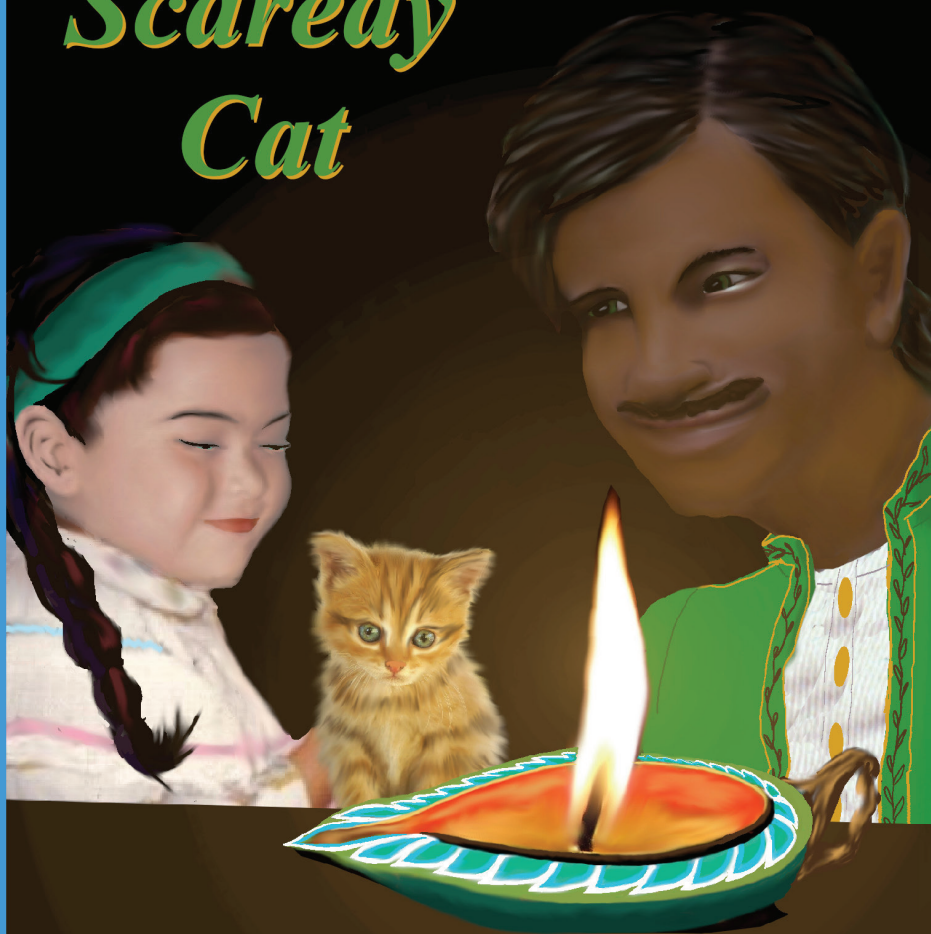


AUTHOR OF *A NOT-SO-SACRIFICIAL MAIDEN*

MANGALA MCNAMARA

Scaredy Cat



*A Knightess of the Realm
Holiday Prequel Novella*



*“Did you see how high I went, Uncle Andry?
Did-you-did-you-did-you?
I was up even higher than you can reach!”*

Andry bent over double to sweep the small girl up in his arms. “You were, my lass. You’re getting very brave.”

“Andry, don’t encourage her,” Devin said with a sigh, and as Karana’s beaming little face fell, he cursed himself for his fumbling lack of subtlety. He should have left it to Andry, who seemed to have been born subtle.

*You’d think that having spent
every minute together that they could arrange
since their mothers first had them share a cradle
would have gotten some of that to rub off on Devin,
but no...*

SCAREDY CAT

A LOVE-STORY ABOUT A MAN AND
HIS LITTLE GIRL

*A novella of the
Knighthess of the Realm*



KERRIDWEN MANGALA MCNAMARA

RISING DRAGON BOOKS

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Made by humans, for humans.

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Summary: Devin Metreedi is used to doing things his own way – but Karana, his 3yo daughter – is a puzzle he can't solve or control the way he's used to. He'll have to get over his own deep-seated fears of parental abandonment to be the Papa she needs.

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For every parent who had to *work* to connect with their child – because this parenting thing isn't *easy*.

SPOILER ALERT!!!

Dear Reader...

This novella contains some “spoilers” for the *Knightess of the Realm* series, though most of them are clear by the end of the *Secrets of Dragon Mountain* mini-series (books 5-7 of the main timeline).

The author believes that these “spoilers” will not damage your enjoyment of the other books. Instead, you'll merely have a different perspective than the main characters - a bit like living in the author's head!

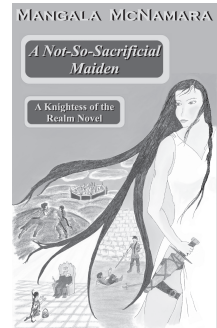
At Rising Dragon Books we believe that Readers are capable of making the decisions that work for them... so choose carefully!

A few things to know before you read this story....

- *The province of Wave has permitted "triad-marriage" (marriages including 3 instead of 2 people) for some centuries. This is predicated on the fact that Wave was once the capitol of the Turquoise Empire and the Emperor/ Empress was required to marry the Goddess Merut (the Sea-Queen), but also had to marry a human in order to ensure the succession. Since the Gods had made it clear that such unions were acceptable, the practice spread. Triad-marriages are still rare - as anyone who has been married knows, making a relationship work with ONE other person is enough of a challenge for most people!*
- *The Turquoise Empire "fell" a thousand years prior to this story. The daughter and Heir to the Last Empress married the King of Taridawil and founded the country now known as Dawil.*
- *The country of Amberdia was founded by a dissatisfied younger son of the Last Empress.*
- *Maps and Family Trees are to be found at the back of the book. The Elemandros and Metreedi families have been artificially separated for clarity. The various lands that Devin is dealing with in the story are shown on the map on page 81: Lands Around the Merutian Sea*

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Chapter ONE

Fraidy Cat

(Fourteen Years before A Not-So-Sacrificial Maiden begins...)

“**W** E CAN’T GET HER TO quit going up there, Andry.” Devin Metreedi looked up at his little girl, his arms folded in frustration. She had got herself up into the aerial playground again... and, as usual, was unwilling to come down.

The three-year-old looked back at him solemnly, those unusually green eyes of hers wide.

Or, no, she wasn’t looking at *him*, her Papa. As usual, she was looking at her ‘Uncle’ Andry. Of course. And Trialina. It was *their* opinions – and her cousin Mitael’s, and even young Liam Chidewell’s – that mattered to her more than Devin’s, it often seemed. And she seemed to hang on Restella’s every word when his wife was *home...* though Trialina still mothered the little girl more than her own Mama did, even when Restella was *there* to do it.

Not that Devin was going to complain. Restella was the best captain the Metreedi fleet had ever had and a passable Captain-Admiral. Karana could do worse than have a mother like that to emulate.

Even if it did mean he was stuck with handling the inscrutable little creature on his own for months on end.

When this first started happening, he'd been so *proud* of her. It showed that Karana – regardless of what *else* her future might hold – would make a fine Metreedi sailor. She was agile as one of the monkeys that kept getting into the courtyard, climbing fearlessly right up into the tangle of ropes and ladders and suspended beams and small, 'floating' platforms that formed the aerial playground at Wave's Metreedi House.

Some of the other young cousins never got the hang of climbing and swinging from rope to rope – something Devin had little patience with. It had come easily to *him*, and seemed like a proper skill for anyone who actually carried the name 'Metreedi.' Like his wife, even though *she* wasn't born to it.

"She seems happy enough up there, Dev," Andry replied, a bemused expression on his face. Bemused... segueing over to *besotted* when he looked at Karana, also as usual.

"It wouldn't be a problem if she'd do it at *reasonable hours*, Andry," Trialina told the Lord of Wave. "But she's started going up in the *middle of the night*, when there's no one to keep an eye on her."

"Or if she'd just bloody well come *down* when we tell her to," Devin added sourly.

When *he* told her to, at least, though it would be handy if she'd obey Trialina or Mitael in this, as she did in most other matters. He was Head of House Metreedi, after all, and couldn't be stopping his work to look after a toddler at random moments.

He and Trialina had tried blocking off the access-points, but the structure was too well-anchored. It had to be, since there were frequently over a dozen children and a handful of adults up there. A skilled climber – and his little daughter was that, no question – could make it over any obstruction and into the main structure, but adding such barriers made the whole endeavor more hazardous.

And Devin couldn't have the entire thing taken down; the aerial playground at the center of a Metreedi House was a necessary element. Climbing and ships were part of what bound them together as a Family, and if the core-House itself didn't have one...

Well, Devin might as well just give over his title, because The Family would replace him if he even suggested it.

“And she’s *falling asleep* up there,” Trialina added. It was a rare thing for her to be in accord with Devin over anything – especially Karana’s upbringing – but in this they were unified. “So far, it’s always been in one of the hammocks–” the tall, blonde woman gestured at an appropriate structure, “but she is only three. We’re not sure if she understands that she’s at risk of rolling off in her sleep.”

“She wouldn’t do that, Mama,” Mitael said. “She knows that sailors sleep in hammocks, and she’s going up there to pretend to be a sailor and practice for being on Aunt Restella’s ship.”

All three adults glanced at the twelve-year-old boy, and he reddened slightly under the attention, then straightened up and lifted his chin.

Devin looked back up at his suspended daughter, but was aware that Andry gave the boy a small smile and a nod. They were both practically Mitael’s foster-father and had been since they’d lost cousin Eric – but Andry could afford to be softer. Mit wasn’t *his* Named Heir. That the boy should stand up for what he said – ridiculous or not – was simply what Devin expected of him.

He was also aware that Trialina gave him a narrowed gaze before shooing her son off to climb up and see if he could get Karana to come down a bit from her current perch.

Right now, the baby was too high up for even the incredibly tall Andry to be able to reach – though she hadn’t been when Devin sent for him. The obnoxious little creature had actually scooted up *higher* when Devin ordered her to come down.

It was just so *vexing*.

Ordinarily, three-year-old Karana was more biddable and attentive than the cousins two – or even three – times her age.

Even some of the ones *four or more* times her age, Devin thought wryly. Though that didn’t include Mitael, of course. The Head of House deeply looked forwards to his young Heir growing up a bit more so that he could turn the job of handling the internship classes over to him. The annually arriving groups of ten to twenty fourteen-year-olds tended to set Devin’s teeth on edge.

A pity – in retrospect – that he’d been ‘clever’ enough to Name Mit after Artsur and Shinonwe had come home to Dawil, but then insisted on moving up to Cowry. Handling the Metreedi interns

from around the world was traditionally the job of the Heir or Head-Secundus – and devolved on the Head otherwise.

But Mit was still too young and small for the slightly-older cousins to take him seriously. And Artsur was a day's ride away.

And there was no other reasonable reason to Name someone other than Uncle Gavin as Secundus for now. Even though the man – who had been Eric's father – was also a captain in the fleet. He couldn't be expected to stay ashore just to manage groups of rowdy teenagers.

Not to mention that he was getting on in years and... it still broke Devin's heart to see Uncle Gavin watching the younger cousins and clearly missing his own son. Though he pulled himself together for his grandson, Mitael, and had done so for his adopted granddaughters before they moved inland.

And for Devin and Andry and Artsur – and presumably for Alasdar and Dimitria out in Delta, though Devin hadn't seen the two of them together in years. Eric had been a big brother to all of them. And a mentor as well, to Restella's brother, Hesorn. And best friend since childhood to Andry's actual older brother, Marco.

The hole his loss had left in all of their lives was... Second only to the one in Devin's heart from the similar loss of his own parents. And harder to go on from, given that he'd lost Mama and Papa when he was barely three and didn't really remember them enough to miss them. Or so he told himself.

But in a year or two Mitael could take the task on – and maybe, someday, Devin's own little Karana could...

"She's not difficult like this about anything *else*," Devin complained, trying to derail the thought.

Though it *shouldn't* be an unreasonable hope for a man that his daughter should follow him in his work.

Trialina's eyes were trained upwards at the pair of children as Mit worked his careful way over to the little girl. She – and Devin as well, and likely Andry still, though it was years since he'd tried – were quite good enough to clamber over to her themselves, but their greater mass would jostle the entire structure more than Mitael's lighter body. And Karana didn't look anywhere near stable enough to please the watching adults.

“I’ve told you before, Devin,” Tria said in a low voice. “She’s *terrified*. She *can’t* come down on her own.”

Devin spared a moment to glare at her from trying to hide his worry while watching the children – Andry wasn’t bothering and was moving around underneath where one might expect Karana to fall if she slipped, hoping to catch her. With his height and long arms, he had a better shot than anyone else – it wouldn’t even be much of a drop for her if he was in the right place.

“Then why the *hell* does she keep going up there? And in the middle of the bloody *night*?”

Trialina met his glare with one of her own, before looking back up. She was one of the few members of The Family who would snarl back at him, and Devin could never decide if he appreciated that about her, or resented it.

If only she’d properly grown up in The Family instead of as a noblewoman of Ilseador for half her life, *Tria* would have made an excellent Heir and Secundus. But as it was, Devin never felt entirely certain of her loyalties and would be happier to have her out of his house – if not for the sake of his much-missed cousin, Eric, and Mit... and Karana, who clung to the woman if Andry wasn’t around.

Just because Tria had fought a few pirates, she had some gall in thinking herself as good as those who had been properly raised as Metreedis.

Doubtless Karana was picking up this rebelliousness and disobedience from Trialina.

“It’s like *Mitael* told you. She’s trying to prove herself worthy to serve on Restella’s ship,” Tria informed him. “And to defeat this fear, so *you’ll* love her. And I’ll thank you not to use that language around the children. Mit is picking up quite enough as it is, and likely more now that he’s starting his apprenticeship. We don’t need Kari picking it up as well.”

Devin snorted. “She wants to be a sailor, she’ll pick up the cant, Tria.”

“And I suppose you’ll be *thrilled* when your adorable little daughter does her duty serving snacks when you have a customer and some *sailor-cant* slips out of those cute little lips, Devin? Because her *Papa* says such things, so it must be perfectly acceptable?”

He managed not to let her see his wince at that thought. Unfortunately, Trialina tended to be right about too many such issues. Damn her.

At least the interns usually went to her over the usual teenage nonsense once Devin had gotten them settled in. He hadn't had to deal with any of the latest group in months; not since Everett came in to tell him that one of Aunt Zenobi's twin granddaughters really needed to switch out of her bos'n training and do something on land. Not that that was teenage nonsense, and why the girl hadn't come to him directly, Devin didn't know.

At least Everett had had some solid suggestions – as Executive Officer on the *Crested Dolphin* it was his job to notice such things, but not every Exec was as good at doing so. Devin liked the young man: he was utterly irreverent and a creative thinker. Devin had been planning to offer him the next small-vessel captaincy that came up in the home-fleet.

Unfortunately, Everett had *also* used his meeting with the Head of House to put in his request to transfer to the Ilseadoran House-fleet. He already had an offer in hand from Aunt Lenore, he had both the *Dolphin's* second officers ready to take on his position if Captain Dara didn't want to bring in outside talent, and Dara's blessings to move on. Since Lenore had promised Everett *in writing* that he would be serving as first officer for cousin William on *Starboard Skies* and William was retiring in three or four years, *and* Everett would succeed him as captain... the matter was out of Devin's hands.

Which he hated.

But Everett simply didn't have the seniority and experience to move into a position like that in the home-fleet. Even Restella had only made captain at a hair before thirty, brilliant as she was, and that had only been in the Wavian Navy, not the *Metreedi* home-fleet. Capitol ships, like *Skies* didn't come up for new captains all that often, even for brilliant young officers.

Devin had thought to offer Everett the new ship that was still in the planning stages – but it wouldn't likely make it even into the shipyards for a couple of years yet. Master Shooler had a new ship-designer, who wanted to try some innovative ideas to improve speed without sacrificing freight capacity – if the man was right, this would make it much more subtle for Devin to get messages around

the Merutian Sea. There were times, after all, when sending a fast courier ship was disruptive to the local political situation, but it still needed to be done.

*(The Head of House spared a moment to regret that Empress Turiallina's – and the then current Head of House, Alsinthe Metreedi's – attempt to acquire **dragons** as couriers by incorporating Taridawil into the Empire had not succeeded. The ancient tales of faster communications had been a secret 'holy grail' for the Heads of House for longer years than that... despite the injunction in The Family's Goddess-given Onus limiting them to slower methods than the Ancestors had once possessed.)*

However, the new ship, tentatively named *Rainbow's Surf*, wouldn't be a done deal for at least four years. Or maybe longer. And Everett wanted to go *now*.

Devin was reduced to negotiating over the terms of Everett's transfer from Wave to Ilseador. He had Aunt Lenore's offer – already signed by her and Everett *and* cousin William – on his desk right now.

Not that Devin wasn't working on a counter-offer to bring the young man back to Wave in a few years... or at least to give him the option. Surely, a cosmopolitan fellow like Everett wouldn't want to stay with a branch-House that had been a backwater in Imperial times, let alone *now*, no matter how spectacular their harbor was.

It was important to keep the House's best talent connected to the core-House in Wave... and since Everett's mother was apparently planning to migrate with him and his (*much less talented in Devin's opinion*) siblings had already found positions in Anju and Elàdaí, there wasn't much to draw the young man back besides rather copious offers of compensation. And while Everett showed a great deal of *promise*, there was a limit to what Devin was willing to offer at this stage in his young cousin's career.

Dammit, *that* was what he should be working on right now.

Not trying to look irritated and not concerned about his obstinate child.

Who was *also* inordinately fond of Everett, to judge by how she climbed up onto the young officer's lap every time there was a House party. Everett tended to be found up there in the aerial playgrounds along with her and the other *much* younger cousins in all defiance of his dignity as an upwardly mobile officer in the home-fleet.

Not that Devin didn't sometimes envy Everett's disregard for Family norms and wish *he* could ditch all the expectations and just climb around up there. He'd been working towards his mastery as a Saimaster before Grandfather had needed him to serve as Heir and Secundus fulltime when he turned sixteen... and only gotten out for a voyage as a *sailor* the one time thereafter...

Devin tried not to think too hard about how badly he missed the wind in his hair and the sway of the crow's-nest. He'd been a damned good shroud-swinger, too, though he'd never had much time to devote to it, since Grandfather had needed him, and it had meant even *more* time away from Andry's side, if he had wanted to try to compete. And if he couldn't compete, half the incentive evaporated.

It wasn't possible that *his* daughter was scared of *heights*?

Was it?

And... it wasn't possible that Karana thought he wouldn't *love* her if she was... was it?

Andry had wandered back closer, now that Mitael had made it to Karana and was urging her down, inch by inch.

"She's a brave girl, if she's doing this all alone, even though it scares her," Andry commented. He hadn't missed a beat of the conversation, despite having seemingly all his attention on Karana.

Tria snorted. "Of course, she's brave. She's *yours*, after all."

Andry went a little pink and glanced at Devin. "I don't think I've done anything particularly brave."

Tria rolled her eyes. "Yours and Devin's and Restella's. Plural *you*. Though facing off with your patron Goddess would be considered brave by *most* people." She paused for effect. "Well, brave or *stupid*."

Andry winced, which gave Devin an excuse to put an arm around the taller man and give Trialina what should have been a reproving look. Her knowing smirk kind of took the edge off of Devin's glare, though.

Damn the woman. Everyone *else* took Devin seriously, but *she* never seemed to.

"We still need a solution," Devin pointed out. "No matter *what* her reasons are."

Arguing with a three-year-old was... undignified.

"I'll talk to her," Andry volunteered.

Well, Andry was Lord of Wave and no one questioned *his* dignity.

“And... the Festival of Lights is tomorrow night,” Andry pointed out. “Maybe we could give her something that would encourage her to stay out of the nets without a spotter. At night at least.” Not that he looked like he had any ideas about what sort of three-year-old-appropriate gift might achieve that goal.

The Festival of Lights wasn’t a holiday the core-House had celebrated regularly before Grandfather had half-adopted Andry into The Family. Devin allowed his trained mind to veer away from just *why* his grandfather had done such a thing, given that they were supposed to keep the Elemandros lineage – the line of the UnCrowned Emperor – close but not *that* close. Devin had needed Andry and that was enough.

Andry’s mother’s family were of Pardasian descent, though, and Lady Lexa had made sure both of them – and Andry’s siblings and Devin’s cousins – grew up loving the celebrations of her heritage as much as the ones that everyone celebrated.

“Restella won’t be back for another week,” Devin sighed. “I wanted her home for the Festival, but she felt it didn’t make sense against the shipping schedules. This unseasonably good weather has some downsides.”

They hadn’t had a serious Storm Season since Karana had been born, which most people were explaining away as natural variations in the weather cycles.

Devin knew better, given that he knew how happy Andry had been these last three years – he didn’t know if even The Family’s researchers were aware that the UnCrowned Emperor’s moods affected the weather around the Merutian Sea. It was Head of House lore, passed down by word-of-mouth alone from generation to generation. Only the reigns of Emperors (or Empresses) who were particularly tightly Bound showed such a connection – which hadn’t been the case for the last several – but Devin was uncomfortably aware that his Andry was one such.

In any case, Devin had begun scheduling sailing runs out of Wave farther into what was normally the season of storms the year after Karana was born. As long as Andry remained happy – and that wasn’t about to change anytime soon, given how he barely seemed to notice *Devin* anymore if Karana was around – the weather was likely to stay good.

The Family's analysts had argued, but Devin had stayed firm. Even if he couldn't explain why without revealing Head of House secrets, there was no reason to waste sailing weather. And his accurate predictions had added to the Head of House mystique within – and beyond – The Family.

Even if it did mean he had no reasonable excuse to overrule his best captain's assessment that she should skip the Festival in order to keep to his new schedules.

"We'll give her our presents when she comes home, Dev," Andry said soothingly. "in the meantime, we can help Mit out by honoring Tria as the *ex tempore* Lady of the House."

Tria winced, so Devin knew his own face must have grown dark. There weren't a handful of people left in Wave now who would hear those capitol letters in Andry's voice. Or who might have cause to wonder which House Andry might mean, even though he was standing square in the middle of House Metreedi and talking to *Devin* about *his* wife.

But Trialina was one of that handful.

After all, the spouse of the Head was co-Head, not... that other title. Though Andry was a nobleman born and might be assumed to be using the lingo of his own social group, if anyone who wasn't part of that *handful* was close enough to hear. Hopefully.

"Mit and I are fine. Kari should be her mother's stand-in, even if you two weren't planning to honor them both. And Ina as well, I imagine," she said quickly.

Andry smiled that sweet smile of his. "The Goddess of Light shines through all the women of the household, Tria. That includes you." His smile went wry as he looked down at Devin. "And since I know Dev is terrible about remembering these things..."

Devin shifted uncomfortably. "I didn't forget. I have a present for you to give Lady Amiria. I was going to bring it over if you didn't stop by today."

Though giving Andry his gift for Lady Amiria *had* been a side-reason for calling the Lord of Wave out to try to reach Karana down from the aerial playground – or at least try to talk her down. While Devin *loved* the old woman, she had always made him uncomfortable. Andry's triad-mother's clear-eyed gaze always seemed to see through whatever façade Devin had up; to see *through* Devin and to find him *wanting*, at least when it came to his relationship with Andry.

And while he couldn't necessarily fault her opinion – *he* rather thought he came up *wanting* when it came to being worthy of Andry as well, at least these last several years – it was damned unnerving. Not to mention that the old woman had been giving him that *look* since he was a little boy, and surely *then* he hadn't given her any cause.

Not that the Head of House Metreedi would go out of his way to avoid an old woman. It had simply... *worked out* to send for Andry to come help with the obstreperous three-year-old who would only listen to *him*.

“And one for Ina?”

No, and not *that* old woman either. Though his mother-in-law-the-former-Royal-Inspector was rather more intimidating than the aging Amberdeen princess. Really.

“I have something for her, yes. *And* for Greta. Not that *they* celebrate the Festival of Lights except that we do.”

But Karana would be disappointed if her grandmother – the one she knew as such, as well as the fussy elderly princess up at the palace – *and* her (known) grandmother's fussy housekeeper – didn't get gifts as well.

Trialina snorted again. “And by *he has something*, he means *I* went shopping and picked things up for all of them. Though Devin told me he'd pick out something for Kari himself and I should leave it to him.”

She gave him another of those annoying *knowing* glances. “I don't imagine he *has*, yet, though.”

“There's still tomorrow,” Devin retorted. “So long as I have something to put beside her lamp when she wakes up the next morning, we're good, right?”

He looked up at the now-empty tangle of ropes and wood above them. Mitael had lured Karana all the way out, it appeared. “Maybe I should get her some of those Pardasian jingling anklets. Then at least we might *hear* her the next time she tries this nonsense.”

Trialina's sardonic gaze met Andry's eternally forgiving one. “He's expecting you to take care of it. As usual.”

Andry chuckled. “Anklets would go well with the bangles Mama got for her. Is it you or Ina taking her to dance class next, Tria? Do you think Palmyra would say she's ready to learn to dance with jingly things on?”

Trialina rolled her eyes. “How should *I* know? I’m still a novice at this style myself.”

Hardly that. Trialina had been taking classes with Palmyra since she recovered from Mitael’s birth. Unless her impossible adopted daughters – both now moved on to branch-Houses farther inland and *out* of Devin’s *hair* at last, thank the Goddess – had kept her from learning much herself for most of that time.

And then there had been the year after they’d lost Eric and the Wandering Gull II to the pirates when Trialina hadn’t done much of anything at all besides cry.

It had been... disturbing to see such a strong woman fall apart so thoroughly. Aunt Ressa and Andry’s sister, Dimitria, had come back from Wave to look after her for awhile... though Dimi had barely had a civil word for Devin and had utterly refused to speak to Andry at all. Which had made everything harder for Andry and had led to Devin finally asking them to go home to Delta, even though Dimi was Tria’s best friend aside from Andry himself.

And then it had been *worse* when Andry had *forbidden* him to take vengeance for Eric’s loss. It wasn’t often that Andry put on his full authority as UnCrowned Emperor, and rarer still when he did it with Devin, but apparently this was *That Important*. The Sea-Queen had given Andry Her Word on the matter, it appeared, and *this* wasn’t something he would fight his Patron Goddess over... no matter how important it was to Trialina... and to Devin.

There hadn’t been anything that Devin *could* do then except take his adored elder cousin-and-Heir’s widow and son into his own home, and try to do for them what Grandfather had done for *him* when Mama and Papa...

It hadn’t hurt that he’d already had his eye on Eric’s son. Nor that Trialina had already had the pair of them over here half the time before they’d lost Eric anyways, taking care of Karana when Restella was gone and Devin had to be in town instead of down at the beach house where it was easier to look after the baby on his own.

He hadn’t wanted to be around Trialina then; the Head of House Metreedi couldn’t give in to raging and weeping, no matter what he wanted, and watching her do so was a painful mixture of frustrating and cathartic. But Mitael had been falling apart, too, and the only thing that seemed to soothe the half-orphaned boy had been Karana – especially after his friend and foster-brother, Liam Chidewell, had had to leave for Tallspire or miss his chance to become a page.

Mit had carried her around like a rag-doll for so long that Restella had wondered aloud rather caustically— when she was home – if the baby would forget how to walk. Though that had seemed unlikely, since they frequently found the children curled up together in the morning, Karana having somehow snuck out of her own bedroom and slipped into Mit’s to let him snuggle her at night for comfort as well.

It seemed too cruel to try to keep the children apart for long... or to abandon Mit with only his devastated mother in residence. (Tria’s parents had moved in briefly, but Aunt Megan’s own permanent-seeming, deep depression had only made things worse, and Uncle Daffyd had finally taken them back to Ilseador again.)

Not to mention that Devin being gone had left Andry to shoulder the burden of supporting his dear friend and their foster-son all on his own and possibly being derelict in his duties as Lord of Wave...

No. Andry would never do that, but Devin didn’t really want to think about what *other* reasons he might have for not leaving the grieving, widowed Trialina and the all-too-sympathetic and caring Andry together for too long in his absence. It wasn’t something he should worry about after all; Andry was nothing if not the absolute definition of loyal...

But Trialina *had* been taking Mit with her for dance lessons, just the two of them for the last year. Ina usually took Karana, unless Restella was actually home... Devin had thought about trying to clear time in his schedule to take the baby himself, but it was so *nice* just to have the house to himself a few hours a week, and be able get some *work* done without risk of interruptions.

Besides, there were all those memories of having taken lessons with Andry when they were younger... He didn’t want to layer new ones on top of those.

His little daughter was running out into the courtyard now, her black braids flying out behind her, and Mitael trailing.

“Did you see how high I went, Uncle Andry? Did-you-did-you-did-you? I was up even higher than *you* can reach!”

Andry bent over double to sweep the small girl up in his arms. “You were, my lass. You’re getting very brave.”

“Andry, don’t encourage her,” Devin said with a sigh, and as Karana’s beaming little face fell, he cursed himself for his fumbling lack of subtlety. He should have left it to Andry, who seemed to have been *born* subtle.

You'd think that having spent every minute together that they could arrange since their mothers first had them share a cradle would have gotten some of that to rub off on Devin, but no...

And both Trialina and *twelve-year-old Mitael* were looking at him with disappointment... (*Andry's subtlety seemed to be successfully rubbing off on their foster-son at least, so perhaps there was hope for their daughter. Or maybe it was Eric's lasting influence. It certainly couldn't be Trialina... not with that look she was giving him now...*)

Not Andry, though, never Andry, who was tickling Karana to bring her up out of where she'd buried into his chest to hide from Devin. And who was explaining to her that Papa had just been *worried* about her and *worry* often made people sound *upset*, even when that wasn't really how they were feeling. And who was telling her how that was a big-person thing to understand, but she was so *good* at understanding people, so it would make sense to *her*.

And Karana was sitting up straighter in Andry's arms and looking at him with those almost *glowingly* green eyes and Andry's grey ones were almost *glowing* back at her... and Devin could only wish that either one of them would look at *him* that way... But Andry had only ever given *that* look to the baby... And the baby had always looked to Andry first, no matter how Devin tried to be patient.

Now she *was* looking at him, but it was with that faintly anxious expression she always had for him. That little crease between her eyebrows as if she was trying to figure him out and not – quite – succeeding.

Though at least she didn't look like she was ready to give up. That was something.

"You're *really* not mad at me, Papa?"

Devin held out his arms, and Andry yielded her over with that slight hesitation that Devin had never been sure was more about his unwillingness to let her go, or his lack of trust in Devin's ability to care for her. "Of course, I'm not, imp. Like Uncle Andry said, I was just worried about you because I couldn't reach you when you needed help to get down."

He didn't look at Andry any more than he ever did when he called him 'Uncle' Andry to Karana. He didn't need to see that broken glass look in Andry's lovely eyes. Not after the first time, when he *had* made the mistake of looking.

“Didn’t *need* help,” Karana insisted. “Came down by *myself*.” She twisted to look around at Mitael, though. “But Mit made me feel better ’bout it. He made it easier.”

Mit grinned at her. “Of course not, imp. You’re the best little monkey in The Family.”

Karana beamed back at him.

She would never, ever, ever hurt Mitael’s feelings, even by so much as implying that she didn’t need him in some way. Nor would *Mitael* try her self-image by suggesting she couldn’t manage anything she tried. Occasionally, Devin worried that those two were *too* dependent on each other...

...on the other hand, that’s what people had said about him and Andry.

Granted, there was a nine-year gap between the two children, and they were being raised as brother and sister... just as Mama and Lady Lexa and the aunts and uncles had thought of him and Andry... But Mit and Karana weren’t *that* close bloodkin. And there were marriages made with larger age differences. Great-grandfather’s second wife had been nearly thirty years younger, for instance, and Trialina’s parents were nearly fifteen years apart in age.

It was *far* too early to think about whom his baby-girl would marry.

And likely Andry would remind him that *they* likely wouldn’t have any say in it anyways, given what the Sea-Queen had told them was likely for her future. Some lordling from the landlocked original provinces of Dawil was ‘meant’ for her – likely Randall Saralath’s younger child or Jaycoff Torvalds’ littlest lad.

As if either of *them* could possibly be worthy of a maiden whose lineages stood to place her as the most powerful woman, not just in insignificant Dawil, but in the *world*.

He’d have to see that those boys – whichever one it turned out to be, since the Goddess’ hints hadn’t been sufficiently detailed to tell, as Andry had related them – understood exactly *who* his daughter was. And why *her* lineage and potential far outshone the ones *they* hailed from. Either one.

Which was likely to be a damned good trick; the Saralaths of Taridawil and the Torvalds of Mountainmeadow were the most arrogant bastards among the entire nobility in Devin’s experience.

At least both likely lads were youngest-borns and there should be little trouble with their fathers in having them take the Metreedi name and learn their place in The Family. Arrogant or not, both the duke and Lord Jaycoff knew enough about the role of The Family to have *some* idea of the honor they were being offered.

And, of course, both lords would undoubtedly be over the moon when they found out about Karana's *other* lineage and likely future, reduced circumstances though it was compared to the rest. It was all a matter of perspective and local land-locked lordlings tended to be myopic in Devin's experience.

And if Andry could only Name Karana as *his* Heir...

Trialina was prying the baby out of his arms, saying something about it being time for a bath after all that excitement. One thing to say for his daughter: Karana never objected to being immersed in water; she was a Metreedi through and through.

He must have said something about that aloud as Trialina herded the children off, because Andry was giving him a sideways look. "I seem to recall *you* hating to go into a bath for a few years there, Dev. More than me, anyways. Or Dimi."

Devin shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant. "Alright. So, it's an Elemandros trait as well. We both trace our descent back to the Sea-Queen after all."

As likely did his wife, given how her father and she and her brother were such spectacular sea-captains, all. And no need to remember aloud that Devin's own Elemandros blood was quite as good as Andry's.

Andry relented easily as always, and came closer for an embrace. "You've much of air in you, love. Perhaps there's a Daughter of Sifwisa in your lineage that we don't know about."

It was a teasing tone, but there was too much truth to that statement.

Devin was aware that Andry had all the Power of the Bound Emperor (UnCrowned though he was, it made no real difference) and had been trained in its use by his father, Lord Tedros. But *Andry* didn't know about – or at least *wasn't supposed to know about* – anything Devin might have beyond the well-known Metreedi *charisma*. And especially not to know that Devin's use of even that was more than subconscious or instinctual.

Andry was *certainly* not to know that Grandfather had dithered over making Devin the Heir to the House because Metreedis were supposed to have an affinity for Water, and Devin's was for Air.

It hadn't mattered so much in the days of the Empire. But ever since they had given up that overt secular power and their official position as the Emperor's Right Hand and Prime Minister, and ever since Empress Turiallina had given up *her* secular power and returned the Crown of the Empire to the Sea-Queen, it had been necessary for the Heads of House Metreedi to be more subtle in their support. Just as they had to be more subtle in how they managed the Empire-in-Abeyance's politics and economy for the good of the citizens.

A thousand years ago... and The Family was *still* rebuilding from their utter failure in preventing the collapse of the Empire.

A thousand years... and they were *still* smarting from the Sea-Queen's chastisement – delivered *in person* to the Head of House and Council of Elders, instead of through the Empress as had been the traditional approach.

A thousand years... and it was *enough*.

Devin had decided – and passed the word through The Family after Andry had brought back word of what the Sea-Queen intended for *his daughter* – that the next generation would receive a somewhat *adjusted* version of history.

No more castigating themselves for the Fall of the Empire.

They would still respect and obey the original Onus of The Family Metreedi – that still made sense and Devin believed in the Onus with his entire heart and soul – but not these extra commandments.

They would assume they were *forgiven*.

And since the branch-House Heads all knew about Karana's birth. But nothing untoward had happened in the last three years, as had happened before when a Metreedi had attempted to take the Turquoise Throne. Or in the last *eight* years, since he and Andry had been wed.

And thus, so far, Devin's decree had been accepted.

He knew they thought he was arrogant as all get out to challenge the Gods themselves.

*(Though they seemed to see his Andry as **daring**, and **tragic**, for doing essentially the same thing. Of course, Andry rarely let anyone see past that humble exterior. Devin knew better... but he wasn't sure if even Lady Amiria or their Aunt Ress did. Or Restella.)*

But The Family was tired of being penalized for the mistakes of their ancestors (*their recent ancestors – the Turquoise Empire, both before and now in-Abeyance, only existed at all because the Original Ancestors had been given a second chance on this world*).

But none of that meant that the odd young Head of House with his Air- instead of Water-affinity could reveal any of that to the UnCrowned Emperor. No matter how close they were in every other sense.

Devin justified the omission by telling himself that Andry kept political secrets from him for the good of Wave. But the truth was that, with the resources of the House behind him, Devin probably had access to any of those ‘secrets’ that he deemed necessary.

“Well, as Head of a sailing House, I certainly wouldn’t want to risk offending the Goddess of the Trade-Winds by denying it,” Devin said lightly. “Come on up to my office, Andry. I want you to look at Lenore’s contract and tell me if I’m missing any ideas on how to keep that young fool, Everett, from decamping to Ilseador.”

“I’ll try,” Andry said dubiously. “But I’ve talked to Everett myself and–”

“Come try anyways,” Devin urged, then gave him a dry smile. “Trialina will have the baby busy for the next hour or so, after all, and we both know you’re not going back up to the Palace until you spend some time with *her*.”

As he’d known such a phrasing would do, Andry looked both slightly stung and more than slightly guilty. “And with you, Dev. Always.”

“Of course, Andry,” Devin put just enough of a hint of disbelief into his voice that Andry followed him up to the office as if to prove him wrong. Likely he’d stay long enough to make the point...

Well, it *was* the day before the Festival of Lights. Surely even the Head of House Metreedi could take a few hours off.



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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.

Her *Chronicles of Ilseador* and *Prankster Prince* series occur in the same world as the *Knightess of the Realm* stories.

(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 <https://www.RisingDragonBooks.com>



Also by Mangala McNamara

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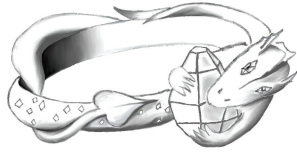
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