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magic study

MARIA V. SNYDER



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A wholehearted thank-you to the one who holds down the fort while I'm doing book events, who gets the dishes done and the kids to soccer, who has been my biggest fan and supporter from the very beginning, my husband, Rodney.

To my Seton Hill University critique partners, Chun Lee, Amanda Sablak, Ceres Wright, thanks for all the help. Also, many thanks go to my Seton Hill mentor, Steven Piziks. I hope you find enough descriptive details!

I couldn't forget to thank my Muse and Schmooze critique group for their continued support and guidance. Your help has been wonderful, and our biannual retreats and coffee bar conversations are much loved.

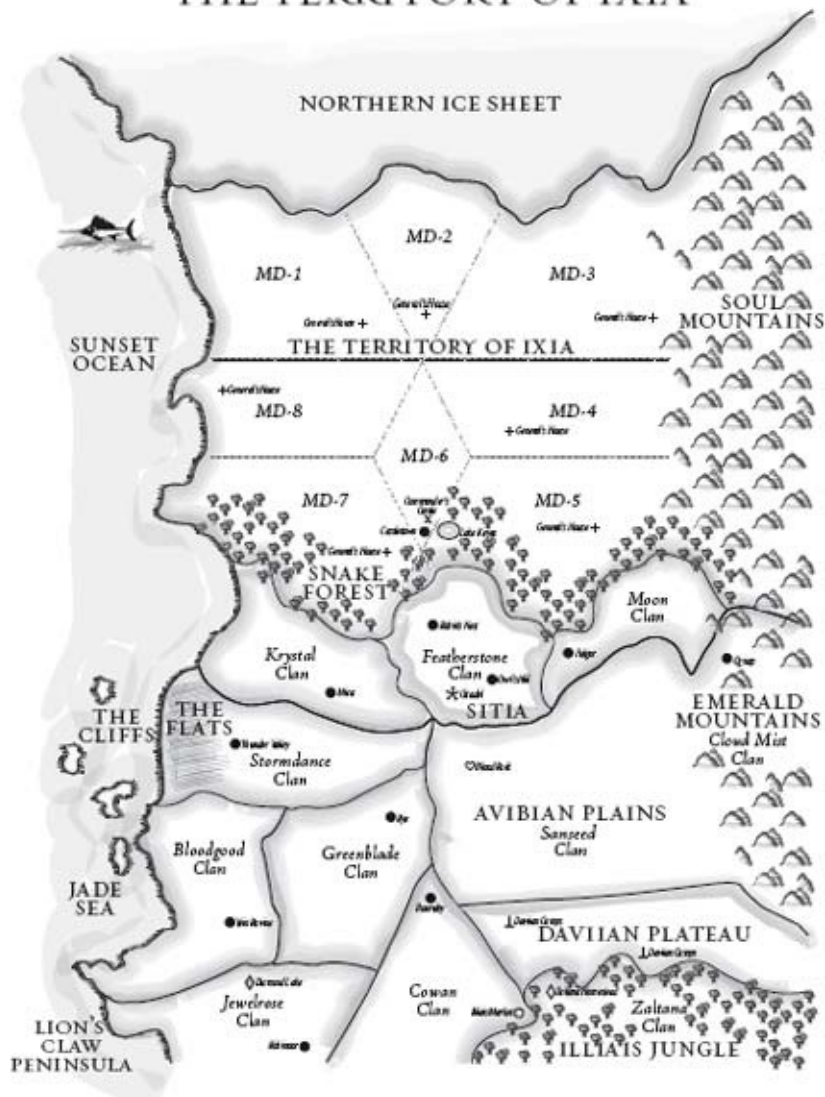
Many thanks and praise go to my excellent editor, Mary-Theresa Hussey. Despite her busy schedule she always finds time to answer my million questions. Thank you so much!

And a heartfelt thanks to Susan Kraykowski and her horse Kiki. Without them both, I wouldn't have learned how to ride, and I wouldn't have discovered the unique bond between horse and rider.

To my children, Luke and Jenna,
a constant source of inspiration and love.
You both are truly magical.

In loving memory of Anthony Foster.

THE TERRITORY OF IXIA



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“WE’RE HERE,” IRYS SAID.

I looked around. The surrounding jungle bulged with life. Overgrown green bushes blocked our path, vines hung from the tree canopy, and the constant chatter and trill of jungle birds beat at my ears. Small furry creatures, who had been following us through the jungle, peeked at us from their hiding spots behind huge leaves.

“Where?” I asked, glancing at the three other girls. They shrugged in unison, equally confused. In the thick humid air, their thin cotton dresses were soaked in sweat. My own black pants and white shirt clung to my clammy skin. We were tired from lugging our heavy backpacks along snake-thin jungle paths, and itchy from hosting unnameable insects on our skins.

“The Zaltana homestead,” Irys said. “Quite possibly *your* home.”

I surveyed the lush greenery and saw nothing that resembled a settlement. During the course of our travels south, whenever Irys had declared that we had arrived, we were usually in the midst of a small town or village, with houses made of wood, stone or brick, hemmed in by fields and farms.

The brightly dressed inhabitants would welcome us, feed us and, amid a cacophony of voices and spicy aromas, listen to our story. Then certain families would be summoned with great haste. In a whirlwind of excitement and babble, one of the children in our party, who had lived in the orphanage in the north, would be reunited with a family they hadn’t known existed.

As a result, our group had grown ever smaller as we’d traveled farther into the southern land of Sitia. Soon, we had left the cold northern air far behind, and were now cooking in the steamy warmth of the jungle with no sign of a town in sight.

“Homestead?” I asked.

Irys sighed. Wisps of her black hair had sprung from her tight bun, and her stern expression didn’t quite match the slight humor in her emerald eyes.

“Yelena, appearances can be deceiving. Seek with your mind, not your senses,” she instructed.

I rubbed my slick hands along the grain of my wooden staff, concentrating on its smooth surface. My mind emptied, and the buzz of the jungle faded as I sent out my mental awareness. In my mind’s eye, I slithered through the underbrush with a snake, searching for a patch of sunlight. I scrambled through the tree branches with a long-limbed animal with such ease that it felt as if we flew.

Then, above, I moved with people among the treetops. Their minds were open and relaxed, deciding what to eat for dinner, and discussing the news from the city. But one mind worried about the sounds from the jungle below. Something wasn’t right. Someone strange was there. Possible danger. *Who’s in my mind?*

I snapped back to myself. Irys stared at me.

“They live in the trees?” I asked.

She nodded. “But remember Yelena, just because someone’s mind is receptive to your probing doesn’t mean you’re permitted to dive into their deeper thoughts. That’s a breach of our Ethical Code.”

Her words were harsh, the master level magician scolding her student.

“Sorry,” I said.

She shook her head. “I forget that you’re still learning. We need to get to the Citadel and begin your training, but I’m afraid this stop will take some time.”

“Why?”

“I can’t leave you with your family like I did for the other children, and it would be cruel to take you away too soon.”

Just then, a loud voice from above called out, “Venettaden.”

Irys swung her arm up and mumbled something, but my muscles froze before I could repel the magic that engulfed us. I couldn’t move. After a frantic moment of panic, I calmed my mind. I tried to build a mental wall of defense, but the magic that ensnared me knocked down my mental bricks as fast as I could stack them.

Irys, however, was unaffected. She yelled into the treetops. “We’re friends of the Zaltanas. I’m Irys of the Jewelrose Clan, Fourth Magician in the Council.”

Another strange word echoed from the trees. My legs trembled as the magic released me and I sank to the ground to wait for the faintness to pass. The twins, Gracena and Nickeely collapsed together, moaning. May rubbed her legs.

“Why have you come, Irys Jewelrose?” the voice above asked.

“I believe I may have found your lost daughter,” she replied.

A rope ladder descended through the branches.

“Let’s go, girls,” Irys said. “Here, Yelena, hold the bottom while we climb.”

A peevish thought about who would hold the ladder for me flashed through my mind. Irys’s annoyed voice admonished me in my own head. *Yelena, you will have no trouble getting into the tree. Perhaps I should have them raise the ladder when it’s your turn to climb, as you might prefer to use your grapple and rope.*

She was right, of course. I had used the trees to hide from my enemies in Ixia without the convenience of a ladder. And even now, I’d enjoyed an occasional “walk” through the treetops to keep my skills honed.

Irys smiled at me. *Perhaps it’s in your blood.*

My stomach filled with unease as I remembered Mogkan. He had said I was cursed with Zaltana blood. I’d no reason to trust the now dead southern magician, though, and I’d been avoiding asking Irys questions about the Zaltanas so I wouldn’t get my hopes up about being a part of their family. Even while dying, I knew Mogkan would have been capable of pulling one last spiteful trick.

Mogkan and General Brazell’s son, Reyad, had kidnapped me along with over thirty other children from Sitia. Averaging two children a year, they had brought the girls and boys north to Brazell’s “orphanage” in the Territory of Ixia for use in their twisted plans. All of the children had the potential of becoming magicians because they had been born to families with strong magic.

Irys had explained to me that magical powers were a gift, and only a handful of magicians came from each clan. “Of course, the more magicians in a family,” Irys had said, “the greater chance of having more in the next generation. Mogkan took a risk kidnapping children so young; magical powers don’t manifest until a child reaches maturity.”

“Why were there more girls than boys?” I had asked.

“Only thirty percent of our magicians are males, and Bain Bloodgood is the only one to achieve master level status.”

As I steadied the rope ladder that hung from the jungle’s canopy, I now wondered how many Zaltanas were magicians. Beside me, the three girls tucked the hems of their dresses into their belts. Irys helped May start up the rope rungs, and then Gracena and Nickeely followed.

When we had crossed the border into Sitia, the girls hadn’t hesitated to exchange their northern uniforms for the bright multicolored, cotton dresses worn by some of the southern women. The boys switched their uniforms for simple cotton pants and tunics. I, on the other hand, had kept my food taster’s uniform on until the heat and humidity had driven me to purchase a pair of boy’s cotton pants and a shirt.

After Irys disappeared into the green canopy, I set my boot on the bottom rung. My feet felt as if ~~they were swollen with water, weighing me down. Reluctance clung to my legs as I dragged them up~~ the ladder. In midair, I paused. What if these people didn't want me? What if they didn't believe I was their lost daughter? What if I were too old to be bothered with?

All the children who had already found their homes had been immediately accepted. Between the ages of seven and thirteen, they had been separated from their families for only a few years. Physical resemblances, ages, and even names had made it easy to place them. Now, we were down to four. The identical twins, Gracena and Nickeely were thirteen. May was the youngest at twelve, and I was the oldest of the group at twenty.

According to Irys, the Zaltanas had lost a six-year-old girl over fourteen years prior. That was a long time to be away. I was no longer a child.

Yet I was the oldest one who had survived Brazell's plans and remained whole. When the other kidnapped children reach maturity, those who had developed magical powers had been tortured until they surrendered their souls to Mogkan and Reyad. Mogkan had then used the magic of these now mindless captives to enhance his own, making the children nothing more than living bodies without souls.

Irys bore the burden of informing the families of these children, but I felt some guilt by being the only one to survive Mogkan's efforts to capture my soul. The effort, though, cost me a great deal.

Thinking about my struggles in Ixia led to thoughts of Valek. An ache for him chewed at my heart. Hooking an arm around the ladder, I fingered the butterfly pendant he had carved for me. Perhaps I could devise a way to return to Ixia. After all, the magic in my body no longer flared out of control, and I would much rather be with him than among these strange southerners who lived in the trees. Even the name of the south, Sitia, felt thick as rancid syrup in my mouth.

"Yelena, come on," Irys called down to me. "We're waiting."

I swallowed hard and ran a hand over my long braid, smoothing my black hair and pulling out the few viney tendrils that clung to it. Despite the long trek through the jungle, I wasn't too tired. While shorter than most Ixians at five feet four inches, my body had transformed from emaciated to muscular during my last year in Ixia. The difference had been in my living arrangements. From starving in the dungeon to tasting food for Commander Ambrose, my situation had improved for my physical well-being, but I couldn't say the same for my mental well-being during that time.

I shook my head, banishing those thoughts and concentrating on my immediate circumstances. Climbing up the rest of the ladder, I expected it to end at a wide branch or a platform in the tree like landing on a staircase. Instead, I entered a room.

I looked around in amazement. The walls and ceiling of the room were formed by branches and limbs that had been roped together. Sunlight leaked in between the gaps. Bundled sticks had been worked into chairs that had cushions made of leaves. The small room held only four seats.

"Is this her?" a tall man asked Irys. His cotton tunic and short pants were the color of the tree's leaves. Green gel had been combed into his hair and smeared over all his exposed skin. A bow and a quiver of arrows hung over his shoulder. I guessed he was the guard. Why, though, would he need a weapon if he were the magician who had frozen us? Then again, Irys had deflected that spell with ease. Could she turn aside an arrow as well?

"Yes," Irys said to the man.

"We've heard rumors at the market, and wondered if you would pay us a visit, Fourth Magician. Please, stay here," he said. "I'll get the Elder."

Irys sank into one of the chairs, and the girls explored the room, exclaiming over the view from the single window. I paced the narrow space. The guard seemed to disappear through the wall, but upon investigation, I discovered a gap that led to a bridge also made of branches.

“Sit down,” Irys said to me. “Relax. You’re safe here.”

“Even with that heartwarming reception?” I countered.

“Standard procedure. Unaccompanied visitors are extremely rare. With the constant danger of jungle predators, most travelers hire a Zaltana guide. You’ve been edgy and defensive ever since I told you we were headed to the Zaltana’s village.”

Irys pointed at my legs. “You’re in a fighting stance, prepared for attack. These people are your family. Why would they want to hurt you?”

I realized that I had pulled my weapon off my back, and was clutching it in the ready position. With effort, I relaxed my posture.

“Sorry.” I threaded the bow, a five-foot wooden staff, back into its holder on the side of my backpack.

Fear of the unknown had caused me to clench. For as long as I could remember in Ixia, I had been told my family was dead. Lost to me forever. Even so, I used to dream of finding an adopted family who would love and care for me. I had only given up that fantasy when I had been turned into Mogka and Reyad’s experiment, and now that I had Valek, I felt I didn’t need a family.

“That’s not true, Yelena,” Irys said aloud. “Your family will help you discover who you are and why. You need them more than you know.”

“I thought you said it was against your Ethical Code to read someone’s mind.” I rankled at her intrusion on my private thoughts.

“We are linked as teacher and student. You freely gave me a pathway to your mind by accepting me as your mentor. It would be easier to divert a waterfall than to break our link.”

“I don’t remember creating a pathway,” I grumbled.

“If there was a conscious effort in making a link, it wouldn’t have happened.” She watched my face for a while. “You gave me your trust and your loyalty. That was all that was needed to forge a bond. While I won’t pry into your intimate thoughts and memories, I can pick up on your surface emotions.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but the green-haired guard returned.

“Follow me,” he said.

We wound our way through the treetops. Hallways and bridges connected room after room high above the land. There had been no hint of this maze of dwellings from the ground. We didn’t see or meet a soul as we passed around bedrooms and through living areas. From glimpses into the rooms, I saw they were decorated with items found in the jungle. Coconut shells, nuts, berries, grasses, twigs and leaves were all artfully arranged into wall hangings, book covers, boxes and statues. Someone had even fashioned an exact replica of one of those long-tailed animals by using white and black stones glued together.

“Irys,” I said, pointing to the statue, “what are those animals?”

“Valmurs. Very intelligent and playful. There are millions of them in the jungle. They’re curious too. Remember how they spied on us from the trees?”

I nodded, recalling the little creatures that never stood still long enough for me to study. In other rooms, I spotted more animal replicas made from different colored stones. A hollowness touched my throat as I thought of Valek and the animals he carved out of rocks. I knew he would appreciate the craftsmanship of these stone statues. Perhaps I could send one to him.

I didn’t know when I’d ever be able to see him again. The Commander had exiled me to Sitia when he had discovered I possessed magical powers. If I returned to Ixia, the Commander’s order of execution would be in effect, but he had never said I couldn’t communicate with my friends in Ixia.

I soon found out why we hadn’t encountered anyone on our journey through the village. We entered a large, round common room where about two hundred people gathered. It appeared the entire

settlement was here. People filled the benches of carved wood that circled a huge fire pit made of stone.

Talk ceased the minute we entered. All eyes focused on me. My skin crawled. I felt as if they were examining every inch of my face, my clothes and my muddy boots. From their expressions, I gathered I wasn't meeting expectations. I stifled the desire to hide behind Irys. Regret that I hadn't asked Irys more questions about the Zaltanas thumped in my chest.

At last, an older man stepped forward. "I'm Bavol Cacao Zaltana, Elder Councilman for the Zaltana family. Are you Yelena Liana Zaltana?"

I hesitated. That name sounded so formal, so connected, so foreign. "My name is Yelena," I said.

A young man a few years older than I pushed through the crowd. He stopped next to the Elder. Squinting hard, his jade-eyed gaze bore into mine. A mixture of hatred and revulsion creased his face. I felt a slight touch of magic brush my body.

"She has killed," he called out. "She reeks of blood."

A COLLECTIVE GASP SOUNDED from the crowd of Zaltanas. Abhorrence and outrage gripped the now hostile faces in the room. I found myself behind Irys, hoping to block the negative force emanating from so many eyes.

“Leif, you always tend toward the dramatic,” Irys admonished the young man. “Yelena’s had a hard life. Don’t judge what you don’t know.”

Leif wilted before Irys’s gaze.

“I reek of blood, too. Do I not?” she asked.

“But you’re the Fourth Magician,” Leif said.

“So you know what I’ve done and why. I suggest you find out what your sister has had to deal with in Ixia before you accuse her.”

His jaw tightened. The muscles on his neck pulled taut as he swallowed what might have been a reply. I risked another peek around the room. Now contemplative, worried and even sheepish looks peppered the group. The Zaltana women wore sleeveless dresses or skirts and short-sleeved blouses with bright floral patterns on them. The hemlines reached to their knees. The men of the clan wore light-colored tunics and plain pants. All the Zaltanas were barefoot, and most had lean builds and bronze skin.

Then Irys’s words sank in. I grabbed her arm. *Brother? I have a brother?*

One side of her mouth quirked up. *Yes. A brother. Your only sibling. You would have known this if you hadn’t changed the subject every time I tried to tell you about the Zaltanas.*

Great. My luck was holding steady. I had thought my troubles were over when I had left the Territory of Ixia. Why should any of this surprise me? While all the other Sitians lived in villages on the ground, my family resided in the trees. I studied Leif, searching for a resemblance. His stocky muscular build and square face stood out compared to the rest of the lithe clan. Only his black hair and green eyes matched my own features.

During the awkward moments that followed, I wished for an invisibility spell, and reminded myself to ask Irys if there were such a spell.

An older woman about my height approached us. As she neared she shot Leif a powerful glance, and he hung his head. Without warning, she embraced me. I flinched for a heartbeat, uncertain. Her hair smelled like lilacs.

“I’ve wanted to do this for fourteen years,” she said, hugging me tighter. “How my arms have ached for my little girl.”

Those words transported me back in time, shrunk me down into a six-year-old child. Wrapping my arms around this woman, I bawled. Fourteen years without a mother had made me believe I could be stoic when I finally met her. During the journey south, I had imagined I would be curious and unemotional. *Nice to make your acquaintance, but we really need to get to the Citadel.* But I was woefully unprepared for the torrent of emotions that racked my body. I clung to her as if she alone kept me from drowning.

From a distance, I heard Baval Cacao. “Everyone get back to work. The Fourth Magician is our guest. We need a proper feast for tonight. Petal, make up the guest rooms. We’ll need five beds.”

The buzz of voices filling the common area disbursed. The room was almost empty when the woman—my mother—released me from her arms. It was still difficult to match her oval face to the title of “Mother.” After all, she might not be my real mother. And if she were, did I have the right to

call her by that name after so many years away?

~~“Your father will be so pleased,” she said. She pulled a strand of black hair from her face. Streaks of gray painted her long braids, and her pale green eyes shone with unshed tears.~~

“How do you know?” I asked. “I may not be your—”

“Your soul fits the void in my soul perfectly. I’ve no doubt you’re mine. I hope you’ll call me Mother, but if you can’t you can call me Perl.”

I wiped at my face with the handkerchief Irys handed me. Glancing around, I looked for my father. Father. Another word that threatened to ruin what little dignity I had remaining.

“Your father’s out collecting samples,” Perl said, seeming to read my mind. “He’ll be back as soon as word reaches him.” Perl turned her head. I followed her gaze and saw Leif standing near us; his arms crossed over his chest and his hands bunched into fists. “You’ve met your brother. Don’t just stand there, Leif. Come give your sister a proper greeting.”

“I can’t stand the smell,” he said. He turned his back on us and stalked away.

“Don’t mind him,” my mother said. “He’s overly sensitive. He had trouble dealing with your disappearance. He was blessed with strong magic, but his magic is...” She paused. “Unique. He can sense where and what a person has been doing. Not specifics, but general feelings. The Council calls on him to help solve crimes and disputes, and to determine if a person is guilty or not.” She shook her head. “Those Zaltanas with magical powers have unusual abilities. What about you, Yelena? I feel the magic coursing through you.” A brief smile touched her lips. “My own limited ability. What is your talent?”

I glanced at Irys for help.

“Her magic was forced from her and was uncontrolled until recently. We have yet to determine her specialty.”

Color drained from my mother’s face. “Forced?”

I touched her sleeve. “It’s all right.”

Perl bit her lip. “Could she flame out?” she asked Irys.

“No. I have taken her under my wing. She has gained some measure of control. Although, she must come to the Magician’s Keep so I can teach her more about her magic.”

My mother grabbed my arms hard. “You must tell me *everything* that has happened to you since you were taken from us.”

“I...” A trapped feeling seized my throat.

Bavol Cacao stepped to my rescue. “The Zaltanas are honored that you have chosen one of ours as your student, Fourth Magician. Please let me escort your party to your rooms so you may freshen up and rest before the feast.”

Relief coursed through me, although the determined set to my mother’s jaw warned that she was not yet finished with me. Her grip tightened when Irys and the three girls moved to follow Bavol Cacao to our rooms.

“Perl, you’ll have plenty of time to spend with your daughter,” he said. “She’s home now.”

She released me, stepping back. “I’ll see you tonight. I’ll ask your cousin, Nutty, to lend you some decent clothes for the feast.”

I grinned as we worked our way to the guest rooms. With all that had happened today, my mother had still managed to notice the clothes I wore.

The feast that night began as a sedate dinner, but then transformed into a party despite the fact that I might have offended my hosts by first tasting the many fruit dishes and seasoned cold meats for poisons before I ate. Old habits die hard.

The night air filled with the scent of burning citronella mixed with a damp earthy smell. After the

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