



Ten-year-old Sulla dunked the threadbare cloth into the bowl of tepid water, wrung it out, and smoothed it over her mother's face. The storm raging since her mother's contractions began still lashed against the flat roof. Sulla glanced at the ceiling. It wasn't leaking. Yet. But at least the thunder would muffle any commotion from the birth. The last thing Sulla wanted was the queen's soldiers to hear.

Her mother hissed and squeezed Sulla's hand. Sulla grimaced, biting the inside of her cheek. She wished the midwife would arrive. So much pain. Were the babies even worth it? How could they fulfil the Nal's dreams?

When the Nal had visited them, she'd sipped hot, fragrant tea from a cup borrowed for the occasion while Sulla's mother lumbered from the woodstove to the table with a loaf of coarse bread.

"These two will save us all," the Nal had said. "I've seen it."

"Twins?" Sulla's mother asked.

"The power will be stronger if it's shared between them." The Nal laid her hands on both sides of the pregnant woman's belly, blessing the children within. Sulla's mother gave her a gift: a hank of smooth, fine wool spun by her nimble fingers and soaked in batberry juice dye until it was a deep blue the same color as the river. Wool they couldn't spare, Sulla's father grumbled, because the queen's quota hadn't yet been paid.

But Sulla's mother had only smiled. Sulla watched as the Nal hobbled away. What could a few words spoken by an old woman mean? Even if she were a prophet.

They were slaves and always would be. Nothing and no one could change that. Least of all newborn babies.

The door swung open and jerked Sulla back into the present. The midwife stood dripping on the threshold.

She hurried to the laboring woman and checked her. “Almost there, love.” She kept Sulla busy fetching hot water, a basket, and soft blankets.

Her mother was panting now. A scream tore from her throat.

“It’s a girl child.” The midwife held up a squalling creature, wet and glistening like a toad. A flame blossomed in Sulla’s chest, unfolding and expanding with a longing she didn’t understand.

She reached for the baby with her skinny arms, her hands stretched out as if they’d never want for another thing if only they could hold the tiny thing.

“Miri,” her mother whispered, and Sulla nodded, wrapping her new sister in one of the blankets. Sulla wiped Miri’s face, and big, black eyes stared up at her.

“Bring her here,” the midwife commanded. Sulla obeyed. The midwife dipped her fingers in water and shook them above Miri. Droplets fell from the midwife’s fingertips and hovered over the baby’s forehead. The midwife’s voice was triumphant. “Watertamer.”

Sulla’s mother cried out, and the midwife turned back to her.

A moment later, the second baby was born, but she was limp and motionless.

Thumps on the door drowned out the rain. “Open in the name of the queen!”

The midwife thrust Sulla and Miri into a closet. “Keep the babe silent.”

Sulla peeked through the slats as the midwife opened the door. Soldiers swarmed inside, swords drawn, faces grim.

Their captain swaggered forward. “Where is it?”

The midwife pointed to the basket. “She didn’t survive.”

Another soldier pulled back the blanket covering the silent, still form. The captain looked from the basket to Sulla’s mother weeping on the bed. He glanced around the room. Miri stirred in Sulla’s arms and whimpered. The captain’s gaze focused on the closet. Sulla drew back, holding her breath. Thunder crashed above them.

“One less brat to worry about.” The captain motioned to his soldiers, and they left, slamming the door behind them.

The midwife drew Sulla from the closet, putting her fingers to her lips. “Tell no one. Your mother could still have another child whose gift could join with Miri’s.”

But Sulla’s mother miscarried again and again. The queen’s quota rose year after year. Food grew scarce, hope scarcer. Yet Miri prospered.

Rain parted around her like a glistening curtain.

By the time she was three, she could make water in a cup ripple with tiny waves.

When she was five, she accidentally bumped a full pitcher of water off the table. She wriggled her fingers over the plank floor, and the water rose up from the cracks in a twisting column.

Miri giggled. “Look.”

Sulla ran to her and captured her sister’s hands in her own.

“Don’t,” Sulla said. “You have to keep your gift hidden.”

Miri pulled away from Sulla, and the column collapsed, the water soaking into the wood.

Sulla tried to watch Miri, tried to keep her sister from displaying her gift, but she’d spot Miri throwing water darts at minnows or simultaneously filling everyone’s buckets at the crowded well. When Sulla scolded her, Miri only shrugged.

“I want to help,” Miri said. “Our lives are hard enough.”

When Miri was ten, Sulla found her by the river, bringing shimmering globes of water from its depths to chase one another through the water lilies.

Miri’s antics caught a soldier’s attention.

He clomped down to the river with a squad behind him. Sulla grabbed Miri, and they hid among the head-high cattails.

“Search everywhere,” the soldier bellowed. “There will be a handsome reward if we find a Watertamer.” The others fanned out, coming closer and closer to where Sulla and Miri crouched.

Miri tugged on Sulla’s sleeve and pointed to the river. “This way,” she mouthed. Bent double, Sulla followed Miri, the mud oozing between their toes, the wind masking their movements as they slipped into the river.

Sulla gasped as the frigid water closed over her head. Miri pulled her deeper and deeper. Sulla's chest tightened, and murky spots swam before her eyes. Miri took Sulla's hands and pursed her lips. Miri blew out, forming huge bubbles that joined together until one giant bubble enclosed them both. They sat cross-legged, facing one another and still holding hands, on the sandy river bottom.

Sulla drew in a shaky breath. "How did you know to do that?"

Miri shrugged. "The water talks to me, tells me how to make it obey."

They waited until darkness fell overhead before hauling themselves out on the riverbank.

Miri glanced up to the palace on the hill. Light gleamed from its windows, illuminating the slaves' quarters below. "It's almost time."

Sulla's gut constricted. "No, Miri. You can't challenge the queen. You're not strong enough."

Miri turned on her fiercely. "I saw a soldier beat a little boy younger than me today. For doing nothing more than being too slow to get out of his way. I have to *do* something."

"But not yet," Sulla pleaded.

"The queen is afraid of Watertamers."

"And she's killed each one she's found."

Miri lifted her hand, and the river followed the motion, ebbing like the tide going out. "She hasn't found me."

They returned to their hovel. Neither Sulla nor Miri referred to their conversation again, but the tension was thick between them like beads crowded on a frayed string.

When Miri was sixteen, the queen ordered her soldiers to round up fifty strong men and stout boys from their village to work in her mines, replacing those lost in a recent cave-in.

Miri narrowed her black eyes, and her gaze travelled once more to the palace on the hill. Sulla glanced at her sister, as tall as herself with her coltish limbs and her jaw set in a determined line, and knew there was no argument she could make.

She followed Miri to the palace.

Miri stood in front of the gates and raised her arms. The water in the moat flew into the air, the sunlight scattering miniature rainbows over the palace's white marble walls, before crashing down with a resounding *thwack!*

She didn't move when the soldiers cautiously approached her, didn't spare them a glance when they surrounded her.

They dragged Sulla and her sister across the vast hall and threw them down in front of the queen's throne. Sulla scarcely dared to peek at her cold, fair face.

But Miri scrambled to her feet and faced the queen. "Let our people go. Including those you just took to work in your despicable mine."

"Or what?" mocked the queen.

Instead of answering, Miri turned toward the enormous tiled fountain in the center of the throne room, her fingers fluttering. The water rose, took shape. Phantom soldiers leaped from the fountain, and their liquid forms challenged the queen's guard. They struggled together before Miri's soldiers overpowered the queen's guard, disarming them.

The queen leaned forward. "You have no idea what you're up against, girl." She inclined her head, and more soldiers stepped forward, dragging the fifty captives, all chained together.

The queen stood and crooked her finger at the fountain. The water began to swirl. Sulla's breath caught in her lungs. The queen was also a Watertamer? A wave rushed to the slaves, and swept them in a huge waterspout. It pressed them against the ceiling.

Miri quickly swept her hands downward, and the waterspout lowered the slaves to stand back on the floor.

"You'll have to do better than that," the queen said.

Miri whirled to the fountain. A pinkish trickle emerged, then the water flowed red.

She turned back to the queen. "I will turn every drop of water in your kingdom into blood if you don't let us go."

The queen's eyes widened. Sulla watched as the blood slowly turned back into water. Miri locked gazes with the queen, staring her down. For what seemed like an eternity, nothing happened; the water remained unchanged. Then the water grew pinkish once more. The queen's face twitched. Miri clenched her fists. A crimson wave spurted from the fountain.

The queen crumpled in a heap on her throne, the sweat beading on her forehead. She was breathless. "Very well. You may go."

Sulla took Miri's trembling hand and led her away.

The slaves packed their belongings, jubilant. They spoke of a land far away, beyond the river, where they could live in freedom, out of reach from the queen's magic which had held them all captive. They smiled at Miri. She'd proved herself more powerful.

Finally, they were ready. Wagons loaded with household goods, mothers and fathers on foot with small children, the elderly on horseback or in small carts.

Miri stood at the river's edge, Sulla by her side. The water spun back from Miri's feet like roles of fabric until two clear walls stood on either side of her. The ground beneath was dry and sandy.

The crowd pressed forward and began to cross the vast expanse.

The Nal, perched on an iron gray pony, nodded at Sulla as she passed by. "I told you she'd save us."

"You were right," Sulla told her.

More and more of them made the crossing. The ground before the river bed was empty of people, and the far shore teemed with those who had already reached safety.

Miri sagged against Sulla. "I'm so tired."

Sulla propped her up. "We're the only ones left. Let's go."

A trumpet blast sounded from the palace, and the clip-clop of horses' hooves thundered on the drawbridge.

Sulla caught Miri's arm. "The queen means to stop us."

The sisters hurried across the riverbed. The ground grew rocky and slippery.

The queen and her army paused on the shore.

"Watertamer!" the queen shouted. "If you come back now, I will spare your life and the lives of your people. But if you refuse, I'll drown you all."

"We'll no longer be your slaves," Miri shouted back. She stumbled, and Sulla helped her regain her footing as they clambered over the last few boulders.

The queen raised her arms, and the two walls of water began to join into one enormous barrier. It sped toward the crowd on the rock-strewn shore.

"We'll be dashed to pieces!" someone yelled, and wails went up all around Sulla.

Miri faced the oncoming wave, hands clenched to her sides. She leaned forward, and the wave slowed. Through the clear water, Sulla could see the queen waving her arms in circles. The wave grew higher and higher and swept forward again. Miri strained against the water moving toward them, gritting her teeth.

The wave towered over them.

Miri gasped. "I can't hold it."

Her eyes rolled to the back of her head, and she collapsed.

"No!" Sulla lifted her arms, her palms facing outward. She opened her mouth and screamed defiance at the seething wave. The wave crested. Tumbled. Would crash over her and Miri at any moment, the weight of it hurtling them and their people into oblivion. She squeezed her eyes shut.

Silence.

When she opened her eyes, the wave loomed above them, a sheer, unmoving wall of water and foam.

Sulla blinked, but the tower of water remained. She stared at the droplets of water suspended above her outstretched fingers, at her sister unconscious at her feet. Sulla flicked her wrists, and the wall of water undulated, swirling in shades of emerald and turquoise, the sunlight glinting off its surface. She moved her hands to the left, and the water obeyed, traveling in a huge swell.

Her gaze flew across the dry riverbed to the queen and her army still poised on its far side. Sulla swept her arm toward them, and the wall of water surged away from her before collapsing and filling in the wide channel between them. It splashed over the banks, soaking the queen's hem.

The people cheered.

Miri groaned, and Sulla knelt beside her. "Are you all right?"

Miri sat, staring at the river now freely flowing. "How...what..."

The corners of Sulla's mouth quirked. "The Nal did say the power would be stronger if it were shared." She cast a glance over her shoulder at the Nal hobbling up to them.

"I meant Miri and her twin," the Nal said with a grin. "Though my dreams always were mysterious."

Sulla laughed.

The Nal's grin grew wider. "What will you do now, Watertamer's sister?"

"Now?" Sulla helped Miri scramble to her feet and surveyed the crowd, weeping and laughing and singing. "Now, we will lead our people to freedom."

The End