned over to the likely instigator of her parents’ and cousins’ murders – and for who-knew-what dark and dire purpose – Karana proposed a desperate alternative. *She* would train as a knight for the remainder of the allotted time – two years – and then face the Wizard herself, aye. Not in chains, but with sword in hand, and call him to account herself!

The king seemed on the verge of refusing such the outlandish, impossible, and quite probably even *dangerous*, request. After all, if Henig should discover her whereabouts or be offended by this attempt, might he not wreak his plan upon Dawil out of pique?

And then... without explanation... King Theolore acceded to her request.

Karana had no explanation for it, though surely the king must have known who she was. She hadn’t denied it after all, and he had known her parents – her father as Head of House, and her mother as the former naval captain who had retrieved him from his ill-fated Royal Heir’s Journey. Her own Lord Andros of Wave – her ‘Uncle Andry’ – was there in the King’s Court as well, though he held silent for some reason.

But she was too tired and half-starved to think through all the parts of the problem right then – and later, she was too busy.

For the King named her a squire and Bound her, by Dawilm tradition, to two other squires. Knights in that country always earned their shields as sets of three Companions, the better to support each other and serve their king. Karana would be the first woman knight in over a hundred years – though women still served in all the other armed forces of the nation.

The young woman spent the next two years learning the things knights knew and she did not – largely swordwork and mounted combat, since her training as Heir to House Metreedi had been extremely thorough in all other aspects. Her Companions aided her to train and became her dearest and most trusted friends – they didn’t resent being Bound to the first woman training as a knight and they seemed less disdainful of merchants than did most nobles. Kefen – the late Duke’s son, though for sorrow’s sake he never mentioned that fact – was more than willing to help her plan the mission to deal with Henig; golden-haired Ivan – Lord Jaycoff’s youngest son, who like Kefen never mentioned his lineage, though for different reasons – seemed much less sanguine about the project.

AN ENTIRELY-UNEXPECTED REVELATION

Karana's remaining hours were taken up with running her merchant empire. She had inherited her position as Head of House upon her father's death, after all. And House Metreedi's place in the world had deeper roots than kings and noblemen know... Karana's responsibilities went far beyond what her young Companions rather condescendingly assumed to be mere merchants' concerns.

Upon the actual day of their knighting, Ivan deserted the other two, storming out of the public ceremony with great flair. Nor did he come with Kefen and Karana on their dread mission.

It was a two-fold mission in the end – to discover Henig's purpose in demanding Karana be turned over... as well as to destroy him. The first part was easier than they had anticipated. They confronted Henig on top of the Duke's Tower, the highest point of Taridawil Keep at high noon on the Midsummer's Day of the third year since his ultimatum. The Evil Wizard was charming and genteel; enigmatic, but talkative, revealing Kefen's identity as Heir to the fallen province almost sympathetically while claiming some mysterious bond between himself and the young woman – the 'knightess' as the king had styled her when she declined to be named a 'lady.'

In the end, Karana distracted the fell Wizard while Kefen vanquished the Wizard's ogre minions and then they both acted together to slay Henig.

With Kefen's need for vengeance sated, his long-suppressed grief poured out. He fell to his knees, weeping... and never saw Henig's body vanish and his blood *crawl* across the stone to soak the dress Karana had worn to distract the Wizard.

What Kefen did *not* miss was the surge of magickal Power that seemed to be born from his contact with the Living – though seemingly somnolent – Stone of Taridawil Keep. It spread from his hands, washing out over the Keep and beyond in a golden wave– and Restoring all it touched.

To the young knight's delight, it brought back all the *people* of his province. They were aged seven years, their city overgrown with plants, their fabric and basketry – and food – rotted, but they *lived!* All but his father and mother and sister seemed to have been Restored with Henig's death.

In his overwhelming delight at the Restoration of Taridawil, Kefen lifted Karana up and kissed her...

...it was shocking, and not merely because Karana had never allowed herself to think beyond surviving this engagement. She had watched Kefen and Ivan cast longing glances at *each other* for two long years and carefully kept herself from thinking about any future other than returning to her fulltime work for House Metreedi.

That Kefen should kiss *her*... if anything, she had thought it had been *Ivan* who had flirted with her, but there had been too many stories of how *he* was a man for the ladies, for all that he'd been entirely circumspect while she'd known him.

MANGALA McNAMARA

...but the only Heir to a devastated province needs the allies that a marriage can provide. The *noble* allies.

...and the Head of the premier merchant House in the world has other responsibilities...

One kiss... and then neither of them spoke of it again. For fear of what it might or might not mean and could or could not be.

One kiss... that complicated everything they knew of each other and every dream they might each have for the future. Or that the future might have for them.

One kiss... and Karana overheard Kefen telling their Companion – for Ivan had awaited them outside of Taridawil’s borders, claiming to have been magickally turned back from crossing the desert and even from passing the Restored temperate jungle. She overheard Kefen saying that maybe it was all for the best that it had been *only* one kiss...

Conversation with Ivan on that ride back made her aware that it was one of his brothers to whom she was to have been betrothed – not himself, he *very* quickly disabused her of *that* notion – and that Lord Jaycoff might still wish to enforce that betrothal contract. Which of the unwed Torvalds brothers was to have been the choice of the Head of House Metreedi... her father when the contract was signed, but now herself. It was another piece of the giant mess that was what was left in the wake of Henig’s demise.

But they were still her best friends – despite her mixed feelings for Kefen and her sense of betrayed trust for Ivan. Karana was nothing if not sensible, practical, and eminently responsible... no matter if it hurt. She set it all aside as they returned to Tallspire to make their report to King Theolore.

His Majesty named them both Heroes of the Realm and paraded and fêted them. He inducted Kefen into the Royal Council as a junior member – the soon-to-be Second Peer of the Realm, second only to the king himself. And he began to show Kefen how the process worked and to teach him the art of rule as aid was assembled and sent to damaged Taridawil. Kefen set to with a will, showing an attitude that his masters at the knights’ training academy had despaired for lack of in all his years as a page and squire.

He showed so very *much* will, in fact, that King Theolore tired of his questions and importuning. His Majesty sent for all three Companions and assigned them to the task of guarding his only daughter, the Crown-Princess-Presumptive Karivas, on her Heir’s Journey to the Blessed Isle to seek the Goddess’ Favor on her future reign.

It should have been a simple mission...

...but the princess was determined – as, indeed, was every noblemaiden in the land, it seemed – to capture Kefen as her husband. Even the formidable lady Mendria of Delta, Fifth Peer of the Realm and with a province contiguous with damaged Taridawil, had her eye on the naïve young ducal-prince.

AN ENTIRELY-UNEXPECTED REVELATION

In seeking to evade the matrimonial intentions of both Princess Karivas and the Lady of Delta, the three Companions hatched a plan.

It was *supposed* to have been a pretense that they were all three lovers of long-standing. The rumor had been floating around Court for Karana's entire tenure as a squire after all: a young woman surrounded by boys, actually *Bound* as Companion to two of them... rumors had likely been inevitable.

It had *begun* as a pretense.

It hadn't continued that way.

Because Karana hadn't been wrong about Ivan's attentions – to herself or to Kefen. Nor Kefen's return interest. Nor *her* attraction to *both* young men.

...and there was still some a dark and sorrowful history between the young men. A history that seemed to have much to do with Ivan's father, the powerful Lord of Mountainmeadow. It was a history that neither of them seemed willing to confide to Karana, but one that seemed to alternately draw them together and break them apart.

In short, it was an unGodly mess.

When word arrived during their sojourn in Lady Mendria's palace that Lord Jaycoff was coming to Delta and bringing one each of Ivan's six brothers and six sisters with him, the fearless golden Ivan collapsed in stark terror. He was sure that his lord father was going to call for the king to surrender Ivan's oath – as any father or mother of noblebirth might do – and force him to return to Mountainmeadow and never again see his beloveds.

And Ivan also suspected that Lord Jaycoff was planning to use that unfulfilled betrothal contract to force Karana to wed his brother... and likely play for leverage to force Kefen to wed his sister.

It was then that the three Companions finally faced their feelings for each other and hatched a plot to save Ivan from his father. If they could *prove* that Ivan and Karana were already lovers after all... it should seem more difficult for Lord Jaycoff to use the betrothal contract for anything other than to see the pair of *them* wed, no matter which son he would prefer to see in that position.

Which left Kefen out. But he had heard of the notion – begun in Karana's home-province of Wave – of '*triad-marriage*.'

A custom of centuries-long provenance, it allowed a relationship consisting of *three* people to be legally formed and spiritually sanctified. The spiritual basis had been established because the Lord (or Lady) of Wave was always ceremonially wedded to the Goddess of the Sea in addition to their human spouse. The Sea might be a jealous Mistress but as a Wife was perfectly willing to share. It was a peaceful and entirely possible resolution to what otherwise could only be a tragic love-triangle.

MANGALA McNAMARA

Karana was overjoyed when Kefen suggested this solution – and then dismayed when he wasn't ready to discuss it with Ivan. She was born and bred of the southern provinces where such things were uncommon but unexceptionable; they were northerners where even the marriages of pairs of men or pairs of women were still looked at askance and were certainly only to be expected of the lower classes. The sons of two of the highest noblehouses in the land simply *couldn't*...

But, perhaps, with time to get used to the idea, they *could*. Or... at least Kefen might be willing to discuss it with their golden-haired Companion. Karana reluctantly agreed to keep silent for now.

Setting the remainder of their plan into action earned them the ire of the powerful Lady of Delta, but they ended up aboard the ship designated to take the princess and her attendants to the Blessed Isle.

It was a ship captained by Karana's own uncle, Hesorn Endeiroff, her mother's younger brother now become Captain-Admiral of the Royal Navy. The young woman had been climbing around on ships run by her uncle since she could toddle, and the sea was a second home to her after Metreedi House in Wave. After three long years ashore and far more than her share of terror, starvation, and sorrow, Karana could at last feel relaxed and entirely free to be not just who she was, but dream again of who she had always *wanted to be*.

Unfortunately, the dream of being the captain of her own ship owned fully and free of obligation even to Metreedi House... was a poor fit with being either Kefen's Duchess in Taridawil or Head of House Metreedi. The Head of House was supposed to keep herself out of harm's way and direct others – for good reason, as witness what had happened to her papa – and Taridawil... was landlocked.

Her contract with Lord Jaycoff stipulated that whichever of his sons – and of course it could only ever be Ivan – married her would become a Metreedi. But of the two young men, Ivan seemed the one less likely to take well to being a 'mere merchant' and Karana wasn't sure how to tell him – or either of them – of the far broader responsibilities and powers of her House.

Not to mention that Ivan had been in a terrible snit when they boarded the ship, having somehow decided that she was trying to *buy his favors*.

However, the enforced quietude of the ship journey provided enough time for the three young knights to sort themselves out.

For Ivan and Karana to come to a better understanding of each other's world views, hopes, and fears.

For the three of them to discuss *triad-marriage* and begin to see how it might work for them.

And... less happily... for the three of them to discuss at last what had happened in the confrontation with Henig on Taridawil's high Tower. To discuss it... and to realize that the Evil Wizard Henig was the *Queen's younger brother*.

AN ENTIRELY-UNEXPECTED REVELATION

They were not able to determine, by parsing their memories, whether it was clear that King Theolore and his pretty Queen *knew* the identity of their nemesis and had sent Karana in good faith or poor. These were, after all, the same royal couple to whom all three young knights were vassal-sworn. And the parents of the same royal maiden they were escorting on this ship and who was *still* trying to flirt with Kefen – though he swore he saw her only as the ‘little sister’ he and Ivan had entertained with puzzles and games at children’s parties when they were pages.

Merely to speak their fears aloud could be construed as high treason. They were on a Royal Navy ship after all, and no matter that the captain was Karana’s closest living kin and she was a darling of the crew, half of whom had sailed for her mother. The two young men were nobles and literally *entitled* to a trial, but as a commoner – no matter her family’s long provenance and critical role in the Realm and the world – it would be up to the king as to whether Karana merited one. She would have her own title if she wed either of them – or both. But for knights such a marriage needed to be approved by... the holder of their oaths. Who was, in this case, the king.

Kefen swore his first – and likely illegal, as he had not yet the right – oath as duke to protect her no matter what.

And they began to formally solve their problems by having Ivan propose to her... and as if that act were a harbinger of peace, things began to settle.

They were not a full day’s sail from the Blessed Isle when the frustrated and restive young princess came to Karana, begging her to free Kefen to marry *her*. She showed Karana a long list of little boys and old men – the most ‘eligible’ princes and kings and lords for three countries in each direction and whom the princess might be importuned to wed. And when Karana’s reluctant sympathy for the spoiled child was fully stirred... she reverted to type and became most thoroughly obnoxious and arrogant.

In the resulting spat – during which Karana made the princess look a fool and then sought to make amends – a great wave and a wind arose up out of the ocean with no sign or warning. It was enough to remind everyone aboard of the disaster of King Theolore’s own Journey as Crown Prince-Presumptive and the legends that no one made it to the Blessed Isle save those whom the Great Goddess of All deigned to have visit Her.

The ship tipped and rocked and when the water and breath of the sea subsided...

Karana and the princess, Kefen and the princess’ nurse...

Were gone.





Chapter ONE

Blessings of the Day

KARANA WAS LAYING ON SOMETHING hard.
And it was very bright. And hot.
Very, *very* hot.

She peeled open eyes that seemed crusted with... sand.

She was lying on sand. On her stomach, the sand grinding into her left cheek.

The young woman remembered Princess Karivas toppling over into the ocean, and dragging Karana with her. She remembered her panicky determination not to let the princess go – so long as she held onto the girl, she could probably swim them both up to the surface in time.

But then the sea had gone wild.

The stories were true. The Wind-Goddess would not abide whistling on a ship.

That made *all* of this the knightess' fault.

Karana started to drag herself to a sitting position and realized her hand was cramped and her movement constricted. She had to consciously look to see what was preventing her from moving.

Somehow... somehow, she still held the princess' hand.

Her mind seemed dull, but she noted that the girl seemed to be breathing easily.

Carefully, the knightess sat up and used her free hand to pry her cramped fingers from the girl's wrist. Karivas would doubtless have a ring of bruises... and Karana could not even claim fairly that it had been necessary to save the princess's life. She had no memory of anything past the shock of the water, and the way the sea had begun to roil.

Had she somehow offended the *Sea-Queen* as well?

The late afternoon sunshine – surely this misadventure had taken longer than a mere handful of hours, but the position of the sun suggested otherwise – was beginning to bake her salt-encrusted skin. Karana never tanned, or burned, but she knew from two Winters in Tallspire that her skin could crack with dryness and the salt and sun were sucking the moisture from her shriveled fingers. The princess would likely be in worse shape yet.

She looked across the beach, trying to gather her thoughts.

Another figure lay sprawled farther on, green gown shredded, red hair splayed out like a splattering of dark blood. Karana forced herself to crawl close enough to positively identify Lady Mitarr, and determine that the royal nurse seemed also to be in a deep sleep. She looked a great deal younger in her heavy repose; perhaps she was actually closer in age to Mitael than to Their Majesties, though that would mean she'd been the princess' nursemaid since she was barely older than the royal maiden was now.

The knightess let herself collapse again once she had verified Lady Mitarr's fate.

Goddess, but she ached. Karivas had somehow fallen in a graceful arc, but Karana had been dragged, pell-mell, behind her, bruising herself on the railing and the hull both. Their entry to the water had been surprisingly gentle, and while she could not explain it, the knightess was grateful that every inch of skin did not smart from the great slap that she knew to expect when a dive went poorly.

It was almost as though...

As though the wind had scooped them up and laid her – them – gently on the surface of the wild wave that had erupted.

Silly fancy.

They must be on Kalapula – there was no land of any other sort for several days sailing in any direction. Therefore, assuming that the *Windy Osprey* had survived, they had only to wait for rescue.

Karana tried not to think what had happened to the ship King Theolore had been swept from on his own Heir's Journey to the Blessed Isle. *He* had been attempting to hunt pirates instead of follow his proper direction to Kalapula in complete contravention of his royal mother's command.

Not that she disagreed with the idea of hunting pirates, but a time and a place for everything and he'd had but one ship. There were better and more effective ways to do such things... though they'd been as successful as only the truly reckless can be.

AN ENTIRELY-UNEXPECTED REVELATION

But *this* ship, her uncle, her friends, her *Companions*... they had done nothing wrong. They *had* to be okay.

Water. She needed fresh water after all that salt – she felt dried inside and out. There were springs on the Blessed Isle. Nevermind that the Goddess-incarnate was supposed to live here; Uncle Hesorn had said he intended to refill his freshwater barrels.

Up, then.

The knightess pulled herself back up to a sitting position, then forced herself to stand. Bruises that hadn't yet made themselves known howled in protest as she did so. She took the time to stretch cramped muscles slowly.

The sea, to her side, seemed unreasonably placid. Karana sourly regarded the sparkling water that usually was all her heart's desires, then turned slowly to survey her surroundings from the vantage of standing height.

The beach was broad, and carpeted with clean, white sand, glittering with salt crystals. A hundred feet inland the grasses began, marking the edges of the salt-marsh that would absorb the high-tide lines. A hundred feet beyond that, perhaps, she saw true trees marching up a hillside. And beyond that: a forest, even small mountains. To her right, beyond Lady Mitarr's prostrate form, a dune rose up, blocking her view.

She turned to her left, hoping to see the telltales of a stream.

The beach curved away into the distance to the left, continuing on as far as her eye could see. There was something else washed ashore some distance off.

No, not *something*. *Someone*.

Short, dark hair, a dark tunic and pants... her heart caught, remembering who else had been on the deck.

Karana stumbled down the beach, trying to be careful not to break the crust of damp sand. It was hard enough to walk on the tide-packed sand now; if she had to force her way through soft, crumbly sand, she wasn't sure she'd make it, tired as she was, aching as she was.

She collapsed next to Kefen's still form. Too still. He was breathing, yes, and easily. At first, she thought that, like the women, he was merely in a deep sleep. But something didn't seem right, so she rolled him over and saw the huge bruise on his forehead. It was already coloring up and swelling so *much*. Too much. It was half the size of her balled fist, it seemed. Blood seeped slowly – whatever had made the bruise had hit hard enough to split the skin.

The young woman's mind blanked for a moment.

What could she do? A head injury like that could be... serious. She didn't dare think fatal.

No tools. No medicines. No *help*.

MANGALA MCNAMARA

Kalapula wasn't uninhabited – but she had no idea where they were in relation to anyone who might be of use.

No water.

She was becoming too dehydrated to think straight, and the small sandwich Ivan had given her seemed as if she had eaten it on another day entirely.

Ivan.

Karana dragged herself up again, her exhaustion and dehydration beating down on her, and surveyed the rest of the stretch of beach for her golden-haired Companion, but saw nothing. Her heart clenched – he had been right beside Kefen on the *Windy Osprey's* deck, last she knew – but she was too worn out even to react.

The knightess collapsed again beside the Companion who *had* washed up with her, gathering his head into her lap with a feeling of hopelessness. Tiredly, she leaned down to kiss his injury. She might have cried, but despite the ocean of saltwater in front of her, she was too dry to form tears.

Great Goddess, she thought desperately, *I'm the one who offended Your Sister. Don't let Kefen, or the princess... or even Lady Mitarr... suffer for my mistake... Please let Ivan and Uncle Hesorn and Cousin Ferry and... and everyone be on the ship and safe. Please.*

“You're here!” said a cheerful voice from behind her.

Karana twisted around as much as she could without disturbing Kefen's head in her lap.

A woman was coming down from the trees, picking her way gracefully through the reeds and marsh-grass. In the bright light, Karana could only make out that she seemed made of silver and cool greens. Could this be the Holy Priestess of the Isle that her uncle had mentioned?

“Holy Priestess?” Karana rasped, her throat too dry for words.

“Oh, goodness, no,” the woman smiled as she knelt down. “I'm Silvestria. Your friend looks like the trip didn't go so well for him.” She shook her head as Karana tried to dredge from her parched thoughts where she had heard that name before. “Kaliatra will have to have a word with Her little Sisters. Again. ‘Deliver My guests safely,’ She says, every time.”

She clucked her tongue in disapproval.

“Please help him,” the knightess tried to force the words out.

The woman – Silvestria – nodded. “Of course. Here, have some water,” she handed Karana a glass bottle wrapped in a leather strap. “You'll have to help me carry him, so you need a drink first,” she added when the conflict of Karana's desperate needs made the young woman hesitate.

A drink of water that was... just water, but tasted like the purest, cleanest water she had ever had. It cleared her throat and brought some color back to the young woman's dulled thoughts.

AN ENTIRELY-UNEXPECTED REVELATION

She stood again, carefully setting Kefen's head down first, and this time she felt like she had some strength. Her guilty glance back at the still-sleeping princess and her nurse – surely the king would expect her to tend first to his daughter over all else – did not go unnoticed by her mysterious savior.

“They’ll be fine,” the woman assured her. “This is Kalapula, after all. It’s this young man of yours that needs help right away.”

Between the two of them, they hoisted Kefen's limp form to their shoulders. Karana fair staggered under her half of his weight, but the stranger woman had no trouble at all, though she looked as slender and willowy as the princess.

The knightess wanted to ask how far it would be to whatever source of aid the woman was taking them... but it didn't matter. She would go as far as she had to go.

And it was *far*.

Up the beach. Along a solid trail through the salt-marsh – a family of crowned cranes eyed them curiously before stalking gracefully away. Then a shady path through the trees. The shade helped, as the water had helped, but Karana was near to complete collapse when they came to a small building of luminous white marble in a peaceful glade.

“The House of Kaliatra,” Silvestria said simply, and they entered.

The inside seemed larger than it could possibly have been, but still an intimate setting. The room was dominated by a very naturalistic, life-size carving of the Great Goddess Kaliatra, reclining on a marble bench as if She were sleeping, one knee propped up, one hand tucked behind the head; it seemed more the imagination of some creative sculptor than any pose one might expect for a representation of The Great Goddess of All. The statue was made of pale marble, too roseate to be white, too pale to be golden; and set with some dark stone – jet or black marble, perhaps – for Her Hair. A blanket of shimmering fabric was draped over the image, rendering the statue still more lifelike.

“Lay him down here,” Silvestria directed. Her cheerful demeanor had been replaced by a sense of... something deeper. And darker. And... did it even *matter* with Kefen in such terrible straits?

Karana looked askance at the cold, hard marble of the floor, and sank down to lower his body gently, again taking his head upon her lap. She smoothed Kefen's rumpled, salt-crustured hair out of his face, his skin also crackling with salt crystals.

“And now?” she asked, looking up at the strange, silvery-green woman who had brought them here.

“And now,” Silvestria said serenely, and there was in her voice a stillness as of an entire glade of trees *listening* somehow, for an answer that all the world awaited, “you must ask the Goddess to heal him. That's a fatal wound, Karana. His skull is cracked and blood pools against his brain.”

MANGALA McNAMARA

“No!” the knightess gasped, her strength – both physical and emotional – quite wrung out.

Silvestria nodded. “And to each their time must come. Perhaps it is simply his time.”

The words were almost harsh, but the tone somehow carried a compassion that was... beyond human. As if this woman knew of sorrow and loss beyond what others could comprehend.

“No!” Karana cried again. “It can’t be!”

“And why not?” the strange woman asked, seeming merely curious. That sense of the whole world awaiting an answer – of even the very trees surrounding this small temple leaning in to *listen* – was there again.

“Because – because–” Words failed the young woman, and she bent her head.

“Because?”

“Because I don’t want him to die,” she whispered. She still was too dry for tears, it seemed.

“We never want those we cherish to die,” Silvestria said calmly. “And yet they all do. Why not this one? Why not now?” Her interest seemed suddenly sharp and much less casual. Almost... dangerously *fierce*. “What is he to you that you would ask Kaliatra to save him?”

Karana shook with tears she could not shed. “He is my Bound Companion.”

What else *could* she say after all? It was Ivan’s ring on her finger. All Karana had of Kefen was an unsigned contract under review by a coterie of lawyers. And kisses and... *more...* and a lifetime’s worth of promises in eyes that were molten chocolate when they met hers...

“Ah.” The woman’s tone was somehow disappointed, and it was as if moonlight and darkness were able to express an opinion. “Merely that. And what would you give to see him healed?”

“My own life!” Karana exclaimed.

“Is your own life of so little value to you then? Or to him? Is this an exchange he would accept?”

Karana shook her head, no longer able even to think through the woman’s queries. All she could think of were Kefen’s warm brown eyes. He’d asked her to marry him at least three times – and she’d agreed, including in writing, at least twice. It was Ivan’s ring on her finger, but it was Kefen’s that her heart still whispered for. She loved them both, would be broken if anything had happened to Ivan... but losing Kefen... would more than break her. It would utterly destroy Ivan and dissolve away what lay between the two of them... assuming Ivan would even allow himself to continue living after Kefen was gone... She’d lose them *both*.

AN ENTIRELY-UNEXPECTED REVELATION

The dark-haired young prince knew her inside and out in ways she couldn't even begin to explain, even to herself. He knew Ivan just as well and in just as mysterious ways. Sometimes it felt like it was only through Kefen that she and their golden-haired Companion were able to come to a meeting of minds... and hearts...

But they *belonged* together, all three.

And everyone who saw them knew it – Lythia, Lorabelle and her querulous grandfather, Lady Mendria, Uncle Hesorn, even Princess Karivas. She'd only begun to realize it herself... hadn't yet begun to plumb the depths of what their love – *Kefen's* love – meant to her.

Karana bowed her head, her unraveling braids making a curtain of semi-privacy surrounding the two of them. Ivan should be here. She was grateful that he wasn't – if it meant that he was still safely aboard the *Windy Osprey* – but... Ivan should be here if there was nothing that could be done but to tell Kefen 'goodbye'.

"Silvi..." a voice so melodious, so humorous, so understanding that it put Silvestria's, with all its moonlight and whispering, listening trees, to shame. "She hasn't the words yet. It's all right. The thought will do. Aleri?"

There was what might be an amused snort, and a tanned, masculine hand reached into Karana's field of view, though she'd seen no one besides Silvestria – and the statue – in the sanctuary. The hand caressed her cheek almost wistfully, the cool fingers smooth and strong as silk, and she felt rejuvenated, her energy restored and the salt and sand gone from her hair and skin and clothes. Next, the long, graceful fingers were laid gently over Kefen's injury, rested a moment, and withdrew. The injury – the giant swelling, the colorful bruise, the angry gash – all were gone.

Kefen's eyes fluttered open, and Karana gave a great heaving sob, and kissed him with all the passion that terror and relief could muster. His hands reached up and touched her hair gently, searching down her torso as if to determine if she was really all there.

"That was... different," he said at last with humor in his gentle smile. "And... delightful. Upside-down. Why didn't we think of this before? Karana, my love, you're crying! What's wrong?" Kefen surged up to take her in his arms, only noting in passing their unexpected surroundings.

"I thought I'd lost you forever." She curled into his strong embrace, accepting another kiss to reassure her that he was really there.

"I'm here," he soothed, "I'm fine." A pause, as he looked around. "Um. Where is here? And who are these, um, fine ladies?"

Karana looked up to see Silvestria standing behind a woman who knelt close by. A woman with alabaster skin and fine features set in what seemed to be a permanent, roguish grin; with cascading hair of midnight black; and black eyes that held the entire universe in their depths. Karana's eyes flickered to the marble bench – which now stood empty. The concealing drape of cloth puddled on the floor.

MANGALA McNAMARA

“I’m Kaliatra,” the exquisite woman said casually. “Welcome to My home.”

Kefen looked as stunned as his Companion felt, but apparently not for all the same reasons. “Karana,” he murmured, “Except for the eyes, She looks exactly like you!”

The Great Goddess-incarnate gave them a wry, compassionate smile. “The other way around, really, Kefen. I can see I have some explaining to do...”

Karana started at the word. “Explaining! Oh, dear sweet Godde– erm.” She eyed Kaliatra uncertainly. “I left the princess and Lady Mitarr asleep on the beach. And– oh, Kefen!” Her eyes filled with pain as she looked into Kefen’s. “I couldn’t find *Ivan*...”

His arms tightened around her, and he closed his eyes in answer.

“Put your hearts at rest, children,” Silvestria said, her voice returning to that initial cheerfulness that was somehow flavored now with a *fierceness* that was somehow also filled with the calm of moonlight on still water. Which made utterly no sense, and Karana would have shaken her head to clear it of cobwebs if her heart weren’t in the midst of breaking.

But that incomprehensibly *complicated* voice continued on in its cheerful, fierce, calm way to say, “Karivas and Lady Mitarr are being escorted to lodgings as we speak. And your handsome Companion is safe aboard the *Windy OspreyOsprey* – I certainly wouldn’t have allowed anything to happen to *him*. Sifwisa wasn’t quite as careful as *I* would have liked, but She and Merut *did* manage to bring only the people that Kaliatra requested, and They didn’t drop any extras into the sea or break anything. *This* time.”

Silvestria rolled her remarkable silver eyes.

Kefen squeezed Karana again in relief, and she squeezed him back. If the ship was also undamaged, they would see Ivan tomorrow. And her uncle and cousins and the rest of the crew...

“Kali,” Silvestria said familiarly to the Great Goddess-incarnate, “I’ll be off to see to our other guests. You three have quite a bit to talk about.” And with neither ceremony nor pomp, the mysterious woman walked out of the little Temple, her silvery-green robes floating and twisting in ways that seemed to have nothing to do with either her stride or the non-existent wind.

Her name still teased Karana’s memory. She wasn’t parched now, and her physical energy had been replaced; but her emotions felt like they had just been riding out a three-day blow, surging up over one wave’s crest and coasting down its back before the next one struck. This... felt like they had reached calm waters now, but her sails were still furled and she had a great deal of bailing – or perhaps that would just be *bawling* – to do before she’d be steady on her course again.

AN ENTIRELY-UNEXPECTED REVELATION

The remaining three eyed each other.

Kefen blushed and looked away abruptly, and the Great Goddess raised a humorous eyebrow. “It seems, Daughter, that you really do resemble Me. Quite completely, though I suspect that this is one of only two who could make the comparison so well.” She laughed, and was suddenly clothed in a simple toga of the same shimmering fabric that had draped Her recumbent Form. “Easier for you to look upon Me now, Kefen?”

He mumbled something into Karana’s hair that didn’t make much sense, even to her. Not that the Goddess’s words did either.

Nor did the almost hungry, wistful look the Goddess was giving *her*.

After a moment where they all stared at each other awkwardly, the Great Goddess rose and seated Herself upon Her bench.

“You are tired now, children, as is only reasonable. Later you will have questions for Me, some of which I may even answer. For now, I must attend to My other guests, and you must rest.” She gestured, and Karana saw that there was a doorway behind and to the left of the marble bench. “I think you don’t need to subject yourselves just now to what I must do in an audience for royalty.”

She rolled Her Eyes, and the young woman was left to think that She was not at all what one might expect of the Goddess Who was Above All Other Gods.

Right now, however, Karana didn’t much care about the mannerisms of Goddesses or other mysterious people. Kefen was alive, and with her, and that was all she had space for in her overworked heart and mind.

They’d been offered a place to rest and recuperate...

Karana rose and stretched a hand to her beloved Companion. He took it as he rose, and they went through the doorway hand-in-hand.

The doorway led into a room that could not possibly have been included in the tiny structure Karana had seen from the outside. But perhaps a Goddess’ dwelling did not need to behave according to normal rules. The room was large and airy, elegant with platters of fruits and cheeses and ewers beaded with water. A large bed beckoned the weary pair. Windows showed a sky in the brilliant colors of sunset, framed by trees.

Kefen turned as soon as the door closed behind them, his eyes bemused.

“Karana-?” he began, but she didn’t give him a chance to say anything more.

“I will never push you away again,” she swore when they came up for air. “Never.”

He laughed quietly. “My passionate, prudish love. ‘Don’t promise what will break you into pieces’,” he quoted her words back at her, but held her tightly to him.

“Anytime, anywhere,” she insisted, and his eyes went from warm brown to molten chocolate. Karana’s voice was thick with emotion. “I thought I’d lost you forever, Kefen. And the last thing I’d done was *hurt* you...”

MANGALA McNAMARA

His eyes went soft, though other parts definitely were not. “I pushed too hard. It was my own fault.”

“I still can’t quite.... none of this seems real. I want...” She swallowed and flushed in anticipation of the words she needed to say. “I *need*... to feel you *inside* me. To know you’re *real*, and *safe*, and – and *mine*.”

Kefen’s eyes were briefly startled, then they blazed as he fastened his mouth over hers. It was as if he’d been holding back in every previous kiss, no matter how intimate. Karana responded with every iota of her being – this wasn’t a moment for careful exploration. She needed to touch him to believe he was real.

The bed... was too far away. Kefen pressed her up against the closed door for leverage, reaching out to slip the latch closed. They both fumbled with each other’s clothing, trying to remove just enough to let them... engage. He ran a line of kisses down her neck, stopping at the bloodstone pendant that had somehow survived the trip through the ocean and still hung, suspended just in the hollow of her throat. Ivan’s gift.

A pause. A breath, and their eyes met, golden-green to molten brown.

Without breaking their gaze, Karana freed her hands and carefully reached up to loosen the clasp. She slipped the pendant into a pocket, slid the ring off her finger, and slid that into her pocket as well. They simply looked at each other for a suspended moment, hardly daring to break the spell.

“For tonight,” Kefen breathed. “I have you all to myself.”

She smiled back. “Likewise. Tonight... it’s just us.” Her blood heated as she said the words. Her fingers wound into his hair and slid under his collar. He pressed her back into the door, kissing her as if he’d never have the chance again.

At last, their clothes fell away, and he bent slightly to bring them together. She rose on tiptoe to compensate for the small difference in their heights, holding onto Kefen’s shoulders as he stroked in and out, in and out. Not a wave, but a tsunami, this time, and it broke over them both, leaving them shuddering and clinging to each other.

They shed their remaining clothes on the way to the bed, ignoring food and water in favor of each other. Kisses and caresses gradually faded as they snuggled into sleep.



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About the Author



MANGALA MCNAMARA LIVES IN FLYOVER Country (the far northern end of the US South) with her husband, The Professor and four of her six children. The remaining children are in college – you can

blame the oldest for the excessive amounts of math showing up in Mangala's fantasy novels, the second one for better attention to staging of scenes, the third for all the economics, and the fourth for great attention to history – and all of them for a focus on political science! Mangala is a former professional bellydance instructor, and used to enjoy knitting, crochet and embroidering Temari balls but now is much more boring as she rarely does anything but write... although she also fences (the sport) and plays D&D with her kids. She owes her love of books and reading to her mother, who was a professional folklorist and could recite – from memory – stories from every nation in the United Nations.

She currently has three fantasy series out: The Chronicles of Ilseador (which begins with *The Rebel Duchess* and one sequel so far), The Knightess of the Realm (which begins with *A Not-So-Sacrificial Maiden* and includes two sequels and a prequel so far), and The Prankster Prince (begins with *Thony* and the *Much-Anticipated Adventure...* Book 3 will be out in March 2024!) All of these novels take place – more or less – in the World of the Living Gods, so expect to see more stories and lots of crossovers.

Join the Rising Dragon Books newsletter to stay tuned!

(The picture was taken at one of her favorite local bookstores: The Rosewater in Louisville, KY.)

Learn about Mangala's upcoming projects (fiction and nonfiction both) and sign up for email updates at

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