



## **Mystic Rider**

By Patricia Rice

### Prologue

Smoke rising from the Mystic Isle's highest peak dimmed the glow of the quarter moon, casting a foreboding shadow over the drooping leaves of the tropical jungle at the mountain's foot.

Undeterred by the prophetic gloom, Ian Olympus gripped his six-foot-tall oak staff with both hands and adjusted his breathing until he reached the center where his soul

resided. As the island of Aelynn's only Sky Rider, he was attempting his visionary journey once more in an effort to subdue the abnormal weather that was crippling his home and his people. Previous efforts had failed, but perhaps this time...

He swung the staff over his head with practiced hands. As the staff spun faster and faster, he gazed into the starlit bowl of the heavens, searching for answers. The tropical night was humid, and beads of moisture formed upon his brow.

His torso stripped bare, he strained for greater swiftness, compelled by the urgency of the situation. The staff became little more than a blur of motion against the sky as images poured through him.

Sweat glistened on bronzed shoulders and arms bulging with muscle. His abdomen was taut from years of practicing this exercise. Standing half-naked on a rocky hillside above the lush forest of his island home, he was as much a part of the natural world as the trees below—a human windmill catching the energy of the skies.

Electricity danced along his fingertips like a thousand fireflies. As the staff spun faster, sparks flew from its ends.

Ian took no notice of sparks or speed. His inner eye fixed on the familiar image rising in the stars, a womanly vision fine and fair, caught in a cacophony of stormy music. Thunderous deep bass notes joined in symphony with the high-pitched melodies of woodwinds. He didn't understand the significance of the music, but the chorus of screams in the distance, the background of blood and soldiers... Those he interpreted from reports he had received. *Revolution.*

The woman had entered his visions before, capturing his imagination. Cylindrical blond curls framed high cheekbones flushed with pink. Skin like ivory silk, a high

intelligent brow, and thick gold lashes provided a perfect setting for crystalline blue eyes. Her music pulsed through Ian's veins, filling an emptiness inside him.

Women had told Ian that he had a hollow heart, and he'd acknowledged the truth of the accusation. He'd never loved, never known passion. He'd hoped someday that might change, but it didn't seem reasonable at this late date. He was what he was, and his detachment had made his days exceedingly efficient. Until now...

He'd never known such stirring music, or been so thoroughly aroused by the sensual promise in a woman's winsome smile. His lonely soul awakened and craved life.

*Why do the stars continue to summon this vision?*

He caught his breath as the image unexpectedly sharpened at his question. There, just past her round, bare shoulder, hovered the sacred Chalice of Plenty. Its disappearance two years ago had marked the start of the deteriorating conditions on the island. The *chalice*, with a woman not of his world. Did this mean...?

Ian had given up all hope of ever finding his physical and spiritual equal, the rare *amacara* only a fortunate few were granted. If he read the stars correctly, he'd found them both—his mate and his duty—in a woman who was caught in a storm of violence.

He rarely saw himself in his visions, but he recognized his staff in a man's hand reaching out to the woman and the chalice. And there, beyond the chalice—*Murdoch*. In a soldier's uniform. The vision exploded in a painful swirl of red and the thunder of drums, striking him with a blow as effective as if it had come from a club.

Gasping at this psychic attack on his senses, Ian slowed the motion of the oak staff until it became visible. Staggering, he steadied himself. He couldn't stop now while the vision filled his head. He needed to puzzle out its meaning.

Slowly, he worked out the kinks in his extended arm muscles by lowering the pole to the height of his shoulders. He crossed his arms to grasp the top and bottom of his staff and spun it from hand to hand in looping figure eights while he pondered.

What did the blood in the vision signify? His own death? Or that of the woman who was his destiny? And how did Murdoch, a banished renegade, fit into the image?

That he himself should die anywhere other than on Aelynn was unthinkable. Who would lead their people into the future? His sister? Like him, she had no mate. If neither brother nor sister produced an heir, Aelynn would eventually be left leaderless. In a time of upheaval such as this, that could spell disaster for their gifted, ancient people.

He sought other meanings.

The people of Aelynn had been assigned the duty of protecting the chalice, and they had failed. The fate of his world could rest upon his recovering the sacred object—and finding the woman.

As it had more than once before, the conflict between the fate of his line and that of the chalice kept him twirling his staff, until this time he saw resolution. Only after he began cooling exercises did the visitor waiting at the bottom of the hill dare to approach him.

“Ian,” Kiernan the Finder shouted, reducing the regal family name of Ian to the more familiar one that Ian preferred.

Kiernan’s presence had not intruded earlier upon Ian’s trance. Now, he resented returning to mundane matters after the vision of golden curls. But he had been taught since birth, that his responsibilities came first, and he acknowledged the Finder with a nod. Several months ago, Kiernan had been sent to retrieve the chalice and the woman in Ian’s

recurring vision, but he did not appear to have returned with either of them.

“I assume you have Seen the news I have come to tell you,” Kiernan said.

“She is lovely,” Ian agreed obliquely. “The chalice recognizes her, but if she has gifts, they are too common for her to be aware of them.” He seldom spoke of all he’d Seen in his visions, but he hoped Kiernan might be prompted to provide more insight into the woman.

“You see more than I,” Kiernan replied, to Ian’s disappointment.

The Finder looked weary as he came closer, Ian noted. The youthful humor that had once defined his friend’s smile had worn away these past few years into the harsh angles of an adult who had seen more than he liked. Ian was sorry that he’d had to ask so much of him.

“I See *differently*,” Ian corrected. “I know nothing of the Outside World except what others report. The woman appears foreign and exotic to me. I simply recognize the chalice. I possess just a small portion of your skill and can guess only her direction.”

Kiernan did not have visions, but he could locate any object once he’d been told of its existence. “The woman is in Paris,” he stated bluntly. “The city is a maelstrom of discord, misdirecting my insight with the smoke of anger and hatred. The chalice lies in the center of it.”

With great patience, Ian waited for the Finder to explain why he had not returned with either prize—the chalice or Ian’s mate—as he’d been instructed to do.

Kiernan shoved a callused hand through his long, ragged hair. “I went to Paris,” he stated with a rough edge to his voice. “But the chalice is not a...” He hesitated, apparently searching for a means to explain. “It is not an inanimate object.”

He seemed to be waiting for the obvious protest about the inability of lumps of silver to have minds of their own, but Ian acknowledged the possibility of sentience with a nod. “The gods work in strange ways.”

With relief at Ian’s understanding, Kiernan continued. “Tracking the chalice is akin to tracking our exile. I know its general direction, but like Murdoch, it does not stay put. I have the feeling that the chalice is deliberately avoiding me, just as Murdoch does.”

Ian frowned. He disliked the idea that Murdoch LeDroit might be in the same country as the chalice. The renegade had been banished for killing Ian’s father, Council Leader of Aelynn. Whether the death was an accident or deliberate was still debated, but either way, the lightning Murdoch had brought down had demonstrated the danger of his unruly physical and psychic gifts.

Murdoch had the ability to invoke earth, wind, fire, and water. After causing Luther’s death, he had supposedly been stripped of his perilous gifts and exiled. The immovable ring of silence that he wore would prevent his ever speaking of his invisible home. Still, the dangerous fool seemed to hold the fate of Aelynn in his hands. Two years ago, he’d nearly killed the island’s Guardian with Greek fire. What havoc might he create if he claimed the chalice?

“Murdoch should not be able to sense you,” Ian reminded Kiernan.

“I know.” Kiernan’s troubled expression revealed his reluctance to acknowledge what must be said. “I think it is as Trystan warned us—Murdoch’s abilities may have been muddled but were not entirely destroyed. Is it possible that he has more gifts than was known?”

Ian spun his staff. As usual, the movement helped him concentrate. “Anything is

possible, although I suspect it is more a case of no one being able to completely erase what the gods have given. Could he be the reason you cannot find the chalice?”

“I think the chalice is avoiding Murdoch as much as it avoids me. And I sense that your mate is the reason.”

Ian’s head jerked up, and his eyes narrowed. “You think she has the ability to conceal it? That she knows of its worth to us?”

“I have no good explanation for why the chalice and your mate keep disappearing at the same time.” Kiernan straightened his shoulders and met Ian’s gaze boldly. “I think the chalice is challenging you to claim your mate in person.”

At this confirmation of Ian’s own thinking, a ripple of shock hit him. His family never left the isle, not since the beginnings of time. Their abilities were too valuable to risk elsewhere.

Because of that risk, he had never sailed beyond the island’s waters. It was his duty—as it had been the duty of all generations of Olympians—to lead the Mystic Isle of Aelynn. As the only son of the late Council Leader, Luther, and presiding Oracle, Dyllys, Ian led the island’s government. Among other things, he ensured that those of his world followed his mother’s edicts.

Ian was also the last Olympus male on Aelynn.

Even Kiernan was painfully aware of the enormous consequences of what he was suggesting. The Finder dropped to a boulder seat and bowed his head, waiting for the gods to smite him for speaking such heresy.

They did not.

Perhaps it was time to think the unthinkable.

Although Ian had abilities beyond those of mortal men, using them to cause harm in the Outside World was forbidden except in self-defense, and even then, their use was dangerous. Mankind often killed what it did not understand, and Ian was an enigma even here, where he'd been born. In the Outside World, he would be akin to a statue come to life, with little knowledge of his surroundings beyond what his instincts told him.

“She is a revolutionary,” Ian murmured, keeping his horror—and his secret longing—to himself as he pondered the fate he had been assigned.

“She has the chalice.” Since he hadn't been struck dead by the gods, Kiernan dared lift his head. He had no fear of Ian's wrath. The Oracle's son had been raised to be as dispassionate as the rock upon which Kiernan sat.

Aware of his duty and the expectations of his peers, Ian spun his staff. His path became more clear with each rush of air. “I'll retrieve the chalice,” he said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Kiernan's jaw dropped. “France is a country at war. You could die there.”

Ian had already pondered that possibility. If he died, it would mean more than just his death, for he carried the souls of his ancestors. Should he die in the Other World, those souls would be lost in a place that did not recognize them, rather than on the island where his blood was revered. His gifts would also be lost forever—unless he left behind an heir to carry them on. Yet the woman destined to be his mate lived in the maelstrom that could kill him. The challenge intrigued him.

“Nonetheless, I will go.”

“The Council will never allow it,” Kiernan argued.

Ian grunted acknowledgment of the Council's inevitable opposition. Its members

stubbornly resisted any break with tradition. Although they were extremely gifted people, many were elderly and accustomed to his father's rule. Luther had had fewer psychic gifts than Ian did and would never have used them to coerce the entire Council.

Ian had no such compunction. He had obeyed his elders' decrees all his life, but the time had arrived to assume leadership. He had been given his abilities for a reason, not to let them mold unused.

And if his choice led to his death, then he alone was responsible.

Ian did not make his decision lightly. He had given the problem careful consideration since he'd seen the unthinkable in the skies these last months. "What is the point of my living if the chalice is lost in the Other World?" he asked. "And if I do not have a mate to pass on my abilities, of what use am I to Aelynn?"

Without waiting for a response that he knew Kiernan was unprepared to give, Ian strode down the hill toward his home, leaving his friend alone in the starlight to contemplate a future without a Leader.

The Council unanimously agreed upon that future several days later, after Aelynn expressed her disapproval of the chalice's loss by spewing steam and hot ash from the volcano's peak for the first time in the memory of even the eldest citizen. At Ian's suggestion that the gods wished him to retrieve the chalice and prevent Murdoch from using it to blackmail them into abetting his lust for power, the mountain grew silent in approval.

All hastily concurred that only Ian could ensure their future, that only he could appease the angry gods by returning the chalice to the island. They left the fate of the renegade Murdoch in his hands.

Ian very carefully did not mention the revolutionary mate he had foreseen in the stars. The Council had little use for rebels.