

NINE GATES

JANE LINDSKOLD



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—*Library Journal* on *Through Wolf’s Eyes*

“Thought-provoking.”

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—*RT Book Reviews* on *Wolf Captured*

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Wolf's Blood
The Buried Pyramid
Child of a Rainless Year
Thirteen Orphans
Nine Gates
Five Odd Honors (forthcoming)

**NINE
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JANE LINDSKOLD

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For Jim, my favorite Dragon

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I

When the attack began, Pearl Bright already held a sword in her hand. Otherwise, the old Tiger might well have died with the very breath at which she knew she was in danger.

Instead, Pearl pivoted and her blade cut flesh. A head flew from a neck, a stranger's hot blood jettied forth to dapple her face and throat. The man stumbled back, sword hilt slipping from nerveless fingers as he fell.

Pearl did not wait to see how her assailant landed. There was no way he was ever picking up that sword again, and too much else demanded her attention.

Around her, what had been a quiet private park had become a battlefield in which Pearl and her associates were outmatched and outnumbered. From a rip in the air, a dozen or more men had run forward. They were clad in the armor and bearing the arms of a bygone day, of a China that might never have existed.

This last did not make those blades any less deadly.

As Pearl swung around to assess the situation, she saw the right arm of Righteous Drum the Dragon removed neatly at the shoulder to drop steaming and smoking onto the grass.

The complex ideograph Righteous Drum had been sketching hung metallic yellow in the air for a long moment, then transformed into an explosion of golden light that caught his attacker full in the face, melting skin to bone, bone to ash.

The ideograph had retained its shape long enough for Pearl to read what Righteous Drum had intended.

Great idea, Pearl thought, but I'm going to need a little space before I can pull anything that complex off.

Righteous Drum crumpled to his knees, his eyes glazed as he clapped his remaining hand over the stump of his arm. His pale lips muttered what was hopefully a healing or binding.

Righteous Drum's daughter, Honey Dream, the Snake, had run to protect her father when he had fallen. She stood with the curving snake's—fang dagger that was her chosen weapon in her right hand. With her left she was fishing into the cleavage of her low-cut tee shirt, pulling out slips of red paper already inscribed with elaborate charms.

One of these evidently provided some form of protection that covered both father and daughter, as the man who came racing at them, sword raised, a

ferocious battle cry on his lips, learned when his downward cut was halted by some unseen barrier. He reeled back, striving to retain his balance.

Honey Dream did not give him time to recover. Another slip of red paper flew, and when it struck the man in the face the eyelids dissolved beneath a wash of virulent green acid.

Didn't know you'd brought anything that nasty with you, girl, Pearl thought. *Wish I was surprised. Hope you've got a lot more.*

Righteous Drum would be as safe as his daughter could make him. Since Honey Dream had a Snake's regard for a whole skin, Pearl thought they'd do as well as or better than if she gave them her aid. Her own people were much more vulnerable.

It took Pearl a moment to locate Des Lee, for the Rooster formed the center of a small knot of armored men. Then one of these staggered back, blood streaming from where his eyes should have been, the long raking marks across his face showing what a Rooster's Talon could do. The momentary glimpse Pearl caught of Des showed that like Honey Dream he had made enhancing his defense his first priority. Swords torn from their wielder's hands showed that Des had not forgotten the value of disarming one's opponents.

Pearl decided she was being foolish not to enhance her own defense, and while her mind shaped the sequence that would summon mingled winds and dragons to protect her, she looked for the two most vulnerable members of her company.

Like Des, Riprap was surrounded by a small crowd of armored men. One lay on the ground, his head an ugly ruin. Two others were battering at his defenses while a third stood back, muttering something, his fingers sketching patterns in the air.

Pearl would have run to Riprap's aid, but at that moment Flying Claw lived up to his name. The young warrior leapt through the air, screaming like the attacking Tiger he was.

The mutterer was cloven from the top of his shoulder right through his chest. The stroke was so violent, and so efficiently delivered, that it made the near-decapitation that resulted seem almost like an afterthought.

Although battles raged on all sides, still the situation seemed oddly under control—with her own side clearly in the ascendance. Pearl began to think she could turn her attention to completing what Righteous Drum had begun.

Then she caught sight of Brenda Morris. For a moment Pearl's heart went cold in her chest. Then Pearl began to run.



The morning's activity had not gone at all as Brenda could have wished. First, well aware that the session was going to involve the physical combat training

she and Riprap had been agitating for, Brenda had dressed practically—even if jeans and a long-sleeved shirt had meant she was going to feel the July heat and humidity. As a compensation for the heat, she had braided her long, dark brown hair, then twisted it into a knot at the back of her head.

If San Jose, California, hadn't been a whole lot more clement than her home state of South Carolina, Brenda probably couldn't have borne the heavier clothing, but she was being practical. When they got to the designated training grounds, there was Honey Dream in all her exotic Oriental beauty. Honey Dream was wearing nothing but shorts and one of those obnoxious tee shirts that showed off why she needed to wear a bra, whereas Brenda could far too easily do without her own.

Something about the sneer that had flickered across Honey Dream's face told Brenda that the other woman knew perfectly well that Brenda had figured she was going to take a fall or two.

Then, to make matters worse, Flying Claw hadn't even looked at Brenda beyond offering a very casual good-morning. He seemed more interested in talking with Riprap about the baseball bat the big black man had brought along to serve as a weapon.

After some warming up and stretching exercises, they'd paired up. Righteous Drum, a square-bodied, slightly overweight man who rather reminded Brenda of Chairman Mao, had chosen Des Lee.

Des's first name was actually "Desperate" and his appearance was as odd as his given name. Taller than average, lean without being gawky, Des wore both his hair and beard in a fashion that emphasized his ethnic Chinese heritage. His shining black hair was worn in a long queue. His forehead was shaved in a fashion common when both the expansion of the railroads and the California gold rush had drawn Chinese to the United States in record numbers. His long chin beard and wispy mustache emphasized his high cheekbones and beautifully sculptured features.

However, Righteous Drum's choice of Des as a sparring partner had little to do with Des's odd appearance. Righteous Drum wanted to see how Des could use the Rooster's Talons, the odd weapons Des had inherited from his grandmother, to parry thrown spells. Des had been more than happy to oblige, although it was pretty clear that Des intended to get Righteous Drum to show him a trick or two in exchange.

Flying Claw and Riprap were sparring even before the warm-up was formally finished. Waking Lizard, the long-bodied, lean-limbed Monkey, had insisted that Honey Dream begin with him because they could spar spell-to-spell, and Waking Lizard was still stiff from the injuries he had acquired in the course of his narrow escape from the Lands Born from Smoke and Sacrifice.

That left Brenda to practice with Pearl Bright. On the surface, this should not have been a problem. After all, Brenda was nineteen to Pearl's seventy-

some years. Brenda had played both volleyball and soccer right up through high school, and although she hadn't joined a team in college, she had remained active. Pearl didn't belong to a gym or even have a treadmill in her house.

But although Pearl's hair was silver and her skin had its share of honestly earned lines and wrinkles, Pearl Bright was far from the classic "little old lady." Her daily routine included tai chi and sword drills that kept her both active and supple. Next to the older woman, Brenda—lean, almost skinny—felt coltish.

Brenda had known Pearl all her life, but only a month and a half had passed since Brenda had learned why "Auntie" Pearl was such a good friend of the Morris family.

This knowledge had made Pearl—already a bit intimidating in her role as exotic former movie star—no less a figure of awe. Moreover, being knocked on her butt by a woman in her late seventies was not something Brenda looked forward to. It was going to finish the humiliation Honey Dream had begun pretty thoroughly.

However, from the moment Pearl said, "When I give the word, cast a Dragon's Tail as fast as you can. I'm coming at you, and if you don't have the spell up..." Brenda had lacked attention to worry about anything but Pearl.

Pearl hefted Treaty, her elegant long sword, to emphasize the command. Brenda shivered. She didn't think Pearl would cut her, but Brenda bet the flat of the blade would hurt a lot—even through her clothes.

"Now!" Pearl said. She didn't raise her voice a bit, but such was the force of her personality that the command came across with the force of a shout.

Brenda moved her right hand to her left wrist, slipping off in one swift motion one of the three amulet bracelets there. She didn't pause to check the spell since Des, who was her teacher, had insisted that all "left wrist" castings be defense.

Brenda knew she'd get yelled at if she cast something other than the Dragon's Tail Pearl had specified, but that blade was coming at her way too fast, and nothing mattered but getting something between her and that silvery grey length of steel.

Brenda snapped the amulet against the ground, exploding the bits of polymer clay as much with the force of her will as by any physical act. Treaty was coming at her, but when it landed, the translucent greenish-brown of the Dragon's Tail was between Brenda and the sword's impact.

Pearl grinned, a ferocious rather than joyful expression, and shifted her grip. "Now! Stop me!"

Brenda fumbled for an amulet bracelet from her right wrist. Her left hand was much more clumsy than her right had been—Des had been after her to practice. Then Pearl suddenly wheeled, moving with a speed and grace that

spoke of skills honed until the motions were ingrained into muscle memory.

Treaty wheeled with its wielder, the swing intended for Brenda moving, shifting so that the blade hit edge-on. The first Brenda saw of the man who had been coming to attack Pearl was his head sailing off his shoulders and his body stumbling back, the sword with which he had intended to kill Pearl dropping to the ground.

There was screaming all around. A man was running in Brenda's direction, but before he could get close, Flying Claw had intercepted him. Two or three strikes were exchanged, blade-to-blade and—Brenda suspected from the little flashes of light she more sensed than saw—spell-to-spell.

Brenda glanced down at the amulet bracelet in her hand. Dragon's Fire. Not bad, but she needed to get closer to a target to use it. She looked wildly around, trying to figure out what was going on.

Righteous Drum was on the ground. There seemed to be a lot of blood. Honey Dream was protecting him.

Across the field, Waking Lizard lay on the ground, too, ominously still, but Brenda couldn't see very clearly what was wrong because there was too much activity closer in.

She wouldn't have been able to see at all, but there were several fallen—she suspected dead—bodies where Flying Claw had been standing when he and Riprap had begun their sparring. Flying Claw was aiding Riprap now, and Brenda turned her head away, sickened as Flying Claw—his handsome face ugly now with battle fever—cut a man nearly in two.

Brenda realized that the man would probably have killed Riprap if Flying Claw hadn't been there, but blood was all over and the expression on the man's face as he had fallen had mingled horrible pain and something like innocent surprise.

Brenda felt rather than saw Pearl racing past her, that motion her first realization of her own immediate danger.

A man had detached himself from the group attacking Riprap—probably figuring he had a better chance with the old woman and the young than the unholy terrors the men were proving to be.

His sword cut had been well aimed, sliding through the coils of the Dragon's Tail that still protected Brenda. Had it not been for the odd angle he had been forced to use, he probably would have cut her through the middle. As it was she took a long slice through her tee shirt into the skin of her belly.

Then Brenda's attacker turned to give fuller attention to Pearl. She cut at him, Treaty's blade meeting some resistance. The ferocity of her attack drove him back toward Brenda.

Brenda caught her breath, too startled at the sensation of her own blood running over her skin, soaking her clothing, to feel any real pain. The Dragon's Breath amulet was in her hand. With sudden wrath she smashed it

down.

When Brenda extended her palm, a gout of flame, reddish-orange, white-hot around the edges, came forth. Her assailant had been wearing some sort of protective spell, but it must have been weakened by Pearl's assault because some of Brenda's flame eddied through, catching the hair of his eyebrows alight.

The man screamed, and dropped his sword to clap his hands to his eyes. This smothered the flame, but exposed the back of his neck.

Brenda saw Pearl pause in momentary consideration, use a fleeting glance to examine the quieting field, then spin Treaty around in her hand to strike the man hard on the back of his neck with the sword's hilt. He crumpled, but Brenda thought he might be unconscious rather than dead.

Pearl looked at Brenda.

"Serious?" she asked, indicating Brenda's belly.

"I don't think so," Brenda began, but Pearl had nodded and was jogging toward the other side of the field. "Wrap it," she called back. Then, "Des! I need you."



Later, Pearl thought, I must tell Brenda she did very well, but first to make sure there is a later.

Des had come in response to her call. His assailants were down, and Pearl thought at least a couple might be alive. The same probably couldn't be said for those whom Flying Claw, Riprap, and Honey Dream had dealt with. Flying Claw and Riprap were still engaged. Honey Dream was kneeling next to her father, working over the stump of his arm.

The arm itself lay to one side, oddly shriveled, and Pearl wondered at the force and malice of the blow that had detached it. She could spare little thought for that, for Des was trotting over in response to her summons.

He moved easily, so it was likely that most of the blood that splattered him belonged to his opponents. It had been very good luck that the attack had come when they had all been not only armed, but wearing at least moderate protective spells.

Or was it merely luck? Pearl wondered. If Waking Lizard lives ...

The old man—he had admitted to being eighty, making him older even than herself—lay contorted on the grass. His eyes were wide and staring, but completely unseeing. His mouth gaped open, and Pearl could see the marks of footprints on his tongue.

"We need to do a sealing," Pearl said to Des. "Righteous Drum realized what was happening almost at once, but our enemies anticipated he would and took precautions to stop him."

"They didn't kill him," Des said. "But then they wouldn't, not until they had

a chance to question him. What shall we try?"

"Is Waking Lizard alive?"

Des knelt, checked for a pulse. "He is. Weak, but alive. His ch'i is dangerously diminished."

"Then we can't use any destructive spells in case we kill him as well."

She paused for thought, aware that the sounds of battle from behind were diminishing. They were safe for at least a few minutes.

"Red Coral as a barrier," she suggested. "Confused Gates to distract. That should stop them for a while. After we've talked to Waking Lizard, we'll know better what to do."

"Do you have the ch'i?" Des asked. "I had to use quite a few spells."

"I do," Pearl said. "Treaty did most of my work for me."

"Auntie Pearl?"

Brenda Morris had come up to join them, her dark brown eyes serious and intent. She'd taken off her long-sleeved tee shirt and used it to bind her middle. The black sports bra she'd worn beneath was more than modest enough, but she still looked embarrassed.

"Pearl," Brenda repeated. "I only threw a couple of amulets. My ch'i's intact. Let me help."

There was as much plea as offer in the words, and Pearl knew not to reject her.

"Can you remember Knitting without a crib?"

Brenda nodded. "I've got that one cold—especially if you don't insist on my using the character suit."

She managed a weak grin, and Pearl mentally applauded her. Of the three mah-jong suits that formed the symbolic basis of the Thirteen Orphans' magic, Brenda had the most trouble with characters.

"Actually," Pearl said, "in this case bamboo and dots would be best."

"Bamboo for strength and flexibility," Brenda said, folding herself down so that she could lean against a nearby tree. "And dots?"

"Because you find them easiest," Pearl said. "Thank you. I'll be glad for your help. Does your wound hurt too much?"

"Not right now," Brenda said. "I've got it wrapped so it doesn't pull."

Pearl looked at Des. "Since I have Brenda's help, why don't you go and secure our prisoners? I believe we have a few. See if Honey Dream needs help with her father."

"Flying Claw is with her," Des said. "I'm going to reinforce our security spells. If they hadn't been up to make sure no one noticed our peculiar 'exercise,' we'd already have had representatives of every police force in the city, state, and county here."

“Good,” Pearl said. “You’re right. We’re going to need time to mop up. Thanks.”

Des paused long enough to give Brenda a squeeze on one shoulder, then went. Pearl heard him talking to Riprap. Then she tuned him out. Des was far more solid and competent than his rather odd appearance would lead most to think. He’d handle his part. Time for her to do hers.

“Ready?” she said to Brenda.

Brenda nodded. “I’ve got it set. Give the word.”

“Very well,” Pearl said. She paused, worked up the sequence of Red Dragons and characters that made up the twisting lines of Red Coral, then nodded. “Knit.”



Fading back into reality after assisting Pearl with the two defensive spells, Brenda leaned against her tree feeling very tired. Although she hadn’t cast the spells, her ch’i had been used to build them—and quite a lot of that ch’i.

Brenda had understood Pearl’s reasoning and agreed wholeheartedly. In an emergency, Pearl could cast a variety of spells, whereas Brenda—who until about six weeks ago hadn’t known that magic was as real at the tree bark poking into her back—would need time to prepare and compose.

As she came back into focus, Brenda realized the sword cut on her middle was beginning to hurt. She reached down and pressed her fingers where she’d wrapped her tee shirt. There was a sharp pain followed by an eddying throb.

“How does it feel?” Pearl asked.

“Like a giant paper cut,” Brenda said, trying to be honest, but at the same time not willing to make a huge fuss. It was impossible to take her own injury seriously with Righteous Drum lying there on the ground, apparently still unconscious. Honey Dream knelt next to him, her attempt at impassivity not hiding how worried she was. “How is Righteous Drum?”

Des had heard them talking, and now he came to join them, answering Brenda’s question as he did.

“Bad,” he said. “The arm is off. Even if we’d rushed him to a hospital right away, not even microsurgery could reattach it. The blade that took the arm off was spelled. That’s where the only good thing to happen comes in.”

“There’s good?” Brenda asked, incredulous.

“The same element in the spell that ruined the arm sealed the wound,” Des explained. “I doubt that any kindness was intended. Rather whoever did this wanted to make certain that Righteous Drum was put out of action, but not killed. However, he’s in no further danger.”

Disarmed, Brenda thought, swallowing a hysterical giggle. *Oh, god! They disarmed him ...*

She must have looked wild around the eyes, because Des squatted next to her.

“Let me take a look at your injury. I’m no doctor, but I have some first aid training.”

Brenda obeyed, sitting up a little straighter and letting Des peel back her ruined tee shirt. A couple of times he poured on bottled water to loosen where blood had glued the shirt to her skin.

“Nasty,” he said, after careful examination. “But no sign that there was either poison or inimical magic on the blade.”

Pearl had been watching, and now Des turned to her. “Brenda must see a doctor. The sword sliced right through her shirt. Foreign matter in the wound could cause scarring or infection. She probably will need stitches.”

“I agree,” Pearl said. “If Brenda is willing to wait, I can arrange something with a doctor who won’t insist on too many explanations. Are you all right with that, Brenda?”

Brenda, who had already been wondering how she’d explain this injury to her mother—and considering whether she had to mention it at all—nodded in relief.

“As long as a real doctor checks it,” she said, “I’m perfectly fine with not going to a hospital or something.”

“A real doctor,” Pearl promised. “I’ll make some calls. Before I do... Des, what’s the situation?”

“We were attacked,” Des said, “by sixteen armed and armored men. At least five were capable of spellcasting, but certainly not all of them. That’s probably what saved our lives. Of the sixteen, we have four left alive: the one you hit on the back of the neck, two of mine, and one of Riprap’s.”

Brenda shivered and reached for her bloody shirt. That meant twelve people had died here in just a few minutes. She felt suddenly cold.

“And us?” Pearl said.

“All alive. Righteous Drum’s injury is worst. Brenda’s next. The rest of us have various nicks, cuts, and bruises, but nothing too severe.”

“Waking Lizard?”

“Knocked out. Woozy. He’s tried to tell us something several times, but he can’t seem to form coherent sentences. I think he’s suffering severe ch’i depletion. Riprap has taken a car and gone for some yogurt for both Waking Lizard and Righteous Drum.”

“Righteous Drum is alert enough to eat then? Good. How are the wards?”

“Strong ones up, now, but it’s probable someone will have caught the eddies from our opponents’ arrival. Our earlier wards were meant to keep any casual passerby from noticing anything odd going on, not to block the force of a major incursion. After all, we’re on private land, so we didn’t need to worry

overmuch.”

“Twelve bodies,” Pearl said thoughtfully. “Disposing of them is going to take some planning. First, however, let me get a doctor for Brenda. Brenda? Do you want me to call your father?”

Brenda blinked. “Uh, maybe not. Do we need to right away?”

“Only if you want him,” Pearl said. “You’re over eighteen, so the doctor won’t need permission from your parents to treat you.”

“No, then. Not now. There’s a lot more we need to handle.”

Pearl looked approving. “Good. I have my cell phone. I’ll try Dr. Andersen.”

“I’m going to check on Waking Lizard,” Des said. “Honey Dream is assiduously ignoring him, and Flying Claw has been standing guard over our prisoners.”

Riprap arrived back then, driving a secondhand passenger van that had been Pearl’s most recent acquisition. Without apparent difficulty, he lifted out several bulky bags.

“Flying Claw,” he said, “I bought more than yogurt. Grab the bags?”

Flying Claw, a handsome Chinese man, apparently somewhere in his twenties, nodded, sheathed his sword, and crossed to the van without comment. Brenda looked after him with an unsettling mixture of emotions.

Pearl left one alive. Des two. Riprap one. That means of the dozen killed, Flying Claw was probably responsible for most. I didn’t kill anyone. I have the impression Waking Lizard was out of it from the start. I think Pearl killed one. Righteous Drum couldn’t have killed more than one, not with his arm cut off. Honey Dream might have killed several, but I remember bodies all over, and she stayed by her dad. I knew Flying Claw was dangerous, but this ...

Riprap had paused to drop several packages over by where Honey Dream sat by her father, then to give others to Des. They talked for a moment, then Riprap came over to Brenda.

She remembered when she’d been nervous about meeting Riprap. Now the big black man seemed much like a perfect older brother. He hunkered down next to her and proffered a carton of peach yogurt and a plastic spoon.

“Des says you have mild ch’i depletion from helping Pearl with the spells. Eat this. I’ll bring you some water.”

Brenda accepted the yogurt.

“You okay, Riprap?”

“My brain hurts more than my body,” he said, keeping his voice soft. “One minute Flying Claw is telling me about this Wolf Teeth staff that he thinks would be a great weapon for me, next I’m learning really fast why wooden baseball bat against sword isn’t a good combination.”

Brenda thought of the smashed head she’d glimpsed when walking over to offer to help Pearl, and had to fight to keep her yogurt from coming back up.

Only vivid memories of what ch'i depletion felt like kept her from pushing the container away.

“You fought, though,” she said, trying to sound encouraging.

“I killed one man,” Riprap said. “Injured a bunch more. Flying Claw’s the one who saved us. That man really is a tiger. I’ve never seen anything like it. I’d have been dead three times over without his help.”

“Me, too,” Brenda said, and wondered why she didn’t feel more grateful—only scared.

Riprap rose to bring Brenda the promised water, and Pearl came back.

“Nissa will be here in a few minutes. She’s going to drive the compact, and take you to the doctor.”

“And this?” Brenda said, indicating the bodies.

“We’ll deal with it,” Pearl promised. “We’ll deal with the dead and the living alike.”

II

The land on which they had come to practice was one of several parcels that Pearl owned throughout the immediate area.

Most of her properties were rented out, contributing immensely to her wealth. However, there were always those that were between tenants. This park was attached to Colm Lodge, a large house—or small mansion—which until a few days before had been rented to the company of a traveling circus that was performing at various venues throughout the area.

“Jugglers and such,” Pearl had explained when she’d suggested they use the place, “acrobats, high wire. Very few animal acts, but they did have horses and some exotics. The barn worked well for them, and they kept props and stage settings in one of my warehouses.”

When the circus had moved out, Righteous Drum, Honey Dream, Flying Claw, and Waking Lizard had moved there from the somewhat expensive hotel in which they had spent the last few days.

Now that the initial chaos was over, and no new attack seemed to be in the offing, Riprap brought the van around, and the human casualties—for none of the captives were in ideal health—were moved up to the house. Then he and Flying Claw departed, taking the van so they could move the bodies to the shelter of the barn.

When she entered the house, Pearl felt the presence of wards that were not her own, but, true to their initial agreement, Righteous Drum had not done anything to bar her or her associates. What he had done was make the house infinitely more secure. Given the circumstances, Pearl could only be grateful.

“Honey Dream,” she began, “shall we take your father to his room?”

A weak but completely clear voice broke in from where Righteous Drum lay on the collapsible stretcher that had been one of Riprap’s purchases.

“No!” he said. “I must be present for the questioning. I must know...”

Pearl glanced at Honey Dream and the young woman nodded.

“He would only fret,” she said, her tone cold and analytical. “Although in his weakened state I could make him sleep, I would not wish for the consequences when he awoke.”

“Me either,” Des said with a grin. “Right. As I recall, the living room has several sofas. We’ll put him on one, Waking Lizard on the other.”

Honey Dream drew in her breath with a sharp hiss and looked as if she would spit.