

An Extract From:

The Mountain of Kept Memory

by

Rachel Neumeier

For more information, visit
www.rachelneumeier.com

Chapter One

They were talking about her.

Oressa, curled beneath her father's throne, her arms wrapped around her knees and her knees tucked up tight to her chest, was precariously hidden behind generous falls of the saffron-dyed silk draped over the seat and back of the throne. This sort of thing had been easier when she'd been twelve. Or even sixteen. Now that she was a woman grown, she had to work much harder to stay out of sight.

At least she was still small. She was lucky Gulien was the one who'd gotten all their father's height. She breathed soundlessly through her mouth, tensed and relaxed all her muscles in turn to ease the painful cramps in her legs and back, and listened intently.

Oressa had known her father would spend the morning talking about important things. Her father never sent all his servants and attendants away unless he wanted to talk privately to his favored ministers. Sometimes the things they talked about turned out to be boring, as when her father and Magister Baramis had spent a whole afternoon arguing about whether to compel the dyer's guild to sell dyes and fixatives at a low flat rate to a favored merchant house that had just brought in a load of Markandan silk. Oressa had been stuck for far, far too long, listening to every possible ramification of the prices of dyes.

She had guessed that this morning's topic would be more interesting, though, because everyone knew the Tamaristan king had recently suffered a brain storm or seizure or something of the kind and was probably on his deathbed. The Tamaristan succession was often exciting, but especially this time because the Tamaristan king had collapsed without declaring which of his sons was going to be his heir and having the rest killed, which, cruel and horrible as it was, was usually how the Tamaristans handled their succession. So Oressa had expected that her father and his advisors would discuss the five living Tamaristan princes, and which among them was most likely to defeat the rest, and which one those Tamaristan ships out there in the harbor might belong to. Those ships looked suspiciously like narrow, fast warships rather than deep-bellied cargo transports. Or so people were saying. Oressa hadn't seen them herself.

She'd been right about the general subject of discussion. But she hadn't guessed her own name would appear in the ensuing argument. It happened after Lord Meric said, "Mark my words, sire, what we have out there is one of the younger princes who's decided that if he can't win his father's throne, he might as well get out of his brothers' way and try for *foreign* conquest. Naturally he looks our way. That gods-cursed white-crystal plague left us vulnerable - unless, ah, that is, of course, if the Kieba protects us, sire - "

"I think we should not depend on the Kieba's protection," said Oressa's father. His flat voice did not invite Meric to continue. Oressa could imagine her father's chilly eyes, the thin set of his mouth. Plagues weren't exactly rare, but her father had been

furious about this one, almost as though the white-crystal rain had been a personal insult aimed directly at him. It *had* been pretty bad, and the Kieba had let the plague run its course instead of sending a cure, which was very unusual. Meric was right, that plague had left Carastind vulnerable. And Meric was right again: of course Carastind really should be able to depend on the Kieba for protection. But everyone knew that there was a problem between Oressa's father and the Kieba.

At least, Oressa knew it, and she could tell that Meric guessed. *She* knew, as Meric might not, that twice this spring, the Kieba had sent one of her falcons to her father, summoning him to her mountain, and both times her father had declined to go. So far as Oressa was aware, he hadn't told anybody about that, but she knew. She watched her father very carefully.

After a brief, uncomfortable pause, Lord Meric said, his tone cautious, "Yes, sire, but then we must have a way to protect ourselves against this Tamaristan prince. There may even be one or two others on their way behind this one; the old man certainly left enough sons, and they say the eldest is ruthless. Ruthless even among the Garamanaji, I mean."

The eldest Tamaristan prince, Oressa knew, was Maranajdis Garamanaj, and he was indeed supposed to be ferocious. In Carastind, people said he'd murdered his youngest brother when their father had begun showing the boy too much favor, and there were doubts about the sudden illness of the king, too. If those tales were true, no wonder the younger princes might consider fleeing Tamarist rather than facing Maranajdis.

Oressa imagined a whole series of Tamaristan princes sailing in one after another to attack Caras. If she remembered correctly, there were two princesses between Maranajdis and the next eldest prince, Ajei, who was about thirty. Then there was another princess, and after her, Gajdosik, who was close to Gulien's age; and then, a year or two younger, Berijda, and last - since the youngest prince had been murdered - Emarast, who was no older than Oressa was herself. And then the youngest princess, Alia, who was just fifteen or sixteen. Not that Alia or any of the other princesses actually mattered, since their lives were almost as circumscribed as those of their mothers.

Their very lack of power probably meant that the Tamaristan princesses were fairly safe from their brothers, but the way the Tamaristan succession was handled, the princes must have been at odds since childhood and surely could not be friends. But she imagined they might be *allies*, especially if they were all afraid enough of Maranajdis. It would not be good if they all joined forces to attack Carastind. Cannons guarded the harbor, true. But just how many ships could those cannons destroy, if many came at once? Or what would Caras do, if ships came in farther up or down the coast and Tamaristan soldiers marched overland toward the city? She found she had no idea. She wished suddenly that her brother Gulien had explained military history to her, not just the ancient history of the dead gods.

Magister Baramis answered Meric, "If we have a clutter of Tamaristan princes looking for conquest, well, then, we had better look for options that depend on cleverness rather than forceful defense. Take this prince we presume is out in the Narrow Sea. Whichever one it is, right now he must still be considering his strategy.

We'd better do something about him while he's still thinking, and before any more of that lot decide to stir the pot. A dispossessed prince need not look at Caras itself, you know. A man so poor-spirited as to give up his birthright to Maranajdis without a fight might well be content to gain a little hayfield-sized kingdom of his own. Why not grant him one? We can give him those rocky hills up by the northern border. In a generation, his people will serve as a true bulwark between Carastind and Estenda. That would be useful."

Lord Meric snorted. "Useful! It would certainly give him a beachhead! One which he'd use against *us*, not Estenda, and not in a generation, but now!"

"Not if we offer him the proper inducement." Oressa could hear the satisfaction in Baramis' tone and could imagine just what he looked like: smug, satisfied with his own cleverness, sure he'd hit on a perfect plan. He went on, "Oressa's twenty. That's well past marriageable age, and what better use could be made of her? Offer the princess to this Tamaristan prince!"

At that point, Oressa twitched before she could stop herself. She froze, biting her lip hard, sure somebody must have heard her involuntary movement.

"We'll make the Tamaristan prince our ally against his brothers *and* distract Estenda all at once," Baramis declared. "It's perfect! And it means we needn't depend on the Kieba for anything."

The heavy throne that comprised Oressa's hiding place was solid, but it creaked as her father shifted position. The hilt of his sword rubbed against the side of the chair, and the concealing silk draperies trembled. Her father *had* heard her - he would catch her listening -

There was a loud slapping sound as someone else brought his hand down against the arm of a chair. Gulien spoke sharply. "Magister Baramis, that is a *Tamaristan* prince!"

Oressa had not even known till then that Gulien was in the room. He rarely spoke during such meetings, for though Gulien was a man grown, nearly twenty-five, their father expected him to listen and learn and be silent. But now, though Baramis and Meric both tried to speak at once, Gulien raised his voice. "You would offer *my* sister to a prince of *Tamarist*? To live the rest of her life in a *cage*? To watch her sons, my father's grandsons, raised by foreign nurses and finally murdered by her husband?" No one shouted in their father's presence, but Gulien was coming close.

"My son, enough," the king said flatly.

Oressa tucked her head against her knees and fought not to laugh, though it wasn't funny. It wasn't funny *at all*. Princesses seldom chose whom they would marry; she knew that; everyone knew that. But she couldn't imagine any woman voluntarily marrying a Tamaristan prince. Everything Gulien had said was true - everyone knew about the gilded cage in the king's city, Baija - the cage to which only the Tamaristan king had a key and within which his queen spent her whole life. It was a big cage, granted; tales claimed it was three hundred paces long and two hundred paces wide and held many graceful pavilions for the queen and her woman servants, and gardens filled with rare birds and flowers. But it was a *cage*, and the queen never left it.

Her brother seldom lost his temper. But at this suggestion he had, very rightly so in Oressa's opinion, and fortuitously distracted everyone, even their father, from the careless motion that might have betrayed her.

"We could certainly write more civilized terms into the wedding contract, your highness," said Baramis in a much more conciliatory tone. "The match would be advantageous enough that surely the prince would agree Oressa need not be pent as close as a Tamaristan queen. We could require exile for the extra princes, not death. But it's an offer that potentially wins us a great deal and costs us, in practical terms, very little. You know there's no obvious match for Oressa in Carastind, or she'd have been married years ago." His tone changed as he turned to the king. "I'm sure you agree, sire, that there's little benefit bestowing your daughter on any rich merchant from Estenda or gilded lordling from Markand. And there's no unwed Illian prince except that boy in the northernmost province, but he's too young anyway. No, sire, think on it: such an alliance might offer quite enough advantages to justify offering Oressa to a Tamaristan prince, under these circumstances. As Lord Meric reminded us, we remain vulnerable, especially if the Kieba - well, that is, of course Carastind will recover from its weakness, sire, but just at the moment - "

"Indeed," said Oressa's father, his voice dry.

Oressa bit her finger to keep from making a sound, but she knew Baramis was right about Carastind being vulnerable. Everyone must know, even in Tamarist, that the people of Carastind and especially those of Caras itself, had been weakened by the white-crystal rain.

There were always plagues: diseases brought by rains of cinders or blood or sharp slivers of iron, or, worse, by creeping red or purple or black mists that even doors and shutters couldn't stop. Just a few days ago, rumors of a lavender mist had run through the city. The resulting panic had sent palace servants and staff fleeing to relatives in the countryside. But those rumors had turned out to be all wrong; some fool must just have seen sunset light reflecting off sea mist and panicked.

The plague this past spring hadn't been anybody's imagination. It had been carried by a sudden swift rain of tiny white crystals out of a clear hot sky, a rain that had lasted only hours, so it shouldn't have been so bad. Only, like salt, the white crystals of the plague rain dissolved in water and afterwards you couldn't tell the water was bad. Quite a lot of people caught the plague from the bad water before they realized what was happening.

Anybody who drank contaminated water got fever and then chills. Then people seemed to get better. But after that, the fever come back again, only much worse. That higher fever brought on a terrible thirst, and there was so little clean water to give people, especially after many of city's cisterns turned out to be contaminated. Worse, the high fever brought hallucinations: people saw scattered images of long-dead cities from the deep past, from the time of the gods, and sometimes they forgot who they were and called out in languages no one today knew. Which would have even been interesting, and Oressa had almost wished to get the plague herself, but it was just as well she hadn't, because it turned out that a little while after the hallucinations, a lot of the fever victims went into convulsions, and then they died. And for some reason young men had been a lot more likely to die than women or old people or children.

Then the illness had passed. But by that time, a lot of people had died already. Most of them were men, which besides weakening the militia was terribly hard for all the widowed wives. Oressa had pointed out to Gulien that someone might suggest to their father that taxes might be forgiven for the widows, at least for a year or two, but though he said he'd passed that idea around where it might do some good, nothing had happened. She knew there would be a lot of hardship in Caras because of that.

That was when a lot of people had started muttering that Oressa's father must have offended the Kieba. Oressa knew it was true, but she was pretty sure the rumors wouldn't have spread if her father had been nicer about the taxes. She now guessed that those rumors had spread even to Tamarist, and that the Tamaristan princes believed them. And *that* meant they believed that the Kieba wouldn't protect Carastind against any enemies who suddenly decided to attack. And, most frightening of all, they might even be right. In that case, no matter what Baramis thought, a Tamaristan prince needn't be poor-spirited to think of trying to conquer Carastind rather than defeat the infamous Maranajdis. That would actually just be sensible.

So Baramis's suggestion actually made perfect sense. But Oressa didn't have to like it. She glared at the silk draperies, since she couldn't crawl out from under the chair and glare at Magister Baramis or her father.

Oressa's father said nothing. She imagined he had nodded or waved for Baramis to go on or looked at Meric - ah, the latter, because Meric said, "Well, sire, I have to admit, making one Tamaristan prince into an ally against the rest of them . . . I hadn't thought of that, but it's better than trying to fight them all. If we can get this first prince to ally with us, then very likely we can get any others that follow to turn aside from Carastind, perhaps harass Estenda instead. Even if not, a strong settlement in the north would give Estenda pause." From his tone, he actually agreed, if reluctantly, with Baramis. He never agreed with Baramis about anything. Oressa thought this was a very unfortunate time for him to start.

Gulien started to say something, his tone sharp, but then he stopped. For a long moment, no one spoke at all. Oressa thought probably her father had put up a hand for silence.

"Lord Meric, we will think over all you have said," the king said. "Magister Baramis, we will consider your suggestion." His tone remained flat, but it carried a finality that prevented anybody from trying to continue the argument. "Gulien - "

There was the sharp little click of the door opening. Oressa twitched, though this time at least she didn't bump the chair or make a sound. That had to be something important, because no one ever broke in on her father's council deliberations.

"Sire," said a deep, smooth voice, instantly recognizable. This was Erren, junior captain of the king's guard. Oressa didn't like Erren. He was handsome, yes, but he was a bully, especially with servant girls. Erren was thick-set and muscular, and he had a mustache, which he wore long and waxed into points like a Markand lordling. Oressa thought he'd probably been impressed by a mustache like that when he'd been young and had never gotten over it. She thought it was silly and affected, though she had to admit that lots of girls seemed to admire it. Not the servant girls, who knew better, but well-born girls, the kind who didn't have any sense.

Erren must have walked forward and bent to speak quietly into her father's ear, because though his voice was very low, Oressa nevertheless heard him say *Tamarist* and *soldiers* and something that sounded like *the sea-eagle* and, most alarming of all, *Paree*.

Paree was a small town several days' ride south from Caras. There wasn't exactly a harbor there, but if the tides were right, even quite large ships could come and go from Paree. A cold feeling pricked across the back of Oressa's neck.

"So it's Prince Gajdosik, is it?" said Lord Meric. "The sea-eagle's his personal banner, isn't it? Well, we've never heard he's stupid, that one. Overland as well as right into the harbor, is that his plan? That's not the move of a half-committed man. He'll take Paree as a bridgehead if we don't stop him - and it's probably too late to stop him. With supplies from Paree to support his people, he'll come north at his leisure - he'll want to use that land force of his to support an attack against our harbor here - "

"Explain this to me, do," the king said testily, and got to his feet. The throne creaked, and the silk hangings swirled. Oressa tucked her chin tight to her chest and held very still. Cramps had started in both her calves, but she didn't make a sound. Her father said to Baramis, "We shall send to Prince Gajdosik. Find out whether he's personally with that force in Paree or sitting out there in our harbor. Write a proposal along the lines you suggested. Something flowery, to flatter the man's vanity."

"But - " said Gulien, over the magister's murmur of satisfied acquiescence.

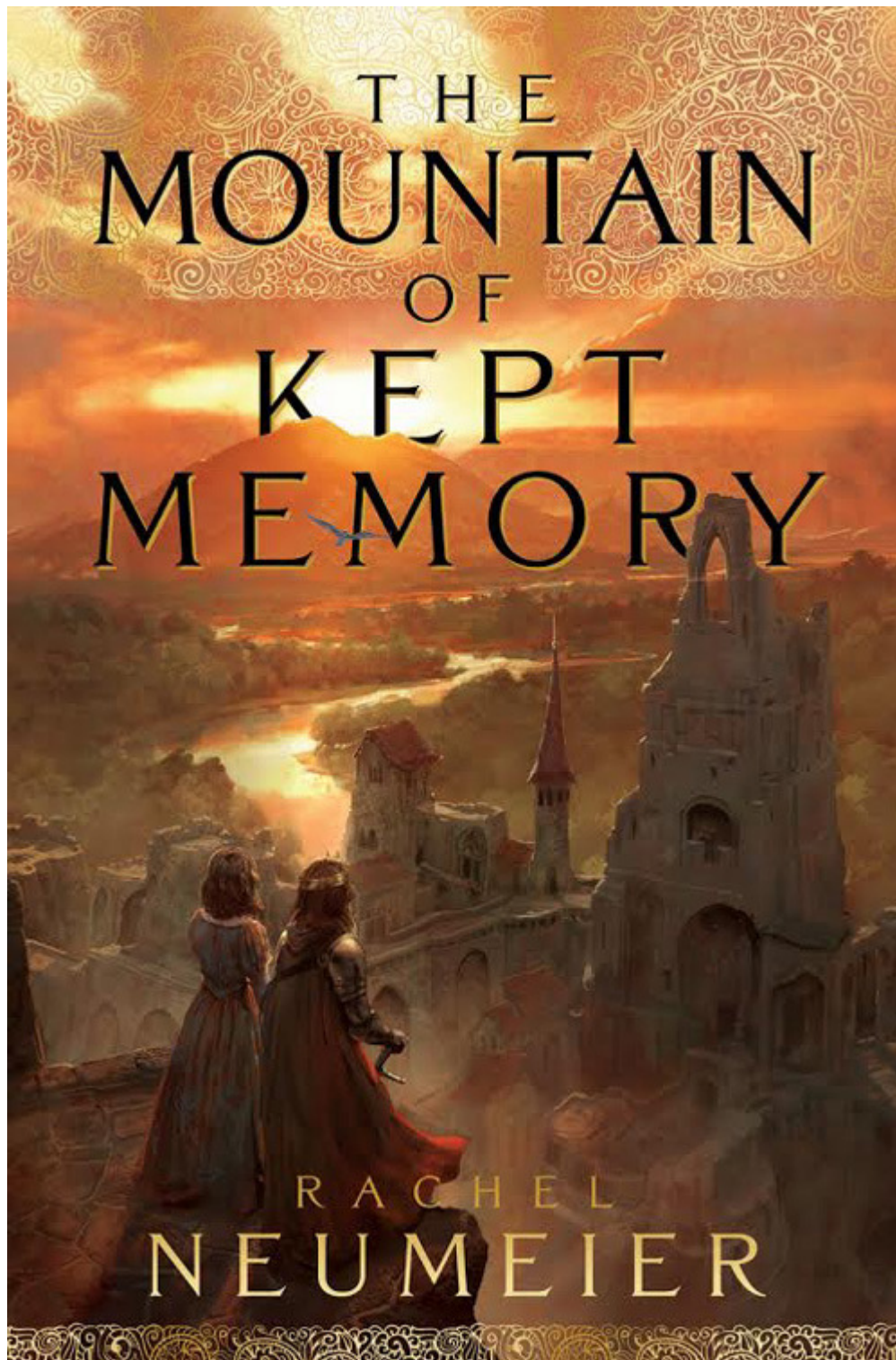
"Sentiment does not keep enemies at bay," said the king, his tone flat and final, and walked out. Oressa could hear his unhurried steps, and the heavier tread of Erren. There was plenty of movement suddenly, and she heard the door open, but she couldn't tell whether everyone had gone or whether somebody might linger in the room even yet. She was almost sure she hadn't heard the door close again. The cramps in her legs were worse, and there was an increasing ache in her back and shoulders and neck, and worse than the discomfort was the anger. She was *outraged*, and she couldn't make a sound. The worst thing of all was that she already knew it would never occur to her father to *ask* her to sacrifice herself for him and for Carastind. He would have Baramis write out a flowery letter for that Tamaristan prince and probably not even bother to mention it to *her* at all.

Then the door did close, a decisive little click, but she heard someone shift his weight, still in the room. Oressa tried not to make a sound. There was a pause.

At last her brother said, his tone resigned, "All right, Oressa. Come out."

* * * * *

The Mountain of Kept Memory is published by Saga Press and available from November 2016.



Visit www.rachelneumeier.com for more about Rachel and her writing, and to read excerpts from her other books for adult and young adult fantasy readers.