

An Extract From:

Law of the Broken Earth
Book Three of the Griffin Mage Trilogy

By

Rachel Neumeier

For more information, visit
www.rachelneumeier.com

From Chapter One

Mienthe did not remember her mother, and she was afraid of her father—a cold, harsh-voiced man with a scathing turn of phrase when his children displeased him. He favored his son, already almost a young man when Mienthe was born, and left Mienthe largely to the care of a succession of nurses—a succession because servants rarely stayed long in that house. If Mienthe had had no one but the nurses, her childhood might have been bleak indeed. But she had Tef.

Tef was the gardener and a man of general work. He had been a soldier for many years and lost a foot in a long-ago dispute with Casmantium. Tef was no longer young and he walked with a crutch, but he was not afraid of Mienthe's father. It never crossed Mienthe's mind that *he* might give notice.

Despite the lack of a foot, Tef carried Mienthe through the gardens on his shoulders. He also let her eat her lunches with him in the kitchen, showed her how to cut flowers so they would stay fresh longer, and gave her a kitten that grew into an enormous slit-eyed gray cat. Tef could speak to cats and so there were always cats about the garden and his cottage, but none of them were as huge or as dignified as the gray cat he gave Mienthe.

When Mienthe was seven, one of her nurses started teaching her her letters. But that nurse had only barely shown her how to form each letter and spell her own name before Mienthe's father raged at her about *Good paper left out in the weather* and *When are you going to teach that child to keep in mind what she is about? A sight more valuable than teaching a mere girl how to spell*, and the nurse gave him notice and Mienthe a tearful farewell. After that, Tef got out a tattered old gardener's compendium and taught Mienthe her letters himself. Mienthe could spell Tef's name before her own, and she could spell *bittersweet* and *catbrier* and even *quaking grass* long before she could spell her father's name. As her father did not notice she had learned to write at all, this did not offend him.

Tef could not teach Mienthe embroidery or deportment, but he taught Mienthe to ride by putting her up on her brother's outgrown pony and letting her fall off until she learned to stay on, which, fortunately, her brother never discovered, and he taught her to imitate the purring call of a contented gray jay and the rippling coo of a dove and the friendly little chirp of a sparrow so well she could often coax one bird or another to take seeds or crumbs out of her hand.

"It's good you can keep the cats from eating the birds," Mienthe told Tef earnestly. "But do you mind?" People who could speak to an animal, she knew, never liked constraining the natural desires of that animal.

"I don't mind," said Tef, smiling down at her. He was sitting perfectly still so he wouldn't frighten the purple-shouldered finch perched on Mienthe's finger. "The cats can catch voles and rabbits. That's much more useful than birds. I wonder if you'll find yourself speaking to some of the little birds one day? That would be pretty and charming."

Mienthe gazed down at the finch on her finger and smiled. But she said, "It wouldn't be very useful. Not like speaking to cats is to you."

Tef shrugged, smiling. "You're Lord Beraod's daughter. You don't need to worry about being useful. Anyway, your father would probably be better pleased with an animal that was pretty and charming than one that's only useful."

This was true. Mienthe wished she was pretty and charming herself, like a finch. Maybe her father ... But she moved her hand too suddenly then, and the bird flew away with a flash of buff and purple, and she forgot her half-recognized thought.

When Mienthe was nine, a terrible storm came pounding out of the sea into the Delta. The storm uprooted trees, tore the roofs off houses, flooded fields, and drowned dozens of people who happened to be in the path of its greatest fury. Among those who died were Mienthe's brother and, trying to rescue him from the racing flood, her father.

Mienthe was her father's sole heir. Tef explained this to her. He explained why three uncles and five cousins - none of whom Mienthe knew, but all with young sons - suddenly appeared and began to quarrel over which of them might best give her a home. Mienthe tried to understand what Tef told her, but everything was suddenly so confusing. The quarrel had something to do with the sons, and with her. "I'm ... to go live with one of them? Somewhere else?" she asked anxiously. "Can't you come, too?"

"No, Mie," Tef said, stroking her hair with his big hand. "No, I can't. Not one of your uncles or cousins would permit that. But you'll do well, do you see? I'm sure you'll like living with your uncle Talenes." Tef thought Uncle Talenes was going to win the quarrel. "You'll have his sons to play with and a nurse who will stay longer than a season and an aunt to be fond of you."

Tef was right about one thing: In the end, Uncle Talenes vanquished the rest of the uncles and cousins. Uncle Talenes finally resorted to the simple expedient of using his thirty men-at-arms-no one else had brought so many - to appropriate Mienthe and carry her away, leaving the rest to continue their suddenly pointless argument without her.

But Tef was wrong about everything else.

Uncle Talenes lived several days' journey from Kames, where Mienthe's father's house was, in a large highwalled house outside Tiefenauer. Uncle Talenes's house had mosaic floors and colored glass in the windows and a beautiful fountain in the courtyard. All around the fountain were flower beds, vivid blooms tumbling over their edges. Three great oaks in the courtyard held cages of fluttering, sweet-voiced birds. Mienthe was not allowed to splash in the fountain no matter how hot the weather. She was allowed to sit on the raked gravel under the trees as long as she was careful not to tear her clothing, but she could not listen to the birds without being sorry for the cages.

Nor, aside from the courtyard, were there any gardens. The wild Delta marshes began almost directly outside the gate and ran from the house all the way to the sea. The tough salt grasses would cut your fingers if you swung your hand through them, and mosquitoes whined in the heavy shade.

"Stay out of the marsh," Aunt Eren warned Mienthe. "There are snakes and poisonous frogs, and quicksand if you put a foot wrong. Snakes, do you hear? Stay close to the house. *Close to the house*. Do you understand me?" That was how she usually spoke to Mienthe: as though Mienthe were too young and stupid to understand anything unless it was very simple and emphatically repeated.

Aunt Eren was not fond of Mienthe. She was not fond of children generally, but her sons did not much regard their mother's temper. Mienthe did not know what she could safely disregard and what she must take care for. She wanted to please her aunt, only she was too careless and not clever enough and could not seem to learn how.

Nor did Aunt Eren hire a nurse for Mienthe. She said Mienthe was too old to need a nurse and should have a proper maid instead, but then she did not hire one. Two of Aunt Eren's own maids took turns looking after Mienthe instead, but she could see they did not like to. Mienthe tried to be quiet and give them no bother.

Mienthe's half cousins had pursuits and friends of their own. They were not in the least interested in the little girl so suddenly thrust into their family, but they left her alone. Uncle Talenes was worse than either Aunt Eren or the boys. He had a sharp, whining voice that made her think of the mosquitoes, and he was dismayed, *dismayed* to find her awkward and inarticulate in front of him and in front of the guests to whom he wanted to show her off. Was Mienthe perhaps not very clever? Then it was certainly a shame she was not prettier, wasn't it? How fortunate for her that her future was safe in his hands ...

Mienthe tried to be grateful to her uncle for giving her a home, but she missed Tef.

Then, late in the year after Mienthe turned twelve, her cousin Bertaud came back to the Delta from the royal court. For days no one spoke of anything else. Mienthe knew that Bertaud was another cousin, much older than she was. He had grown up in the Delta, but he had gone away and no one had thought he would come back. Only recently something had happened, some trouble with Casmantium, or with griffins, or somehow with both, and now he seemed to have come back to stay. Mienthe wondered why her cousin had left the Delta, but she wondered even more why he had returned. She thought that if she ever left the Delta, she never would come back.

But her cousin Bertaud even took up his inheritance as Lord of the Delta. This seemed to shock and offend Uncle Talenes, though Mienthe was not sure why, if it was his rightful inheritance. He took over the great house in Tiefenauer, sending Mienthe's uncle Bodoranes back to his personal estate, and he dismissed all the staff. His dismissal of the staff seemed to shock and offend Aunt Eren as much as his mere return had Uncle Talenes. Both agreed that Bertaud must be high-handed and arrogant and vicious. Yes, it was vicious, uprooting poor Bodoranes like that after all his years and *years* of service, while Bertaud had lived high in the court and ignored the Delta. And flinging out all those people into the cold! But, well, yes, he was by blood Lord

of the Delta, and perhaps there were ways to make the best of it ... One might even have to note that Bodoranés had been regrettably obstinate in some respects ...

Since the weather in the Delta was warm even this late in the fall, Mienthe wondered what her aunt could mean about flinging people into the cold. And how exactly did Uncle Talenes mean to "make the best" of the new lord's arrival?

"We need to see him, see what he's like," Uncle Talenes explained to his elder son, now seventeen and very interested in girls, as long as they weren't Mienthe. "He's Lord of the Delta, for good or ill, and we need to get an idea of him. And we need to be polite. Very, very polite. If he's clever, he'll see how much to everyone's advantage raising the tariffs on Linularinan glass would be" - Uncle Talenes was heavily invested in Delta glass and ceramics - "and if he's less clever, then maybe he could use someone cleverer to point out these things."

Karre nodded, puffed up with importance because his father was explaining this to him. Mienthe, tucked forgotten in a chair in the corner, understood finally that her uncle meant to bully or bribe the new Lord of the Delta if he could. She thought he probably could. Uncle Talenes almost always got his own way.

And Uncle Talenes seemed likely to get his own way this time, too. Not many days after he'd returned to the Delta, Lord Bertaud wrote accepting Talenes's invitation to dine and expressing a hope that two days hence would be convenient, if he were to call.

Aunt Eren stood over the servants while they scrubbed the mosaic floors and put flowers in every room and raked the gravel smooth in the drive. Uncle Talenes made sure his sons and Mienthe were well turned out, and that Aunt Eren was wearing her most expensive jewelry, and he explained several times to the whole household, in ever more vivid terms, how important it was to impress Lord Bertaud.

And precisely at noon on the day arranged, Lord Bertaud arrived.

The family resemblance was clear. He was dark, as all Mienthe's uncles and cousins were dark; he was tall, as they all were tall; and he had the heavy bones that made him look sturdy rather than handsome. He did not speak quickly and laugh often, as Uncle Talenes did; indeed, his manner was so restrained he seemed severe. Mienthe thought he looked both edgy and stern, and she thought there was an odd kind of depth to his eyes, a depth that somehow seemed familiar, although she could not put a name to it.

Lord Bertaud accepted Uncle Talenes's effusive congratulations on his return with an abstracted nod, and nodded again as Uncle Talenes introduced his wife and sons. He did not seem to be paying very close attention, but he frowned when Uncle Talenes introduced Mienthe.

"Bertaud's daughter?" he asked. "Why is she here with you?"

Smiling down at Mienthe possessively, Talenes explained about the storm and how he had offered poor Mienthe a home. He brought her forward to greet her lord cousin,

but Lord Bertaud's sternness frightened her, so after she whispered her proper greeting she could not think of anything to say to him.

"*Manners*, Mienthe," Aunt Eren sighed reproachfully, and Uncle Talenes confided to Lord Bertaud that Mienthe was not, perhaps, very clever. Terre and Karre rolled their eyes and nudged each other. Mienthe longed to flee out to the courtyard. She flushed and looked fixedly at the mosaics underfoot.

Lord Bertaud frowned.

The meal was awful. The food was good, but Aunt Eren snapped at the maids and sent one dish back to the kitchens because it was too spicy and she was sure, as she repeated several times, that Lord Bertaud must have lost his taste for spicy food away in the north. Uncle Talenes worked smooth comments into the conversation about the brilliance with which Bertaud had handled the recent problems with Casmantium. And with the griffins, so there had been something to do with griffins. Mienthe gathered that Feierabiand had been at war with the griffins, or maybe with Casmantium, or maybe with both at the same time, or else one right after the other. And then maybe there had been something about griffins again, and a wall.

It was all very confusing. Mienthe knew nothing about griffins and couldn't imagine what a wall had to do with anything, but she wondered why her uncle, usually so clever, did not see that Lord Bertaud did not want to talk about the recent problems, whatever they had exactly involved. Lord Bertaud grew more and more remote. Mienthe fixed her eyes on her plate and moved food around so it might seem she had eaten part of it.

Lord Bertaud said little himself. Uncle Talenes gave complicated, assured explanations of why the tariffs between the Delta and Linularinum should be raised. Aunt Eren told him at great length about the shortcomings of the Tiefenauer markets and assured him that the Desamion markets on the other side of the river were no better. When Uncle Talenes and Aunt Eren left pauses in the flow of words, Lord Bertaud asked Terre about hunting in the marshes and Karre about the best places in Tiefenauer to buy bows and horses, and listened to their enthusiastic answers with as much attention as he'd given to their parents' discourse.

And he told Mienthe he was sorry to hear about her loss and asked whether she liked living in Tiefenauer with Uncle Talenes.

The question froze Mienthe in her seat. She could not answer truthfully, but she had not expected her lord cousin to speak to her at all and was too confused to lie. The silence that stretched out was horribly uncomfortable. Then Uncle Talenes sharply assured Lord Bertaud that of course Mienthe was perfectly happy, didn't he provide everything she needed? She was great friends with his son Terre; the two would assuredly wed in two years, as soon as Mienthe was old enough. Terre glanced sidelong at his father's face, swallowed, and tried to sound enthusiastic as he agreed. Karre leaned his elbow on the table and grinned at his brother. Aunt Eren scolded Mienthe for her discourtesy in failing to answer her lord cousin's question.

"I am happy," Mienthe whispered dutifully, but something made her add, risking a quick glance up at her lord cousin, "Only sometimes I miss Tef."

"Who is Tef?" Lord Bertaud asked her gently.

Mienthe flinched under Aunt Eren's cold glare and opened her mouth, but she did not know how to answer this question and in the end only looked helplessly at Lord Bertaud. Tef was Tef; it seemed impossible to explain him.

"Who is Tef?" Lord Bertaud asked Uncle Talenes.

Uncle Talenes shook his head, baffled. "A childhood friend?" he guessed.

Mienthe stared down at her plate and wished passionately that she was free to run out to the courtyard and hide under the great oaks. Then Uncle Talenes began to talk about tariffs and trade again, and the discomfort was covered over. But to Mienthe the rest of the meal seemed to last for hours and hours, even though in fact her lord cousin departed the house long before dusk.

Once he was gone, Aunt Eren scolded Mienthe again for clumsiness and discourtesy - Any well-bred girl should be able to respond gracefully to a simple question, and why ever had Mienthe thought Lord Bertaud would want to hear about some little friend from years past? Anyone would have thought Mienthe had no sense of gratitude for anything Talenes had done for her, and no one liked an ungrateful child. Look up, Mienthe, and say, "Yes, Aunt Eren," properly. She was much too old to sulk like a spoiled toddler, and Aunt Eren wouldn't have it.

Mienthe said *Yes, Aunt Eren*, and *No, Aunt Eren*, and looked up when she was bidden to, and down when she could, and at last her aunt allowed her to escape to the courtyard. Mienthe tucked herself up next to the largest of the oaks and wished desperately for Tef. Speaking his name to her cousin had made her remember him too clearly.

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