Praise for
Cyndere’s Midnight

“Delving deeper into the vividly imagined world of the Expanse, with characters both diverse and sympathetic, and a story filled with heartbreak, hope, and wonder, Cyndere’s Midnight is a worthy follow-up to Jeffrey’s fantasy debut and another enchanting entry in the Auralia Thread.”
—ROBERT THOMPSON, FantasyBookCritic.blogspot.com

“Astonishing, arresting, rich, and profound. Jeffrey Overstreet’s beauty of prose reveals the vileness of human nature and then, just as deftly, awakens hope.”
—DONITA K. PAUL, author of DragonLight and DragonSpell

“With Cyndere’s Midnight, Jeffrey Overstreet fulfills the promise of Auralia’s Colors: he has created a fully realized imaginative world, at once utterly distinctive and hauntingly familiar. I can’t wait for the next volume.”
—JOHN WILSON, editor, Books & Culture

“It’s entering a beautiful dream you don’t want to leave, with exhilarating tension that takes you beyond story and into deep truths.”
—SIGMUND BROUWER, author of Broken Angel

“When the Inklings (C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien) met at the ‘Bird and Baby’ pub each week, they would read excerpts from their work, then critique and improve it. With Cyndere’s Midnight, the inventive and imaginative Jeffrey Overstreet delivers another well-crafted, artful work of fantasy, rewarding thoughtful readers and reminding us that the spirit of the Inklings is alive and well and at least one living writer could have held his own at their table!”
—DICK STAUB, broadcaster (The Kindlings Muse) and author of The Culturally Savvy Christian and Christian Wisdom of the Jedi Masters
Praise for
Jeffrey Overstreet and Auralia’s Colors

“Overstreet’s writing is precise and beautiful, and the story is masterfully told.”
—Publishers Weekly

“Overstreet paints vividly imagined scenes and develops his characters and story with thought-provoking insights into human motivations.”
—CBA Retailers+Resources

“Overstreet writes gorgeous and gritty fantasy that leaves us wanting more.”
—YouthWorker Journal

“If you’re a fan of fantasy such as Lord of the Rings and J. R. R. Tolkien, then you’ll love Auralia’s Colors, an awesome tale for young and old alike.”
—Midwest Book Review
ALSO BY JEFFREY OVERSTREET

Fiction:
Auralia’s Colors

Nonfiction:
Through a Screen Darkly:
Looking Closer at Beauty, Truth and Evil at the Movies
Cynderes Midnight

A NOVEL

JEFFREY OVERSTREET

WATERBROOK PRESS
THE CHARACTERS AND EVENTS IN THIS BOOK ARE FICTIONAL, AND ANY RESEMBLANCE TO ACTUAL PERSONS OR EVENTS IS COINCIDENTAL.

ISBN: 978-1-4000-7253-8

Copyright © 2008 by Jeffrey Overstreet
Map copyright © 2008 by Rachel Beatty


All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of The Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

WATERBROOK and its deer colophon are registered trademarks of Random House Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Overstreet, Jeffrey.
   Cyndere’s midnight : a novel / Jeffrey Overstreet ; author of Auralia’s colors. — 1st ed.
   p. cm.
   ISBN 978-1-4000-7253-8
   I. Title.
   PS3615.V474C96 2008
   813’.6—dc22
2008025015

Printed in the United States of America
2008—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
For Anne,

Once upon a time, there was a beauty and there was a beast.

Thank you for being a patient, perceptive, inspiring beauty, while we wrestled this beast to the ground.
CONTENTS

Prologue ......................................................... 1
1. The Heiress and the Oceandragon ......................... 4
2. Predators in the Ruins .................................. 14
3. Rescue on Baldridge Hill ................................ 24
4. Jordam’s Secret ......................................... 37
5. Hunting and Hunted .................................... 47
6. Trouble in Tilianpurth .................................. 53
7. The Blue Glen ......................................... 65
8. Two Prisoners ......................................... 77
9. Midnight Encounter .................................... 87
10. Wirebound ............................................. 96
11. Brothers Divided ....................................... 106
12. Cal-raven’s Bargain .................................. 115
13. Ambush on the Bridge ................................ 124
14. Out of the Prison Pit, into the Fireplace ............. 134
15. A Royal Scrubbing .................................... 150
16. Bel’s Request .......................................... 161
17. Shelter .................................................. 172
18. The Watcher and the Ruined Farm .................. 177
19. A Seer Comes to Tilianpurth ........................................ 191
20. Through the Claws ................................................... 207
21. Ceremony of Sacrifice ................................................. 216
22. Jordan's Descent ...................................................... 230
23. Runaways ............................................................. 240
24. What Became of the Boy in the Stove .............................. 250
25. Auralia's Blue Room .................................................. 255
26. Sculpting a Future .................................................... 267
27. The Fight in the Hall of the Lost ................................... 275
28. The Siege of Barnashum .............................................. 286
29. A Song for Abascar, a Song for the King .......................... 299
30. Auralia's Fear Chamber .............................................. 313
31. The Memorial Tree ................................................... 325
32. The Breaking of the Brothers ....................................... 335
33. Ryllion's Faith ........................................................ 343
34. New Tracks ........................................................... 353
Epilogue ................................................................. 359

A Guide to the Characters ............................................. 365
Acknowledgments ....................................................... 369
Amagnificent viscorcat paws at the trunk of the coil tree, yearning for a summer sun spot up in the branches, his black fur glossed from grooming. The cat’s rider, a girl no more than thirteen, slides from his back. Impatient, the cat claws neat lines down through the bark. “Go ahead, Dukas,” says the girl, running her hand from his neck to his tail, tracing sturdy links of spine through the fur. The cat leaps into the tree and stretches out on a sun-warmed branch.

The girl is tempted to follow. She has wandered far from her lakeside caves, feeling confident as a queen. Her realm has provided everything she might need—nourishment, shelter, color, and materials for her art. But she has yet to offer something in response.

She descends through fern fronds into a quiet glen and finds a place to rest, sitting against a young cloudgrasper tree. Rummaging through her ribbon-weave bag, she considers an array of unfinished crafts. Blue curtains—she’s making them for Krawg, the old man who rescued her from the wilderness when she was a baby. The floppy, fur-spun hats are for the Gatherers. There are lake-fishing lures of dragonfly wings and throwing dice fashioned from acorns. But none of these seems the right subject for this afternoon’s play. She shoves them back inside and listens to the trees’ ideas.

A murmur of water deep underground draws her into a stroll around a flowered mound of stones, a weathered well. Something about that distant song is familiar. How curious, she thinks. Why would anyone need a well here?

She climbs up on the wellstones. Ivy has stitched the well’s mouth shut, shielding it from summer’s slow, golden dust. She tears the ivy loose and shoves her head in, then withdraws, brushing cobwebs and tiny white spiders from her silverbrown hair. Her eyes are wide. The sad, familiar music of the rushing water far below inspires her to imagine its source—a place of fierce purity, high above the world, in skies alive with color and light.
Inside the well a rope is bound to an iron ring. She seizes it and feels resistance. Persisting, she pulls until a sturdy bucket appears. Swirling water mirrors the layered ceiling of dark boughs, delicate leaves, the shining sky. She splashes it across her face. It is surprisingly warm.

She pours the water over the wellstones, washing away dust, webs, fragments of leaves, old spider-egg sacs. Beetles scramble, looking for new homes.

Arranging small glass jars of dye beside her, she takes tiny brushes of vawn-tail hair and sets about painting.

She daubs one wellstone, pauses, considers what should come next. Proceeding like a worryworm, she feels around for a sure step, then teases the air before her in search of the next certainty. She examines the cloudgrasper, its bark green as olives. She scoops up handfuls of leaves, lays them over each other, holds them up to the light. Mixing the paints and spreading them thick and bright across another boulder, she considers how the colors fit. She wishes for more stones, a larger well, something mountain sized.

When she is finished, Dukas has dropped down from the tree, disgruntled by the fading sunlight. He sniffs at the well, blinks, and sneezes in disgust.

The girl scowls. “Thanks for nothing.”

Dukas slinks off to search for a madweed patch where he can roll and dream, leaving her to grumble. “But I suppose you’re right,” she sighs. “I mean, what’s the use?” She shrugs and tosses the paintbrush aside. “Who’s ever gonna see it? Just a pile of painted stones. In a few harsh winters, it’ll all be gone.”

The cat snarls, dragging his claws down the trunk of a maple this time. “Hunting and eating. That’s all you think about. You know you’ll be fed by sundown. I’m hungry too. I just can’t say for what.”

A cloud passes over, hastening the night.

“We should go.”

While she gathers up her brushes and jars, buds open on the frail stems, blessing the glen with their tiny, cerulean stars. “Why bother?” she snaps at the flowers. “Nobody notices.”

But as she sits back down before their constellations, she relaxes, seduced
by the light. “Dukas, have you seen the beastman who comes to my caves? He comes to see the colors. And he’s got a strange liking for blue. He should see this.”

She shivers. The tree shadows have shifted, darkening every color they find.

“He doesn’t hurt me. Never has. But I wonder what he’s like when he’s out on his own.” She sighs. “No. I don’t wonder. I think I know.”

She plucks a cluster of the blooms, careful to draw the shallow, fragile roots along with them. She’ll replant them where she lives. They’re a color with possibilities. “A little something I’m working on,” she mumbles. “Another splash of nothing.”

When she’s gone, the starflowers go on glowing, testifying to the water beneath their roots, raising their own version of its song in perfume and light. Travelers might pass without pausing to observe. No matter. They shine as if for joy.
Cyndere walked down to the water to make her daily decision—turn and go back into House Bel Amica, or climb Stairway Rock and throw herself into the sea.

It had become a habit. Leaving her chamber early, while the mirror-lined corridors were empty of all but servants, she would traverse many bridges, stairs, and passages and emerge on the shores of the Rushtide Inlet, escaping the gravity of distraction. Today in the autumn bluster, she wore her husband’s woolen stormcloak at the water’s edge. She brought her anger. She brought her dead.

While the fog erased the wild seascape, waves exploded against the ocean’s scattered stone teeth, washed wide swaths of pebbles, and sighed into the sand. They carried her father’s whispers from many years past, mornings when he had walked with her along the tide’s edge and dreamt aloud. His bristling grey beard smelled of salt, prickling when he rested his chin on her head. He would place one hand on her shoulder and with the other hold a seashell to her ear. “Hear that?” he’d say. “That’s your very own far-off country. You will walk on ground no one has ever seen. And I’m going to find it for you when I venture out to map the Mystery Sea.”

He had done just that. While Cyndere’s mother, Queen Thesera, stayed home to govern her people within House Bel Amica’s massive swell of stone, King Helpryn discovered islands, sites for future Bel Amican settlements.

A shipwreck took the king when he tried to cross a stormy span between those islands. Within hours of the report, Bel Amica’s cloud-bound city turned volcanic with theories and superstitions. From one sphere of their
society to another, all the way down to the shipyards of the inlet, the people competed to interpret their ambitious king’s demise, their rumors full of words like iceberg, pirates, and oceandragon. The Seers, quarrelsome as gulls, debated whether this might be a portent of judgment by the moon-spirits or whether Helpryn’s celestial guardian had reached down from the sky and carried him away to live in his own peaceful paradise.

Meanwhile, Cyndere mourned the loss of her father’s smiling eyes, his confidence in her, his vision for her future. “You will walk on ground no one has ever seen.” From the day he vanished, the young heiress never grew taller, and the sun was burnt out of her sky.

She did not weep. Given no chance to mourn in private, she concerned herself with the comfort of her mother and her older brother, Partayn.

Partayn slept with his head on the windowsill as though he listened for the king’s counsel in the ocean’s roar. Did those crashing lullabies awaken his father’s wanderlust within him? She wondered. King Helpryn had answered the call of the horizon, but the boy would set sail on a different sea, striving to master all manner of music.

Partayn’s quest was tragically brief. When an armored escort carried him southward to study the music of House Jenta, an ambush of Cent Regus beastmen silenced his songs.

The people, having only just regained their footing, were cast into despair. Even Queen Thesera believed someone had cursed House Bel Amica.

The pressure of an impending inheritance fell hard on Cyndere. She was expected now to stand beside her mother and prepare to take her place someday. More urgently, she should find a husband, bring a new generation of royalty to Bel Amica, and ensure that the line of Tammos Raak, father of the four houses, would continue.

But Cyndere had already determined that she would not become her mother. She still dreamt of breaking ground all her own. She was capable. She had the respect of her people, and in Bel Amica’s courtrooms she was famous for her temper and tenacity. Her helplessness to save her father and her brother only stoked her passions to help others and prevent further calamity.
Such ambitions made her lonely. As her people groped for distractions to numb their fears, the Seers provided potions for reckless indulgences. Those meddling conjurers caught even her mother with their hooks. The thought of inheriting such counselors made Cyndere want to sail for that far-off country of her own, wherever it might be. The sea’s call was more seductive every morning. Her days became rituals of counting the few, feeble cords that bound her to Bel Amica. Hope to become what her father had envisioned quickly dimmed.

If it were not for Deuneroi, a young man who often fought with Cyndere in the court, she might have let the ocean carry her to her father. Even in the midst of their famous courtroom collisions, Deuneroi discerned Cyndere’s sadness. He saw her right through and wove subtle threads of sympathy into his eloquence. Sensing this, she conspired that their feud should spread into private debate, and soon their minds and hearts were inseparably entangled, furious in love.

Before long, Cyndere realized that while two cords had broken, a new cord had been strung. Deuneroi became her consort, her refuge, strong enough to keep her from the sea.

Today she missed hearing the footfalls of Deuneroi’s casual stride. He was off, led by courage she both admired and resented, to search for survivors buried in the rubble of the fallen House Abascar. She had tried to stop him. Tempers flared in their hottest debate. But in the end, she had surrendered, moved by his compassion and by his promise.

“Deuneroi, look what you’ve done. This cat was wild once. Now he’s a lazy pile of fur.”

On their last evening before her husband’s departure, Cyndere sulked through their argument’s aftermath. Gazing into their bedchamber fireplace, she stroked a black viscorcat whose head filled her lap while his furry, muscled body sprawled limp across the braided rug. The viscorcat hummed, kneading the air with his claws.

“I don’t think he was ever very wild at all,” said Deuneroi, rolling a woolen tunic and pressing it into his pack. “Once I lured him into my camp
with some fish, he warmed up quickly, as if he had known someone who treated him kindly before.”

When fireglow lulled the cat into sleep, Cyndere bit her lip and gingerly untangled the snare around the animal’s tail. A prankster had tied a ring of keys there with a thread, then set him loose to run, terrified, with the keys clanging along the corridor behind him.

As the knot slipped free, the cat raised his head and growled. “It’s all right now,” Cyndere whispered. “You’re free.” His purr slowly returned, resonating. She pondered the keys, wondered what they fit, and set them on the floor next to her.

She touched the scar on the cat’s hind leg where Deuneroi had drawn out an arrow’s poisoned head. “I’m glad you found him. That wound might have killed him.”

“I’m surprised he trusted me.”

“I’m not. You’re a born healer, Deun.”

“And so are you.” Deuneroi sat on the edge of the bed, smiling at her.

“Then I should be going with you. If there are survivors in Abascar’s ruins, they’ll need special care.”

“Your mother will never let you venture into such danger.”

“What good is royalty if we just sit in our palace when people are in trouble?”

“Your mother’s lost too much already. She won’t risk losing you.”

“She’s not the only one who’s grieving, Deun. I’m grieving too. And I can’t bear the risk of this. Don’t go. Don’t put so much distance between us.”

“You urged your mother to send rescuers. Remember?”

“Months ago…and she refused to send help while it mattered. Now she’s just doing this to separate us, to interrupt our work. You won’t find anything in the ruins of Abascar except scavenging beastmen.”

“Then I’ll bring back some beastmen. We’ll have real subjects for our study.” He was trying to make her laugh, but she would have none of it. He shifted to a softer approach. “Won’t you sleep better knowing that there’s nobody clinging to hope in Abascar’s ruins? We’ve both had nightmares, imagining someone trapped there, praying to the moon-spirits for a rescuer.”
"The people of Abascar don't pray to moon-spirits. Didn't."

"This isn't the daughter of brave King Helpryn talking. Where is the bold heiress who dares to dream even of curing the beastmen of their curse?"

Cyndere pressed her lips together. She was angry with her mother, the Seers, and the court. She needed to strike at something, and Deuneroi was the easiest target. But she knew that he was right. She reached for a poker and began to jab recklessly at the smoldering firewood. "Life was so much easier before Mother got word of our plans for the beastmen."

"It was in the glen near Tilianpurth, wasn't it? That's where we first dreamt of taming them."

"No more talk about the Cent Regus, Deun. Not if you insist on running off into their territory. You're not ready for this road. You're a court scholar. Will you stab at the beastmen with a scroll?"

He sat down beside her. "I'm afraid too. But I lost faith in my fears a long time ago, Cyn. People used to tell me, 'Deuneroi, you're a weakling. When the soldiers eat what they catch on a hunt, you're stuck with broth. While others run along the wall, you can't climb a flight of stairs without losing your breath. You're not fit for an heiress.' But then an heiress proved them wrong."

"This is different, Deun. You're not a soldier. You're not a ranger or even a merchant."

"And I have no skill with horses or vawns. I couldn't hunt a stag if you turned one loose in this very chamber." He turned and looked her in the eye. "But I must do this. If we run into the Cent Regus, so be it. What good is this dream of helping beastmen if we're too afraid to face them?"

Cyndere picked up a scrap of burnt firewood and began to sketch the outline of the viscorcat on one of the stone tiles. "You know what they did to my brother."

"Your brother headed south with inexperienced guards. Your mother's sending Ryllion with us. He can shoot the eye out of a rabbit running. He can chase down a fox in his bare feet. He can hear a flea on a fangbear. He'll protect me. And don't forget." Deuneroi's warm palm slid across Cyndere's belly. "Your mother has a compelling reason to keep me safe."

"She only wants a grandchild to extend the line of Tammos Raak."
“But I want a child, Cyn, because you and I perform wonders whenever we work together.” He took the brittle charcoal from her hand and entangled his fingers in hers. “Don’t despair.”

She pulled her hands away, reached to massage the nape of the viscor-cat’s neck. A ripple of white moved under her fingers as she stroked the black-tipped fur. The cat stiffened at her touch, murmured in delight, and then eased back into sleep.

Deuneroi stood. “Remember the tigerfly?”

She laughed, although she tried to avoid it. Deuneroi had rescued the bright orange insect during a walk in the woods around the faraway bastion of Tilianpurth. It had been trapped inside a curled leaf floating in the bucket beside the old well. “It sat in your hand for an hour.”

“And then it flew. When I go to Abascar, I’ll bring something out of those ruins. Something worth saving. I promise.”

“Right.” She dabbed at her eyes. “You promise.”

“I promise. And then we’ll go to the well at Tilianpurth. And celebrate.”

“Will we?”

He knelt behind her, ran his fingers through her strawgold hair, and tipped her head back so he could look into her eyes. “Yes. Or you could just close your eyes and dream a little, and we could be there right now.”

When she reached up to pull his dark hair down around her face, the cat grumbled, unhappy to have been forgotten.

“Be brave, little bird,” Deuneroi whispered between their kisses. “Be brave.”

Without her husband beside her, Cyndere felt exposed.

The only remaining child of Queen Thesera, she lived with constant surveillance. Cyndere was the last link in the chain—and it felt so much like a chain—leading back to Tammos Raak. She would never be allowed to walk unguarded. She would never walk on ground that had not been secured.

The fog unveiled the long, winding stair down the rugged cliffs to the sandy strand. The chorus of waves grew louder. The cold grew mean.

Cyndere would have her meditation, nevertheless. She would wear out
those forerunners who scanned the path ahead and tax the strength of those who crept behind. The cold did not dissuade her. She was always cold.

Buffeted by wind, she clasped Deuneroi’s black stormcloak at her throat. When she reached the beach at last, she left her silver slippers on the final stair. Her feet were numb with cold by the time she reached the line where the surf slid frothy beneath the fog.

A tree trunk nudged the shore, rolling and waving its sprawl of roots. Above her, two great lights gleamed like eyes—the rising sun, a coin of gold, and the setting moon, a pool of shifting shapes believed by the Seers to be powerful spirits. Every so often the fog strained at its seams and tore, and Cyndere peered through to the ocean. Once she saw a dark, departing ship, sails pregnant with wind, carrying dreamers her father had inspired.

She scooped up wet sand and cast it into the rippling shallows, tempted again.

Come out into the water, the waves seemed to say. Come out to me, my daughter. You have suffered so much loss. You can escape here in the deep, where I am waiting for you. You’ll never again have to worry about losing what you love.

As the rippling tide washed over her feet, a commotion ahead of her broke the silence. Screams. And curses too dark for the morning.

She stepped into the water and hid behind the tree stump as it rocked in the surf.

Her forerunners ran, wailing, back toward Bel Amica. “Wyrm! Ocean-dragon!”

She braced herself as the freezing currents swirled about her ankles and her feet turned to ice. Water tugged at Deuneroi’s cloak. She felt a faint spark, the flare of her father’s courage. “Row;” he would have said. “Row against the current.”

“Cyndere!” they were calling into the mist. “Heiress! Where is she?” The sound of their panic blew past.

Cyndere splashed out of the tide.

There it was. A jagged line of darkness ahead, like a mountain range. As it took on detail, she heard its hollow groaning.

The oceandragon’s gargantuan form loomed, its snout resting on the sand, head large enough to swallow a herd of wild tidehorses. The fog withdrew, and she could see the spiked tip of its tail curling about and resting on
the sand beside her, ten times the size of the harpoons her father had hurled at seawraiths and horned whales.

She stood still, waited for the dragon to writhe and twist and thrash down upon her. “Is this what took you down into the sea?” she whispered to her father. “Is this what you saw as the ship came apart?”

The fog thinned.

The oceandragon’s eyes were hollow, the head but a skull. Its sides did not heave; they were no more than rows of towering ribs. Its tail, a chain with links of bone. Perhaps it had been dead an age. The sea had carried it into the inlet by night and cast it onto the shore, having taken every scrap of its flesh, offering up its unbreakable skeleton.

That reverberating moan—it was only the wind moving through the skull’s cavities.

“Beautiful,” she said.

She stepped through the gap of a missing tooth. The lower jaw was gone, probably resting at the bottom of the sea. Within the hollow thrumming of its head, she stood tall enough to see out through the gaping windows of its eyes. She reached out, touched the edge of a socket.

What was it like to be an oceandragon? What was its purpose? Had it enjoyed the open sea, redirecting currents with the twitch of a tail or the fling of a fin? Did oceandragons sing, as some drunken sailors insisted? Or did the creatures think only of eating?

She found a small, exquisitely detailed stone on the edge of the opposite eye. She set it on her palm, amazed, for it was an exact replica of the oceandragon’s white skull, sculpted as only a stonemaster could shape it. She held it up to the light and looked through its vacant eyes. And then she laughed. “Scharr ben Fray.”

She put it to her lips and blew softly. The whistle’s tone struck a haunting counterpoint to the low hum of the dragon’s skull. He had been here. That eccentric old mage, so famously exiled from House Abascar when Cyndere was a child, had walked among these bones. Scharr ben Fray was known across the Expanse as a man obsessed with mysteries. And he had studied these bones already. His sculptures were his signatures, and this whistle in Cyndere’s hand was unmistakable.
She would have given the whistle to Partayn for his collection, were he still alive. Scharr ben Fray had shown both her and her brother a grandfatherly affection during his occasional visits to House Bel Amica. King Helpryn had coveted the old man’s advice and respected his knowledge of the Expanse. Partayn had pestered him for verses from songs he heard in his travels. The queen had only tolerated him, jealous of his stonemastery and his gift of speaking with animals. But Scharr ben Fray was a solitary wanderer, appearing when least expected, slipping away whenever they tried to hold him.

Cyndere stepped through the skull’s oceanward ear. The tide’s tentative shallows moved around her feet again, alive with wavering seaweed and scuttling crabs.

She traced her fingers along the edge of the ribs, then stepped into their vast cage. These bones were gashed as if by claws or teeth. Either the dragon had died violently, or vigorous scavengers had carved up the carcass.

When she pulled her hand away, her skin was smudged with black from the decomposing dragon bone. Not stopping to wonder why, she followed an impulse and traced the ashes around her eyes and across her forehead, thinking of her father.

Another rush of water. The tide was turning in earnest now. Cyndere tucked the whistle into her pocket. “You’ll regret missing this, Deun.” She felt a strong tug of the tether, longing to share all wonders with Deuneroi. That desire would bring her home again.

Something moved. She turned, half expecting the mage. But this figure was taller and robed in something colorless. Light passed through it, and it cast no shadow.

Her father’s courage flickered again. She stepped from between the oceandragon’s ribs to get a better look. But swift currents of fog moved in, erasing the phantom. She thought to call out, but distant voices approaching from Bel Amica distracted her.

Walking back, clutching the whistle in her pocketed fist, Cyndere guessed that her guardians meant to rescue her. She hastened toward them, smug with her discovery. How Deuneroi would laugh.

But then she slowed. Figures emerged from the mist. Their silhouettes
became robes, wringing hands, fretful faces. Some were Seers, stalking forward like white mantises. Some, her attendants—sisterlies—in their heavy brown stormcloaks, with her lifelong friend Emeriene limping along ahead of them, one leg bound in a cast.

“Cyndere.” Emeriene opened her arms and stumbled forward in her haste as a mother lunges to save her child from a fall.

“Em.” Cyndere’s voice seized in her throat. Her body knew, somehow, before any tidings reached her ears. “No. Not Deuneroi…”

Cyndere’s tether broke. Like a kite cut loose in a storm, she surrendered, turning and splashing out into the tide. Half in ocean, half in fog, she felt wet sand give way beneath her feet. Water closed over her head.

When Emeriene’s hands seized Cyndere’s robes, the heiress of House Bel Amica fought to break free and dive into her father’s embrace.