



Excerpt from “The Song”

“Aaaaaaigh! Ow ow ow! BACK!”

Evanor, startled, dropped the trowel he was using to dig a hole for one of the plants Mariel had brought. Shoving to his feet, he ran for the chicken yard, arriving just in time to see the curly-haired woman beating back one of the squawking, feathered devils. She managed to get the gate closed, the hen beating its wings on the wire penning it inside, a couple loose feathers fluttering to the ground.

The disheveled Healer scraped her hair back from her face, panting. She winced at her arms, then twisted to look down at her legs. Evanor could see the holes pecked in her tights, and winced in sympathy.

“*Are you all right?*” he asked, touching her shoulder gently. Her son was unpacking some of his things in his room, under his honorary aunt’s supervision; Mariel planned to unpack hers later that evening, since they had plenty of lightglobes to spare for illumination. The others had scattered to do their own chores, including the preparation of lunch. Mariel had wanted to work on her plants right away, to get the most delicate of them planted before the day’s end, so Evanor had offered to help her. Planting didn’t require magic, after all.

When she realized she could check on the chickens at the same time, Mariel had decided to do so, to see if she could bring herself to perform regeneration experiments upon them. Of course, Dominor had warned her about the nastiness of the poultry on this island, but Mariel hadn’t believed him. Now she did.

She grimaced at her injuries, then glared through the wire fence. “Damned creatures...they’re not chickens! They’re demonic beasts from a feathered Netherhell!”

“—*bkAW!*”

She jumped back a little as the last hen to attack her fluttered at the walls of its cage, squawking its opinion rudely. The hen cocked its head sharply, its red eyes bead-bright and its comb flopping with the motion, then strutted off without further concern. Sticking out her tongue, Mariel let Evanor tuck his arm around her, guiding her to a low section of stone wall. Once seated on the granite block, she hissed at the blood welling up from the scrapes and gouges on her skin.

“I have *never*, in all my life, met with such...such *ornery* beasts!”

Evanor’s ears twitched, meaning the Ultra Tongue he had drunk was working to translate the word. “*Ornery...that translates as ‘mean’, doesn’t it?*”

“Stubborn and mean, yes,” she agreed. “It’s a Gucheran word. I grew up on the eastern border of Natallia in a trading town about five miles from Guchere. Naithong City . Rolling hills, golden with wheat and green with orchards. And *nice* chickens!”

The chickens in the coop clucked quietly to themselves. Evanor chuckled, but it only came out as puffs of air. “*I sometimes think the Council deliberately exiled us here with the nastiest poultry on the whole of the mainland as further punishment for simply being born who and what we are. Either that, or they exiled the chickens, and we were just an afterthought, playthings for the feathered little monsters to torment.*”

“Probably. I should Heal myself, in case their claws and beaks left an infection.” Making a face, Mariel eyed her injuries one last time, then breathed deeply, settling her mind in a slow exhale so that she could concentrate. Evanor shifted back a little, no longer touching her. She appreciated the space in which to think, even as she missed the warmth of his touch. Another deep inhale, and she unfurled her powers through her fingertips with a thread of pure sound.

Evanor’s eyes widened. He barely breathed, listening to her Sing—his own magic might be gone, but he knew Singing when he heard it. When he felt it, for that matter. Most mages used words to unlock their powers, and many of them used

gestures as well. Some needed herbs, or runes, others needed crystals. A few used sound to focus their powers. He had been one of those, before literally losing his voice.

Hers was a beautiful voice, too. She was a mezzo, somewhere between an alto and a soprano... though she could dip into the lower registers, he noted. All but holding his breath, Evanor listened raptly as her voice flexed into a simple arpeggio tune, following the back-and-forth movement of her fingers over the injured spots on her flesh.

The scrapes sealed themselves as she worked, some bleeding a little more freely before drying and turning pink with newly formed tissues. He might not have a true affinity for Healing, but Evanor had studied enough of the basics to know that making the punctures bleed helped to cleanse the threat of infection from each wound. Finished with her arms, she moved her hands and the power behind her voice to her legs, starting down at her ankles. The tears in her hose knitted themselves back together in the wake of her flesh closing and restoring itself whole.

Entranced, Evanor swayed slightly, following her self-ministrations as she worked. Longing built up within him, the more he listened to her Sing. The odds of encountering another Singing Mage weren't all that high under normal circumstances, but to have one come here to the island, *and* come at a time when it was logical for her to be *his* Destined, foreseen bride...

Mariel, aware that he was watching her avidly, nervously let her fingers caress one final sore spot on the back of her thigh. Her voice trailed into silence as the Healing finished; Clearing her throat, she smiled at him. "There. That should do it. And it's not that different from—"

He couldn't help himself; Mariel had inadvertently seduced him, just by Singing. Unable to contain his excitement, his fascination, the thrill of meeting someone who clearly *knew* the importance of vocal chords to a Singing mage, someone who could Heal him and restore his powers, Evanor caught her face and pulled her into a soft kiss.