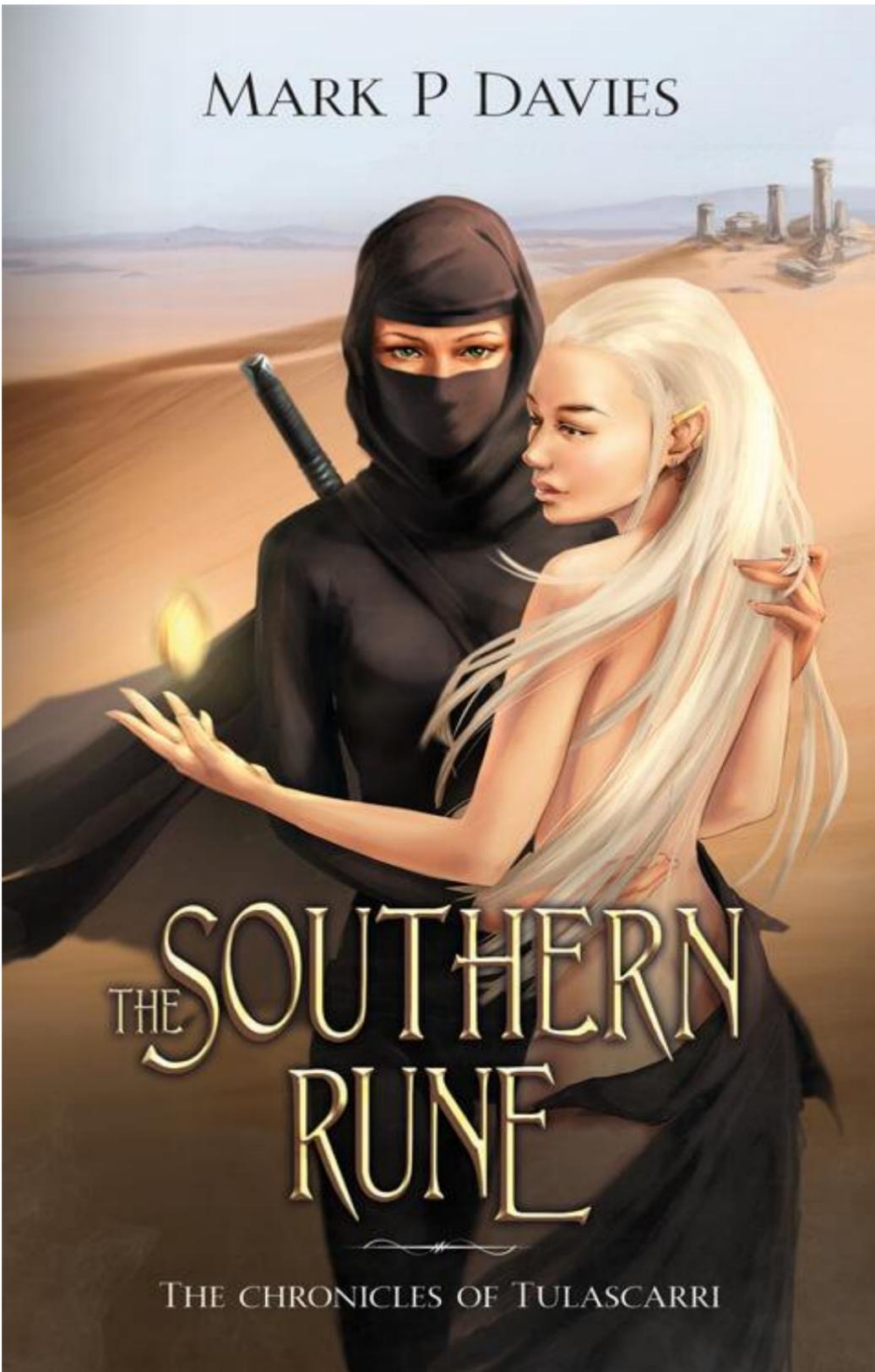


MARK P DAVIES



THE SOUTHERN
RUNE

THE CHRONICLES OF TULASCARRI

From
The Chronicles of Tulascarri

THE SOUTHERN RUNE

Prequel to
The Brotherhood of Sfarr

A Tale in the
Weavers & Wyrders Saga

By
Mark P. Davies

Copyright © 2018 Mark P Davies.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, any web addresses or links contained in this book may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid. The views expressed in this work are solely those of the author.

The author of this book does not dispense medical advice or prescribe the use of any technique as a form of treatment for physical, emotional, or medical problems without the advice of a physician, either directly or indirectly. The intent of the author is only to offer information of a general nature to help you in your quest for emotional and spiritual well-being. In the event you use any of the information in this book for yourself, which is your constitutional right, the author and the publisher assume no responsibility for your actions.

www.markpdavies.com

Sign up for the Author's New Releases and get a
FREE copy of the book
The Tenfeather People.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1.....	1
Firstday, Day 1, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	1
Secon'day, Day 2, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	17
Secon'day, Day 2, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	20
Secon'day, Day 2, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	30
Sixthday, Day 6, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	34
Chapter 2.....	38
Secon'day, Day 8, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	38
Thir'day, Day 9, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	39
Fourthday, Day 10, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	40
Fifthday, Day 11, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	45
Sixthday, Day 12, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	54
Chapter 3.....	57

Thir'day, Day 21, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	57
Thir'day, Day 21, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	66
Thir'day, Day 21, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	70
Thir'day, Day 21, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	77
Sixthday, Day 30, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	83
Chapter 4.....	90
Fifthday, Day 41, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	90
Sixthday, Day 42, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	94
Firstday, Day 43, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	95
Thir'day, Day 45, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	96
Thir'day, Day 45, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	100
Chapter 5.....	106
Fourthday, Day 46, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	106
Fourthday, Day 46, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	114

Fifthday, Day 47, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	122
Sixthday, Day 48, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	128
Firstday, Day 49, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	131
Secon'day, Day 50, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT	135
Chapter 6.....	144
Secon'day, Day 12, of the Trefolkian Month of Ainkor, 1626 ODT	144
Secon'day, Day 2, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	153
Thir'day, Day 15, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	158
Thir'day, Day 16, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	165
Chapter 7.....	173
Thir'day, Day 16, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	173
Thir'day, Day 16, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	176
Thir'day, Day 17, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	180
Fourth'day, Day 22, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	183

Fourth'day, Day 22, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	186
Chapter 8.....	191
Fifthday, Day 23, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	191
Fifthday, Day 23, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	194
Fifthday, Day 23, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	199
Firstday, Day 25, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	202
Thir'day, Day 27, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	205
Chapter 9.....	211
Thir'day, Day 27, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	211
Fourth'day, Day 28, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	214
Thir'day, Day 33, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	217
Sixthday, Day 36, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	221
Fifthday, Day 47, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	224
Sixthday, Day 48, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT	235

Chapter 10	237
Fourthday, Day 46, of the Trefolkian Month of Thena, 1626 ODT	237
Fifthday, Day 47, of the Trefolkian Month of Thena, 1626 ODT	240
Fifthday, Day 47, of the Trefolkian Month of Thena, 1626 ODT	246
Firstday, Day 1, of the Trefolkian Month of Ceesus, 1626 ODT	254
Chapter 11	258
Firstday, Day 1, of the Trefolkian Month of Ceesus, 1626 ODT	258
Secon'day, Day 2, of the Trefolkian Month of Ceesus, 1626 ODT	261
Thir'day, Day 3, of the Trefolkian Month of Ceesus, 1626 ODT	264
Fourth'day, Day 4, of the Trefolkian Month of Ceesus, 1626 ODT	270
Secon'day, Day 8, of the Trefolkian Month of Ceesus, 1626 ODT	273
Firstday, Day 13, of the Trefolkian Month of Rorin, 1627 ODT	275

For Kevin

Chapter 1

Firstday, Day 1, of the Trefolkian Month of
Stara, 1626 ODT

"Who calls? I am here."

She sat up so quickly that she alarmed the family of badgers. In a blur of blacks and whites, they scattered.

It was dark in the hollow. Her blue eyes smarted as she followed a beam of sunlight to the entrance. Certain she had heard a voice, she was momentarily puzzled. Only a pointed little face quizzed her, framed in drifting motes of dust.

Though it was strange, she supposed it was to be expected. Other priestesses had reported bizarre experiences on *their* vision quests, though none of them had ever spent the night under a tree with a family of badgers. She felt honoured that these creatures had welcomed her into their home, and kept her warm.

It had been an unusually cold night.

Uncurling lithely, her creamy skin scratched over crushed leaves and hay that puffed with notes of pine and earth. She sneezed.

She thought the noise would scare away the badger, but he simply crooned at her, encouraging her to roll onto her knees and crawl upwards. While squirming through the tight opening, she was grateful the earth that scoured her breasts and belly was soft and moist.

Standing upright, Ayr of Whispers brushed sand and twigs from her skin, removed some leaves that had indelicately lodged between her buttocks and, with splayed fingers, cleared at least the worst knots from her long, blonde hair.

All around her the forest abounded with the symphony of life. Each call seemed as a Laudlifting to the goddess Athiera, to whom this garden belonged. Breaths of cherry blossoms and peach, the dark rich soil under her soles, and the caress of the breeze inspired her arms to the sky in a stretch.

It was the morning of the fourth day, and her vision quest was complete. Whilst she had had no vision, she was not disappointed. It was often taught that the vision may occur some time after the quest, perhaps even in a dream; and such spontaneous revelations were more often than not highly auspicious.

The faint smell of old smoke tickled her nose and beckoned through the brush. Bowing under a plant with great fluted leaves, mindful of a family of snails, she crawled through a narrow opening in the vegetation and entered the clearing where she had made her campsite.

She squatted over the shallow pit and urinated into the ashes and then covered it with stones and sand. There was no danger of smouldering now.

With soft lush grass as her mat, she spent a long while in exercise. The *athanas* combined breathing with pose and movement, and were the daily practice of all serving the goddess. When she was finished, and drenched in sweat, with a lifted spirit she washed in the cool tributary nearby, saying her morning prayers, thanking the goddess for keeping her warm last night; but somehow she did not seem able to

concentrate, as if there was something nagging at her mind beyond her inner sight.

It was the sensation of having left something important undone, unresolved; like leaving a bottle uncorked after making wine; or the vestiges of a bad dream, the meaning of which escapes the dreamer, leaving them with a tugging gut.

Had she truly extinguished the fire?

Dismissing the feeling as a lack of mindfulness, she returned to her meditation, kneeling in the mud with the water gurgling about her, caressing her flower. She felt so deeply blessed and enriched for this experience that it was appropriate she perform the Second Rite in gratitude.

Flexing her feet so her toes gripped the sand she scooped water into her palms and, lifting them, she asked the goddess' blessing for the day; to let the blessing fill the water, and to shower her with favour. Then, with a gentle but well-practiced movement she inverted her hands onto her head. The water was cold and tingly as it met her scalp, but was warm down her back, over her chin, neck and breasts.

In that moment a gentle breeze danced through the trees, pulling her skin into tiny bumps and with an exultant breath she realized this could only be a sign from the goddess. Her prayer had been heard!

Exhilarated that she had well-nigh heard the goddess' voice with her own ears on the end of her quest of solitude, the young priestess decided it was of great importance to give thanks and so she focussed her enthusiasm into her meditation. She relaxed deeply for some moments, concentrating on her breathing until she felt attuned to the rhythm of the island.

Then, at one with the concerto around her, her hands rose up along her flat belly, circled her breasts as if they were sacred

chalices, and glided across the skin to where the peaks of her desire begged for caress. Her body rose and fell in a slow cadence with her breath and the music around her, until her hands skated downwards, alighted on the rise of her altar, and began a sensual massage.

Water lapped her legs as sliding skin sent sibilants up her spine and between her teeth; sighs of surrender undulated with flexing thighs and rolling eyes. Probing desire, shuddered insistence, mewling lips coaxed her bloom, beckoning the sweet nectar from within – how fitting that it would become one with this blessed stream.

Silky spasms, quivering thighs, a note of surrender; she wanted to fall forwards, but not yet...

The moment was close, that sweet tumbling moment, but she delayed, surrender dancing ferociously between mind and fingers; the pressure in her building like a storm. Each sonorous pant seemed to tense the ecstasy within her, winding it tighter and tighter like a spring.

Her breath caught, her hair fell forward and the joy of the sun burst deep within. She surrendered to the power of the goddess and with a sensual cry let the explosion of ecstasy possess her flesh.

Her mind sparked. Her nectar erupted – clear liquid jetting into the creek – sending her into the heights of the cosmos. Water splashed wildly as her body slipped sideways into it, legs splaying and hips thrusting, waves of pleasure making her convulse. Long notes strummed her throat as a second and a third wave took her to new levels, her hands devoted servants to her flower.

Dreamily she mouthed the mantra of the Second Rite.

“With grace and thankfulness I offer this essence to the goddess, and all that live by her blessings.”

Over and over she repeated the mantra until, she realised, she must have fallen asleep.

Rising partly on her hands, she contemplated her reflection. Bright sparkling blue in an oval countenance, garlanded with tousled blonde, seemed to approve of her, even though her ruddy cheeks were plastered with leaves. The Venerable Elm said her broad mouth and full lips were signs of a capacity to enjoy life; that her straight nose and high forehead were signs of royalty, but that her small, slightly pointed ears were there to keep vanity in check.

But mirrors were not something for which she had much time. It was her belief that one’s true reflection was to be found in others. And right now, though she treasured the feeling of divine quietude, she could not wait to share her inspired quest with the Venerable Elm. As the leader of the Order of Athiera, she would be pleased.

If Ayr set haste to feet she might reach the Temple before the moons were too high, and she would tell all her peers of the wondrous blessing she had received and...

Nightfall.

The memory returned with a visceral kick. She almost had to clutch a vine to steady herself.

That feeling of something unresolved was more than just the vague remnants of a bad dream.

It was a shout, a voice screaming through the etheric realms, and it would not be silenced; and that voice spoke to the cause of why it had been so cold last night.

So cold.

Always... always the island was warm, and temperate. It was so constant that clothing was impractical and the reason why she had needed just a small pack of provisions when she had first set out to complete her quest in the south.

Ayr of Whispers stood solemn. With pursed lips she surveyed the sky and measured the brazen idea that had asserted itself.

She had to check on the magical stone... make sure it was safe.

By the tears of the goddess, no!

The Venerable Elm had spent *many* hours teaching that to even *approach* one of the four Sacred Runes would be met with punishment. Ayr was close to being elevated to the coveted station of Yogini. She had worked hard towards it and disobedience would remove that from her aspirations.

She might have been rebellious as a younger, less experienced and less responsible Initiate, but those days were well behind her, thankfully.

She started to gather the provisions she had brought, packing them neatly into the small rucksack. Carefully fashioned from soft leather so as to be gentle on bare skin, it was stitched with sturdy cords and in one corner was etched the likeness of a wilting lily. It was the symbol of the woman of the same name from whom it had been a gift.

Tracing the indentation with a finger, Ayr contemplated that she had not seen Wilting Lily for some time now, and the memory of her face filled her with fondness. Perhaps she would seek her out after reporting to the Venerable Elm, and she would surely praise her, for the rucksack was a most practical and useful gift.

One of the badgers bounded towards her. It was being chased by its kin, and darted away as it neared, barking as badgers do, leading her vision, and mind, towards the south once more.

What of these creatures?

If something was preventing even *one* of the sacred stones from its purpose, the Island climate could change. If that happened then all the life that was on it would perish. Was she not first and foremost a priestess of the Island, servant to the goddess? Was she not morally bound to ensure the safety of all on the Island, regardless of her ambitions to become Yogini?

She was close enough to the sacred site so that she would not return too late to the Temple. And if she kept this secret to herself and the goddess, at least she would have done her duty. What the Venerable Elm's mind did not know her hand could not punish...

No! By all *four* of the Sacred Runes, no!

How dare she even think such things? It was not her place. And besides, once every ten cycles a delegation of Yogini's was sent to clean and tend the stones. That was due to happen in the next cycle. Why should she disobey when there were people trained to tend the stones?

The badgers were brawling now in the bushes, squabbling until one of them yelped and ran off.

Maybe she should see if it was injured?

She slung the indulgent hide onto her naked back, adjusted the straps, and pushed through the ferns where the animals had been playing. There was no sign of them.

Satisfied that there had been no injury, she pointed her feet towards the Temple, only to discover some time later that she

was walking south, and she had no idea why, and no desire to turn back.

This sorcery that directed her south might be the will of the goddess, she thought. Had she not been blessed so richly this morning?

Just a small peek on the stone would not harm anybody, and she would be content the island and those cute little badgers were safe.

She followed the watercourse from the clearing where she had spent the night, at times she splashed through its cool, muddy bed, and at times clambered over rocks and fallen trees. The forest became thicker and progress was slow, but the sun was warm; thousands of birds were in chorus and the fragrance of blossoms was heady. It was a day resplendent with the bounties of the goddess, and yet there was trepidation in her breast.

It was true that nobody would know she had seen the stone, but *she* would know. She would know she had been disobedient, had broken her vows. Until today she had been a model priestess, so much so that she enjoyed favour from the Venerable Elm the other women did not.

Was it worth betraying that trust, something upon which the order was founded?

Could she live with a secret she knew would haunt her very dreams?

The Venerable Elm was the wielder of the Staff of Athiera and was powerful with the Sentience. She had taught Ayr more about the secrets of Wyrding than any other priestess, entrusting her with advanced knowledge; and knowledge of how to use the Sentience brought one closer to the goddess.

In the middle of a shallow pool her feet sank into thick mud up to her calves, just as doubt and anxiety gripped her so that she stopped, vexed and confused.

How she longed for the confines of the Temple where she could just stare at *renderings* of the Runes on the walls, instead of breaking countless vows to see one in the shrine; and all because of a silly feeling that something was wrong. She was childish and unladylike.

Her fellow priestesses would do well to bind her hands over a barrel and lash her buttocks soundly for such nonsense. If she turned back now, offered confession and penance, a lashing was all she would receive. Afterwards the priestesses would tend her welts, and see that she was put to bed and made to ejaculate nectar until she filled a whole bowl as obeisance to the goddess for her impudence.

Clasping her hands with head bowed, she prayed.

“Oh great goddess, I am mired in doubt. My heart is troubled and my head swims with confusion. I feel summoned to your sacred stone by a power stronger than the yearnings of my soul and the urgings of my heart, such that I believe I hear *your* voice. But my head casts me into dismay for my vanity. Grant me a sign, that I may know my path.”

A deliberately deep inhalation pulled delicious air into her body, and while she concentrated she could almost perceive a peaceful respite, but it eluded her still. A small herd of deer were grazing close by and a few of them regarded her thoughtfully as if ruminating on whether to deliver the message from the goddess, or to leave Ayr stuck in hesitation.

Ayr of Whispers waited, almost willing them to move; maintaining her patience. The goddess would not be pleased with undue haste.

When the deer moved off for better pastures Ayr determined to turn back.

It was decided then.

No sign meant she should not continue and should return to the Temple. Almost overwhelmed by relief she bowed again, and faced the side of the pool from whence she had entered. Immediately the dread was gone, and she felt better, virtuous even, and while a flock of birds sailed overhead she resolved not to tell anybody of this part of her journey. Only the goddess need know.

Setting foot on hard earth once more, she selected a gingafruit from a tree and peeled it slowly. Tiny plumes of citrus jetted from the pitted surface as her nails exposed the juicy flesh beneath and it was the sweetest she had ever tasted, sweeter even than the nectar of Running Doe, the woman with whom she shared many of her rituals.

A number of gingafruit had fallen from the tree, where they had begun returning to the goddess. Usually they would be covered by ants and beetles, and it was strange that they were not. Turning some over with her foot she was disturbed to find their surfaces black, and on closer inspection it appeared they had been scorched as if by fire. Yet there were no ashes, no partially burned logs or impromptu fire pits. How was this possible?

One after another she inspected them, confirming each had shared the same fate.

Where were the ants?

On all fours now she scratched at the ground, digging small holes. Not a single beetle was to be heard and tracing a pungent odour to a small pile of rocks, she lifted them to expose a dead ferret. It too was devoid of carrion creatures.

The wind picked up, a sudden and violent gust, and a sensation of foreboding consumed her belly moments before the pain. She felt as if she had been kicked, doubling over. Icy fingers wound around her legs and arms. She cried out into the wind, holding up her hands, cowering into a ball.

Such biting cold!

It gnawed her bones, turned her fingers and toes blue, and drove her teeth to chatter.

Surely she would die here.

Unable to uncoil and flee she rocked back and forth. She buried her head under her hands, her breath coming in thick white clouds.

For what seemed an age, the hateful howling shrank her lower and lower until she began to sense her end.

The cold no longer mattered and there was even a strange warmth like a comforting blanket thrown over the shoulders, and it lulled her away from her stiff body. Like the smooth creamy Winedew, it seduced her spirit to drift upwards until the ball of her body seemed tiny and insignificant on the landscape below; until she became aware of a distant voice calling her name in a chant, like distant music wafting on a summer's breeze and she turned towards it in welcome.

She coughed.

With warming limbs that tingled and a mouth that seemed filled with dust she squinted at the sun.

She coughed again, rolled onto her side.

Judging from her position she must have spread out in the grass but she had no memory of it and though she tried to recall what had happened, all she could remember was that the wind had stopped abruptly at some time. She had fallen over among the strewn, rotting gingafruit.

Her body was drenched in dew and the sun seemed too low of the morning. How long had she slept?

She felt bruised, like the day after intense *athana* training; and her mind was foggy, as if after too much wine. Like a new born foal she staggered, squashing several fruit until she steadied her feet and her strength returned; and with it came a new assertion.

This time she knew no dread, only purpose and determination.

The sign had been given.

There would be no turning back now.

Previous vacillations were replaced with excitement.

She was obedient to the goddess in her disobedience to the Order, and she would surely be rewarded. With a prayer on her lips that her tale would bring leniency to her punishment she removed the rucksack, placed it over her bare breasts for protection, and entered the thicket at the end of the clearing, forging a path through branches that scratched her thighs and arms, trying to snarl her hair.

Frustrated, she paused for the third time to free her tresses and decided to wind her hair around her neck. The impromptu scarf should help, but stopping here meant she was dangerously close to the massive nest of yellow-belted hornets she was trying to avoid.

Fortunately the din of the swarm was a constant drone, the sign of a placid hive; something of a relief because running away would be impossible. As if the nearly impassable jungle weren't enough, the ground was inhospitable.

Though she had never worn shoes in her life, and her soles were tough as leather, unfriendly stones gouged the softer arches. Several times she jammed her toes into rocks. It was a

great relief to emerge from this passive assault and though she was cut and bleeding, she rejoiced in the view of open ground.

Skidding down an embankment she crossed a creek, squelched through a muddy patch of reeds, and arrived at a wall of boulders that was the foot of a small hill.

And apparently a dead end.

Large and unusually square, the rocks rose easily the height of twenty paces and were lavished with all manner of vegetation.

Retreating to the opposite bank Ayr squatted, scooped water over her wounds, and assessed the wall for hand and footholds to the summit. Thinking she may have found a way, she walked a short distance along the wall to be certain there was no easier route. Finding nothing but the promise of further lacerations, she resigned herself to a climb and was about to leap up to a ledge when she caught a breeze on her ankles.

A curtain of vines wafted back and forth at knee height. Lying on her belly, she spread the leafy veil and discovered a narrow slit, just wide enough for her. Cool air blew onto her face in a steady but gentle stream and it smelled moist and sweet.

There seemed to be light on the other side.

Leaving her pack behind, she wriggled forward with gritted teeth, anticipating the slice of rock on her flesh, but the floor was smooth and though she was covered in dust and cobwebs when she stood up, all of her pain and trepidation was supplanted by wonder.

It was a cavern.

Expansive, circular, it was twenty paces across with a shimmering pool at the centre; and it was breathtakingly beautiful, so that she was moved to offer a prayer of reverence.

Such magnificence had never been rendered on the walls of the Temple, and nobody had ever spoken of its existence. This fact alone told her it was a site too sacred for mere words or simple sketches to convey. Light from an opening in the roof bounced over the water casting dancing shapes onto walls of polished lapis lazuli. Sparks seemed to explode from the stone where light intersected crystal and it reminded her of the stars at night, and the twinkling of sunlight on the Temple baths.

The floor was so smooth she could see her reflection and as she walked around the pool her soles squeaked loudly on the surface, echoing through the ancient hall. She followed the sound, gazing up at hundreds of plants that dangled from the opening above.

Squinting, she could see it had been carved by expert craftswomen, perfectly round with a rim decorated richly with jewels and inscriptions.

But wait!

This cavern *had* been mentioned before.

Known as the Eye of the Goddess, it was spoken of only in the most reverential tones.

Remembering her manners, Ayr put knees to stone, cold heels against her buttocks.

“Peace, great mother. I bring peace, will leave only footprints, and will take only memories.”

The prayer seemed to boom, her words amplified, then contorted until they were but a moan, fading away.

“Is there anybody here?”

Again the words danced, rising out of the cavern, but the only reply was a flock of birds that took flight, startling her.

Falling feathers revealed they had been roosting on a staircase. It was carved from the rock, polished in such a way

that if it had not been for the birds, she may have missed it entirely.

Close to the bottom step she became aware of a trickling noise and discovered, in a recessed channel a gurgling rivulet. The water was sweet and possessed of an energy that lifted her spirits until she wanted to sing. She wanted to dance and spiral and give Laudlifting to the goddess until her legs gave out. She touched her flower too, hot and moist, and she wanted to perform the Second Rite, to offer her nectar to the goddess in thanks for this wonderful place, her great and immeasurable divinity.

Were it not for the intensity of the calling she had experienced earlier she may have done just this, but she also recognised the effects of *hayasakawa*, the hallucinogenic plant. It was used in many of the rituals of the Order, particularly in their dances and celebrations. It grew in great abundance here and beyond the cavern, so it was no wonder the water was infused with its delights.

Leaning on the wall with one hand while the other still mused on her sultry silk, reluctant to part from it, she waited for the warm seduction of pleasure to subside, uncoiled her hair from her neck and began the ascent, following the staircase as it curled upwards to the oculus.

She paused a number of times to look down, marvelling anew each time. The dancing sparkles changed like the three stripes of stars in the heavens change as the night grows older, and the pool below seemed to glow lighter and lighter until it was a shimmering star.

Stepping up onto the last stair and into the sunlight she knew she had reached her destination. Eager to see the Southern Rune for the first time, she called to mind its image.

It was said to be the length of her hand, oval in shape, and an object of such exquisite beauty that the mere sight of it could bring the most evil barbarian to weep. Each stone was rumoured to have been formed from a joyful tear of the goddess when she had first created the Island.

Standing on a wide stone tableau Ayr could see the oculus was an aperture hollowed from the rock. Though the platform was overgrown a team of dedicated priestesses would labour but a few days to restore it to its former glory. Then, once again, the glittering inscriptions at her feet, inlaid with gold and gems, would proclaim the splendour of this place.

To spend the day studying the engraved wisdom was a wish she hoped would, one day, be granted, because right now, she could no longer tarry. Leading off from the tableau was a path, also thick with vegetation and its summons could not be denied. Propelled by an upsurge of urgency Ayr marched forward, and pressed through the bushes and branches that would bar her way.

It did not take long for her to arrive at the sacred site, but it was long enough for the plants to bless her with cuts and scratches.

The pain was forgotten in an instant.

Thick, ornate pillars formed an enclosure, and in the middle of it stood a small pyramid with a flat top.

“By the goddess!”

Ayr darted across to the pyramid, her heart pounding, ears ringing.

“How can this be?”

She searched around the pyramid, in the bushes close by; she peered over the edge of the cliff and stared into the waves crashing below.

Robbed of her strength, she sank to the ground speechless, feeling empty, feeling lost.

The sacred stone was gone.

Secow'day, Day 2, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

The darkness would come soon.

Though the heat of the desert would linger into the evening, it would not last the night. This was not really a concern for they had prepared for this; but the undulating line on the horizon, the thin dark shadow beneath it, and the vines of lightning above, were.

Already the wind gusted across the vast expanse of sand. In a very short while it would rise to a howling gale, and great clouds of dust would crash into the mountains behind the encampment. Scraggly bushes hiding behind rocks and in small alcoves and fissures trembled in anticipation for they knew that the wind would bring moisture.

Crouching on her haunches, her back protected by a large rock face, Tulascarri's scrutiny travelled slowly from the horizon to the narrow gorge at the foot of the mountain. It had taken five days for the army to march through it, fan out and set up camp. Until today they had not known water rations, and they were still joking about it. But if they were to survive this campaign they would need every drop.

The rows and rows of tents were arranged as she had instructed, forming perfect lines, the spaces off-set so there was no straight route between them. Protective trenches and latrines had been dug first, sentries posted. Messing tents were positioned in central places, and the stores were protected by

the tents of soldiers. From the little hilltop they were almost indistinguishable, but Tulascarri knew where each one was.

The light was fading. It was the time when colours seemed to sharpen for a moment before they blurred like paint on an artist's palette. She scanned the horizon again, sent out her mind and probed the landscape. Delicate tendrils of consciousness spread out, sensitive like the web of a spider, focussed as an arrow, methodically analysing, feeding back, then flowing out again in a vast etheric fan that glided unperturbed through the gorge, the camp, and over the barren expanse.

Satisfied that tonight's storm would bring only sand, Tulascarri stood up, flicked back her cape and turned back to the rock face. She climbed quickly, with ease and agility, bare feet and hands navigating easily over the rough surface until she was just below the lip of the cliff. From here she vaulted up, silent save for the flap of the cape.

She had posted sentries on the hill. Men with the keenest sight, men with trumpets, men who were fast runners, and men who were excellent archers. They had been hand-picked, and were well trained, but they scattered in fright when she seemed to suddenly appear amongst them.

She could see their fear, could taste it like the bitter dust on her lips. Its odour was sharp as dung. As they shrank back with apologies for not being more vigilant she recalled the rumours.

They called her "Black Sorceress", the "Unknown Witch," but none had the nerve to speak those words to her face. The most brazen could only ever manage to call her "Commander."

All the titles were true, in some form, but none mattered save the last, for it mattered greatly that they did as she

commanded. In the beginning, some had refused to obey the orders of a woman.

They were dead now.

“If your eyes leave the horizon, your life will leave your body. Set more watches. Use your veils and protect your faces from the sand.”

Once they might have argued, or grumbled, but she had their respect.

When she had had the veils sewn for the men, there had been much jesting about how their commander was trying to make them look like the women of the desert tribes. The men had fallen about laughing, and none of them had been willing to wear it. Finally one of their number had said that if she, their commander, the fearsome Tulascarrri would remove her own mask, and reveal the face of which they only ever saw glinting green, then they would wear theirs. She had said that if they could remove it from her face, she would never wear it again.

They had tried.

Now they obeyed.

“Commander.” A masked soldier twice her height dropped to one knee, removing his hood in respect, chin towards her elegant toes. His long dark hair whipped at his face and neck. “Kevorkai, Son of the All, summons you.”

Like a swift shadow she moved down the hill, between saluting hands and whispered awe; and from these she gauged these men, once dishevelled rogues, were now a disciplined force.

By the time she reached the bottom the gusting had become a dirge and wispy trails of sand were undulating across the baked earth. They swayed back and forth, serpentine, enigmatic. Though a harbinger to some, she marched

irreverently through them, marking the strength of the coming squall by how they shattered, then remade.

The rocky plateau gave way to a narrow ribbon of fine sand. Lacing around pitted rocks, it marked the passage of an underground stream, the main reason she had told Kevorkai to camp here. They would need to replenish their supplies of water before venturing into the desert. It was a long march to the first oasis.

She scooped up a handful of the powder and let it trickle through her fist, observing the speed and direction of the wind. In confirmation of her suspicions, she now detected the smell of cooking fires, wood smoke, and the dank stench of sweaty bodies. Thankfully the storm was headed towards the encampment. A blessing because the smell of this army would carry far into the desert, beyond what hawks could see, and beyond what she could sense.

A winding trail wove between boulders where sand turned to pea gravel that crunched painlessly under her steps, and it carried her into the encampment, leading towards the main tent and the seat of Kevorkai.

Secow'day, Day 2, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

Faint strains drifted on the rising howl, melodies of merriment in contrast to the flat squeak of sand under her soles. In no hurry to meet with Kevorkai, Son of the All, her pace was measured, counting the steps between strategic points as she checked the lashings of tents. The wind was a pugilist and anything that was not secure would fly. Soldiers huddled around sheltered fires did their best against the sand, but it

would get everywhere, and while the storm provided concealment, the clean-up in the morning would add a day to the campaign.

The music was louder now and uniforms more ornate. Tents were bigger, and the smell of food did more than simply hint at opulent excess. Horses whinnied in a paddock to the right; to the left goats bleated and cluck-birds cackled, one of the larger repositories of supplies.

On one of his raids Kevorkai had confiscated a herd of strange beasts, the likes of which Tulascarri had never seen before. They were just shorter than a man, docile and lumbering with dewy brown eyes, big flapping ears and two horns that protruded from their heads. Bragging of his acquisition, Kevorkai had once told her their meat gave the finest cuts, their hides could be cured into sturdy cloaks, and even their dung could be used as fuel or mixed into a paste that could be laid into a hard floor. They were the pride of his herds and the head breeder was a man of high standing. Anybody who brought status to Kevorkai was given accolades.

The royal tent, bigger than forty conscription issue, dominated those that ringed it. The poles were sturdy, set with gold, held in place by thick guy ropes, hand woven by the slaves. The robust canvas was impervious to the sand, and while the surrounding tents bobbed erratically against the sandstorm this one barely moved, a brooding overlord amongst trembling minions.

Two burly members of the royal guard scowled at her until she reached them.

“What is your business here?”

The man observed his training well. His duty was to protect Kevorkai, regardless of who approached, and her orders to him

had been to kill anybody who did not present the password. If these men somehow felt there were another ten of the elite lying camouflaged in the sand.

“*Gazurak.*” The password meant sand-pearl in some obscure dialect. She had chosen it this morning, after a conversation with one of the king’s sorcerers. Like the word, their culture was harsh, but not without gems, if you had patience. “I seek audience with the king, Kevorkai, Son of the All.”

It was a curious religion, The All, but its adherents were numerous, and to gain power among them was coveted. Kevorkai had been anointed as a Son of the All, and his priests had foreseen his destiny as the conqueror who would bring about the ruin of the royal house of Asde Fahd, whom The All regarded as an abomination. Once anointed, masses had flocked to him, loyal of heart and purse, and his campaign had begun. What started as raiding bands rapidly grew into an army ten thousand strong.

The guard saluted, relief briefly visible. He had not failed the commander; and she had not put him to a test that may cost him his life. He and his companion uncrossed their spears, and stood aside. Bowing slightly she flicked away the heavy drape and was engulfed by a place worlds away from whence she had come. Warm, sweetly scented air clogged her nose; it was bloated with the sounds of carousing, a fitting scene for a celebration, but one that should have waited until after the campaign.

“The warrior, Tulascarri!”

The booming voice arrested harps and harlots. Bodies drenched in vice seemed to swivel and leer in her direction. Tulascarri bowed low, awaiting permission to proceed.

An effeminate voice called from the other side of the massive tent. “The commander may advance within ten paces of the king!”

Plush carpet enveloped her feet as she glided forward silently, passing groups of people reclining at tables, bare-breasted serving women, and dancers with gaudy coloured feathers. A pair of naked acrobats were paused in mid conjugation, their heaving breaths the loudest sound in the room. They stared, seemingly perplexed, at the warrior as she stepped around them with little more than a glance. Beyond this an orgy, a writhing spider of limbs, was the only spectacle oblivious to the hasty cessation of festivities.

She passed the thirty paces mark and men in pleated robes parted to let her through. At twenty paces a garland of courtiers bowed out her way, and at ten paces the crown of guards, nimble, muscular, and heavily armed saluted and admitted her to the king’s presence.

“Ah! Tulascarri! Welcome.”

The Guiyenenian Warlord, Son of the All, was seated on his extravagant throne, legs crossed.

Pure-blood Guiyenenians were known for their mottled beige skin; but Kevorkai’s spots were distinctly hexagonal. His priests said it marked him as the Chosen One; his historians said it was sign of an ancient and royal bloodline.

Tulascarri did not care what it meant, for she knew who he was.

His bald head glinted under the torches, and the silver buckles on his jacket flashed as he sat back with the sound of creaking leather. On one arm a desert falcon tilted its head left then right, crooning until he fed her a small piece of raw meat.

Tulascarri did not miss the tiny capsule on its leg and neither did she miss the cloaked figure standing behind Kevorkai.

Here the smell of incense was replaced by the provocative allure of roasted goat, overlaid by the delicate scent of fruity wine.

Kevorkai was a man of impeccable taste and refinement, but this was only the thin veneer that bejewelled his ruthlessness.

A flurry of activity to his left signalled the arrival of several serving girls, each one proffering an enormous tray of delicacies above their ample bosoms; all of them tattooed with three hexagons in obeisance to the king.

He gestured idly at the smorgasbord. “Will you dine with me?”

Tulascarri bowed low again. “As you wish, my lord.”

Both of them knew she would not. She would dine with the soldiers, but it was forbidden to refuse the king, and heresy to deny the Son of the All.

Kevorkai had a gentle voice but a hard heart. His chin dipped slowly, holding her as if in secret communion and she could see the flicker of something inscrutable on his round face; a suspicious dilation of pupils and nostrils, a conceited angle of the rigid jaw, a smile of flashing white teeth that was too loud, and the golden droplet that dangled from his left earlobe swayed to the rhythm of the quickened pulse in his broad neck, discordant with the calm front he presented.

And then there were the disturbing glances he gave the Dark Wyrder behind him.

At the flick of Kevorkai’s wrist the closest courtier clapped puffy hands and the perverted pantomime resumed. The Son of the All beckoned Tulascarri closer, showing her to a low seat

next to his throne, but she took a position on her knees lest she need to rise quickly.

“Let us talk of matters at hand. This victory must be swift and decisive. We will bring Asde Fahd to heel. What think you of the enemy? Are my troops prepared?”

“Your men are well trained, fit and hardy. They are well equipped and well supplied, as I promised.”

They would all be slaughtered.

If she had had a full cycle to train them, they would be *just* ready but it had been only three months. Though they had provisions enough, the heat would sap their strength and if they could still fight, they would have to face the Bandori – men and women of the desert tribes – and nobody knew how many of *them* there were.

If, somehow, their gods favoured them with victory over the Bandori, the survivors of Kevorkai’s army would face a fresh force – the army of Asde Fahd. They had existed for close on a thousand cycles, if not more, and were better adapted to fighting in arid conditions.

And then there were the *Mirage*.

Should Kevorkai’s Dark Wyrders have command over some dark magic that could raise the fallen, those soldiers would need to stand against a faceless adversary of myth and shadows. Though smaller in number, it was well known that one *Mirage* was worth a hundred skilled swordsmen.

Kevorkai had perceived her thoughts. “You will accompany us into battle.”

Tulascarri tensed, the fingers of one hand twitching on her thigh. “That is *not* our arrangement, exalted one.” Her contract was fulfilled. She was due to leave tomorrow morning.

“You *will* come with us if you wish to be paid.” He was gently stroking the falcon, then in a fluid movement he rose and threw the bird upwards to the roof where it gracefully spread its wings and shot out through the smoke-hole at the top. “No need to rise, Tulascarri,” he smiled, turning back, and she sank onto her heels. “My bird flies to my city with a message. When news of our victory reaches the city, your payment will be ready for you to collect.”

Visbuk. He had double-crossed her!

She knew what was about to happen next.

The soldiers of the inner circle turned inwards. A number of archers stretched their bowstrings and two knifemen took halting steps forward, carrying thick rope, ready to bind her.

The Dark Wyrder's hands were bared, fingers poised, ready to cast a spell.

A part of her wanted them to try. In a convincing act of drunken revelation she had once revealed that rope made from the hair of a hundred horses would be strong enough to bind her. Clearly there now existed, somewhere, a herd of hairless horses. Though she was tempted to break the rope just to see their horror, it would be a waste of an otherwise good rope, and besides, she had another idea...

“Very well, my lord. I accept.”

He was visibly surprised. He had expected her to protest, to resist.

“You... accept?”

Beyond this potential bloodbath the party continued, oblivious.

Tulascarri shrugged, rose slowly but did not lock her knees, and the soldiers inched back warily, caught between their sworn duty and a preference not to die screaming.

It wasn't the first time an employer had used such a cowardly strategy. "I have trained these men. We have shared bread. Some of them have shared my bed. You could have asked me nicely, though."

Kevorkai guffawed. Then laughed. His men laughed. Tulascarri did not.

"I could have asked *nice*ly... How can I trust you?"

He was an enigma, at once as comfortable with blood upon his hands as reclining on the most luxurious sofas of Bushde Muoll. His broad shoulders and scarred fingers belied a shrewd intellect. Though he was greedy and cunning he could be generous, known to lavish untold affection and riches upon his three wives who worshipped him both as husband and saviour of the people. He threw excessive banquets but not once did Tulascarri see a drop of wine pass his lips; and under this crafted exterior was a brooding darkness. His charm lacked sincerity, and his genteel manner was thin covering for a brutal man. In just a few short months he had destroyed many villages, burned oases, and conscripted captives into his growing army and, aided by Dumasarri, head of Kevorkai's Dark Wyrders, he was a formidable foe to any stronghold.

In truth, he could *not* trust her. He would do well to double his guard this night. She knew she was gambling by playing this hand, but she also knew what drove him. His status as Son of the All was his weakness. His conceit – his need for power, to feel he had *her* in his power – would win out over his better judgement.

"You cannot, wise one. The Son of the All can trust nobody but his gods. But I give you my word I shall go with you into battle."

She could see he thought about her words, swayed on the edge of indecision.

“Then show us your face. Surely I can see great comeliness beneath those shadows you call clothes.”

From wrist to ankle she was wrapped in a Swath. A warrior’s garment of trousers and shirt, the snugly fitting and hardy material was both protective and practical, reminiscent of the wrappings of the desert people. Unlike the Battlesuit, which was minimal in the extreme, it covered all but her hands and feet and the mask left only enough space for her to see.

“Reveal yourself as a show of good intentions.”

Men always want what they cannot have.

“I have accepted your terms, my lord. Please accept mine. Your men trust *this* visage. Anything else and I may need to spend more time disciplining than commanding. If it please you, I shall do as you ask, when we stand victorious over your enemies.”

It was like a game of *sentimet*. Each player moved a piece, trying to outmanoeuvre the other, and this one made the Son of the All scratch his chin. His men were ready to die but looked to him for deliverance. It would be child’s play to slay them all now and she would pluck Kevorkai’s heart through his mouth before any of them hit the floor, but she could not outrun the falcon already on its way, and Hahn could no doubt use the extra time to strip the royal treasury bare. Her vengeance could afford to be patient.

It seemed like an eternity for him to concede, and she wondered what he was thinking; on what machinations did the cogs of his mind work? What satisfaction did he derive from holding everybody on a precipice?

“We are agreed.”

Soldiers around her barely hid their relief as leather exhaled and steel returned to sheaths.

She expected further threats from him, for that was part of the pattern. In low tones and dark menacing grumbles, he was supposed to promise pain eternal, dismemberment of her family, and of course, death if she attempted to betray him in any way. But he did not, and this perturbed her.

Anger and outrage were the typical reaction of men. Just like an erection, if you milked them there would be an eruption, a lot of noise, and a sticky mess, but more importantly such men were predictable, and the brooding Son of the All was dangerous because he was not.

With a wave of his hand he brought the music and festivities to a dead halt and without ceremony announced, “Tomorrow we take death to our enemies. Tomorrow we will be victorious. Tomorrow, we claim the next phase of our campaign.”

The audience was stunned, but the Son of the All walked out to deafening cheers.

Next phase? The army was supposed to rest for a week to gather supplies and prepare their assault. At once, Kevorkai was a meticulous strategist and a fool. For the sake of his pride he would drive his men into the desert when they were so ill-prepared.

The six faces closest to her still stared at their saviour and saw only their doom.

Secow'day, Day 2, of the Trefolkian Month of
Stara, 1626 ODT

With the abrupt cessation of festivities the only music was the lament of the wind, wailing like a woman betrayed. Torches had long been snuffed; only lanterns secured where they stood provided light, and through the swirls and eddies of silt that bit her feet and hands they were but isolated markers of places where she had no business.

Shielding her eyes, she leaned into the gale and navigated by memory the route to her tent. Only the men of the watch, and she, should be pacing the camp right now, but there were other feet about.

It was not unexpected that Kevorkai would have her under surveillance, and it was a compliment to her that he chose the soldiers *she* had selected for this very task. To the untrained they would be indiscernible, but she knew they were there, in the jerking blur of shadows, hidden behind the ribbons of stinging sand: beige smudges on beige canvas.

At first she had wanted to reason with him. It was madness to mobilise the army the day after they had made camp, but she knew he would not relent. In his mind his will was the will of the gods, and there was no debating with a god.

To Dranaga with him! May he burn in the underworld with his idiot counsel and his Dark Wyrders.

Yet she shook her head. These men, once ruffians now proud soldiers, may very well perish under the desert sun, and all because of one man's delusions and vanity.

Vama ferra! There would be no sleep tonight if the idea forming in her mind was to see the light of the sun.

Entering the antechamber of her tent brought relief from the storm; the sudden absence of wind in her ears was louder than any silence. She shut the clips, satisfied with the design of the tent – the little entrance room allowed her to open the inner chamber without the wind-borne intrusion of the desert.

With a start, she wondered if she had chosen the wrong tent. A naked man lay asleep on the bed. His body was strong with chiselled muscles and his skin was oiled so that it gleamed. His long brown hair was loose and his manhood draped over his thigh. Alongside him lay a naked woman, breasts full, legs parted slightly as if they had fallen asleep after passion.

Remembering now that she had instructed them to wait for her, she stepped across to a table, removed her mask just enough and drank deep of the water from a clay jar to smooth the scrape of her tongue. When it was empty she stared at the figures, both of them alluring in their repose. Had the night's events proceeded in her favour, they would have given her satisfaction until dawn, but Kevorkai had stolen the luxury of time.

She kicked the bed, rousing them, unfocused and tousled. "Get out."

"But my lady..."

Tulascarri took hold of the woman's hair and pulled her, yelping, to her feet. "Go and locate the generals and call them to the map room."

The woman's tresses shone orange in the lamp-light, falling forward as she bent to pick up her clothes.

"No, leave your clothes. You look better naked and there is no time. Go now."

With a cry of disbelief she stumbled backwards and nearly fell out of the tent. The man on the bed was moving towards his trousers but Tulascarri stopped him. "You will stay."

With familiar comfort she removed the bottom part of her Swath, and kneeled on the bed, her pouted buttocks in the air. Glancing backwards she saw him grow hard and moments later he slid into her.

"Hard. *Ferra* me hard or I will have your stamen on a stick!"

He dug strong fingers into her waist and hammered her slick petals, grunting like a boar, his thighs slapping hers. It took but a few moments for her to writhe on the bed, the primeval groan of release muffled in the mattress, but she threatened him with his life if he stopped and again her body convulsed with pleasure so that her fingers tore the sheets.

His strokes were growing shorter and his breath was growing ragged and just as he tensed she pulled away, spun around and watched as he took his stamen between his fingers and sprayed his seed onto the bed, knees bowing until he sank to the floor.

Fixing her Swath back in place she stepped over his twitching form and braved the storm again, arriving in the antechamber shortly behind the last of the generals. They were unsure what to do with the naked redhead that had summoned them but murmured through to the larger room to await their commander.

The woman's cheeks were the colour of her hair as she used her arms ineffectively to hide her nudity, begging a small dark corner for concealment. Tulascarri took her neck in one hand and with the other slid rude fingers between dusty petals, deep into velvet, pink and yielding. She could feel the beating heart, the resistance, the humiliation but none of it mattered because

the woman could not prevent her lids from fluttering, she could not help groaning, growing wet; and she could not resist the dribbling climax that buckled her knees.

Tulascarri lifted her mask and licked her fingers, turning away. "You may wait in my chamber."

With the fury of the storm lashing the room, she arranged the men about the table and surveyed their faces.

There were no questions, only obedience.

Poor fools.

They had hardly ventured further than the western borders of Guinyen. All their lives had been spent with the abundance of water and food. Now they would be faced only with their worst fears, and nothing she could do, no training she could give, would prepare them for it. Her only hope was for the army to take the Bandori strongholds before their supplies ran out.

She spent the rest of the night overseeing the preparations, barking orders until she was hoarse, but by the time the sun kissed the horizon and the wind died, the preparations were nowhere near sufficient, and the red haired woman would have to wait.

The first column of soldiers marched away from the mountain with dismal faces, followed shortly by the second, and the sun was high when the fifth and last column churned up the sand. Each company had a number of drummers and, accompanied by trumpets, the sound of the men singing could be heard clear across the desert. Shaking her head, Tulascarri urged her horse forward, coming alongside the royal carriage. Any element of surprise they might have had was lost now, but at least morale was lifting.

That and a clear sky counted for something.

*Sixthday, Day 6, of the Trefolkian Month of
Stara, 1626 ODT*

Asde Fahd. Desert province.

The name itself conjured images of mysteries lost in antiquity. It was said there was untold wealth beneath the shifting sands and such promise lured treasure-seekers in all forms: from grave robbers to chorusing armies.

The forces of the Son of the All marched between spires of rock and ruins so old their history was forgotten; but where history faltered legend took over, and the tales of great heaps of gold and gems grew until they could be seen reflected in greedy leers and brandished blades.

The remains of ancient and mysterious cities, the only testaments to a lost race that must have been great, were freely accessible in great numbers across the entire province. Many were they who sold all they had to seek their fortunes from fallen stone and buried chambers, and few were those who ever returned.

Fortune seemed to favour Kevorkai and his scribes penned songs in his honour when he revealed a spring of water to revive his men, but Tulascarri did not subscribe to such omniscience and began to suspect he had travelled these lands before. No ordinary thief bent on plunder, he was a man of grander plans. Why should he settle for treasure when he could have an empire?

They had paused at the spring briefly, carelessly, before marching on with voices lifted high.

It was only a few days later when Tulascarri received the report that the water rations were running low. Fortunately, the Bandori stronghold was on the ridge just across the valley that

lay ahead. With careful planning she arranged the battle formations and, long before first light, sent them in.

At sunrise she could see the stronghold on fire, and the army was making headway, despite their disadvantaged position. The commanders were holding their bloodlust in check, making calculated manoeuvres as the troops flowed back and forth like a tide. When they suspected the men were tiring they were recalled and replaced with fresh troops, and the onslaught continued.

On the hilltop, Tulascarri was joined by Kevorkai. Escorted by twenty archers and another twenty swordsmen he wore full battle dress, but his sword was sheathed.

“You have done your work well, mercenary. Your contract is fulfilled.”

Tulascarri bowed, stepping back. “Then I shall take my leave.”

Kevorkai handed her a bag of gold coins. “A parting gift, if you will do me one last favour?”

“This was not part of the contract.” Tulascarri shoved the bag against Kevorkai’s chest.

“I know you do not like me.” He turned his gaze to the battle. “And in truth I resent having to have called on your services. But I know you are fond of the men, especially the generals.”

She might have been outraged if his manipulation wasn’t a poor attempt to appeal to her affections for the men, but manipulation was hardly called for. He was right. The generals had been her first recruits, the first ones she had trained, and in their affability and eagerness to learn they had earned her respect. It was an exploitable weakness perhaps, but it was what it was.

“My final act. You will not see me again.”

Kevorkai turned back to her, smiling his cunning smile. He handed her a roll of parchment.

“Deliver this to them. Your horse will be waiting when you return.”

Tulascarri took the scroll along the blood-soaked path down the hill, picking her way between bodies and burning debris. The noise of battle was loud here, but the main fighting was still some way off. A small company of soldiers rallied to her side, making sure she was protected.

The command tent was close by, just below the crest from where Kevorkai oversaw the battle. It was a short walk to reach it.

As she approached, a soldier ran to meet her. He was shouting something, waving, but he fell, an arrow in his head.

Too late, she realised her mistake.

Too late she saw Kevorkai’s plan, but even as the arrows flew she knew what to do.

She would have her vengeance.

Just moments before the deadly points fell, she summoned the Circle of Five. With the power of the elements of wood, water, earth, fire, and metal at her command she could use it to devastating effect. She would be impervious, and the projectiles would glance off her like stones skipping on water; and then she would return up the hill, and make widows of Kevorkai’s wives. The acrid smell of his burning body would singe their hair and sting their minds and the horror of his blackened corpse would scare even the vultures.

But the arrows did not bounce. Their aim was true.

She did not know how many struck her, or even where; she just knew pain.

By what sorcery had they tricked her? How was this even possible?

The rapid darkness allowed nothing for deduction, for reason, and just before the light fled from her, before oblivion consumed her and swallowed her memory, she was aware only of ice around her heart, and an ineffable terror.

Chapter 2

*Secow'day, Day 8, of the Trefolkian Month of
Stara, 1626 ODT*

Buzzing noise, like a yellow-belted hornet. She tried to swat at it but her arms would not move. She tried to see but her lids seemed glued shut, and she was so very, very tired. She could hear her heart beating, thudding, the beat of hooves, a panicked horse.

Buzzing again... slipped feet on carpet... buzzing... Somebody was here. Lie still...

Words were spoken, they sounded like bubbles underwater at first; then harsh, guttural – somebody was shouting. There was something drifting above her, some kind of murky cloud, and it began to descend, its weight pressing hard into her body. From some distant place she felt her flesh contort and convulse and liquid spewed from somewhere leaving an acrid burn on her lips.

No... She had to resist, had to rise, but there was no response from the thing she called body, and she was alone in this void, save a sound like waves on a shore.

She knew there was pain. It was lodged in her like a rapist. And there was nothing she could do.

*Thir'day, Day 9, of the Trefolkian Month of
Stara, 1626 ODT*

Waves again.

Somehow she knew, in the darkness, that she drifted towards the shores of a lake. It was vast, so vast the horizon was misty in the distance. Above her the sky was white like the desert in the middle of summer, but her bare feet were resting ankle deep in water that lapped gently at the skin.

She could 'see' trees, a dense forest, and the foliage seemed to sway in unison with the sound of a strange beating drum.

A wind came off the water: a cooling, soothing wind, making her realise she was thirsty. Bending down she caught sight of bare flesh and realised she was naked, but what was this?

Her body was covered in oil, a slick black film. It seemed to be oozing from her pores, covering her in filth. She fell into the water, washing it off with handfuls of sand. It threatened to engulf her, constricting about her neck like a noose. She rubbed furiously, freeing her neck, then her arms, but by the time she was done with her belly the slick was growing around her neck again.

Thirst... Unbearable thirst... She needed water but continued scrubbing, faster now, moving and thrashing in the water, leaving acrid pools of... poison?

Darting forward she ran along the sand, flicking up divots, and then sprang into the water again, scrubbing. She had time to gulp some water before the greasy film grew back, but this time it was thinner, more viscous. Again she scrubbed, until her skin turned red and bled, but when she ran to shore the venomous puddle was smaller.

Finally she stumbled onto dry land, collapsing onto a pile of twigs and leaves, resting her head on the sand, puffs of dust blowing away from her lips as she breathed, until the burning sensation in her throat returned, demanding more water.

With force of will alone she pushed herself up, crawled to the lake and, leaning on one hand, scooped the precious fluid to her lips.

Cool, clear water coursed down her throat. She wanted more. Needed more, but as she lowered her hand the lake seemed to grow further away. Desperately she plunged her hand in, struck something hard. It felt like flesh. Grabbing at the sand it faded away through her fingers, and now she was floating, like a bird, high above the water, drifting towards the sun.

Fourthday, Day 10, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

There was a breeze on her face, a light draft, almost playful, toying with the delicate tufts of hair on her ears. It was accompanied by the smell of dust, overlaid with incense, an aromatic blend of wood and spices, and the flat sound of canvas as it sucked and billowed.

Light danced beyond her vision and she could hear voices, that strange tongue again. Her eyelids were still heavy, but she willed them to open, and reluctantly they parted, sank back, then opened a little more.

Daylight stung her, invaded her brain with daggers, making her wince, her body twitching.

She tried to rise but hot pokers of pain stole her breath and she dared not move again.

“Shh...”

A gentle hand touched her shoulder and Tulascarri realised she was covered only by a sheet. “What happened?” she groaned.

“Shatsaloon. Du merien shanyetvee agoonillseer.”

The Ancient Tongue. Who spoke it so well?

She focused up at a canvas that had once been beige, and a woman who wore a sheer black dress and a black headscarf. She had a kind square face with dark brown eyes, darkly bronzed skin, and ruddy cheeks; a desert-dweller, one of the Bandori. Right now she was fussing with Tulascarri’s ankles, and she realised she had been bound.

“Why am I tied up?”

The woman’s face appeared above her, head shaking slowly. *“Di nallif ethetsu ipinie sun dumai emiyarie...”*

It had been some time since she had spoken the Ancient Tongue and it took a moment before she could reply, this time in the same language. *“Why am I tied up, kbuma? Where am I? What happened?”*

The Bandori woman grunted, some note of approval, and moved on to untie Tulascarri’s wrists. *“You were badly injured. My husband found you and brought you here, to our home. We tied you so you would not hurt yourself.”*

“I am grateful, kbuma...”

Tulascarri searched within, trying to remember what had happened when the sheet was rudely yanked from her naked body. *“Iridai...?”*

“We must bathe you.”

We?

Bathe?

Two more women appeared, grunting with the weight of a large wooden trough. Steaming splats of water punctuated guttural effort.

Horrified, Tulascarri shook her head.

“*Iridai? You are afraid to be bathed?*”

“*No...*” Tulascarri calmed her beating heart. “*It’s just...*”

She had never needed anybody’s help before. Always *she* was the one to remove the clothes, to *do* the bathing. If she wanted something she took it...

“*You are a virgin?*”

Tulascarri snorted so hard she felt the skin split on her shoulder.

“*Well then...*” The Bandori woman pulled on Tulascarri’s hand to help her up, while the other two lifted her from the back.

Gouging nails said what tongues did not.

Did they know who she truly was? Did they know she had overseen the slaughter of their people?

The other two commented on her in Bandori. It was a language Tulascarri had never learned but it was obvious she was a subject of fascination. They stared at her pubic mound, unable to fathom why she had no hair there or under her arms, and they babbled about the *shikai* on her back. Small tufts of hair, no thicker than a finger and tapering to the end, the *shikai* grew on either side of her spine in two parallel rows. Two by two the tufts marched along her back from the base of her neck to the top of her buttocks.

Tulascarri did not care if they stared till their heads exploded. She needed to heal, and she needed information. As soon as she was able to walk on her own she would leave,

assuming they did not kill her first, but it did not seem they knew who she was. And if they did, they didn't show it.

They continued to inspect and discuss her long auburn hair, where theirs was black; her emerald irises, where theirs were brown.

Though the women were strong and settled her gently into the water, the very movement of her body was excruciating; but as the heat of the water eased her muscles and melted the mud from her feet the white knives of pain, and the dark edge of oblivion that threatened her consciousness, receded.

They gave her water to drink, cool and soothing, coloured with some tonic, and when her throat was no longer as dry as the sand beyond the tent she had the strength to speak.

"Please, khuma, tell me more of where I was found? Did your husband say anything more?"

"Our husband is a Bannator driver. He was returning home. It is your good fortune he hastened you here." Calloused fingers were tugging on the knots in Tulascarri's hair as water was poured over her head, and soap worked into her scalp. From the woman's tone Tulascarri could judge their husband received the same level of disdain as she did.

"How long have I been here?" She was addressing her navel, head bobbing.

One of the other two opened her legs and washed her womanhood, rubbing harder than necessary, moving harshly over her thighs.

"You walked with Clopax for four days."

Clopax was the Bandori god. Much like the male god of her homeland, Clopax was patriarchal, a mighty warrior who, single-handedly of course, had created the world.

"Four days I was unconscious?"

"If not for your stirring we might have put you to Clopax tomorrow."

"Well, thank you Clopax..."

The woman rapped her hard on the head. *"Do not use the creator's name so lightly, whore!"*

So here was the cause of their hostility. *"You think I am a whore?"*

"There is no other reason a woman would be with an army, unless that army was from Asde Fahd, which you are not."

She was relieved and grateful that they did not know who she really was, but if this were the case, why did the sentence cut so deep?

"If you hate me so, why help me?"

The woman's hands stopped. She dropped to a knee and lifted Tulascarri's chin. *"Hate you? We hate the deed, child, not the doer. Clopax the ever wise, teaches this. The fact that he allowed you to live means he has plans for you yet."* She studied Tulascarri's oval face for long moments, her expression deep and meaningful, before returning to rinse the hair that was now clean.

The other women had finished. One was laying long green leaves on Tulascarri's cot while the second was mixing a paste.

They lifted her from the acrid water, dried her delicately, and watched as she relieved herself in a chamber pot. Then they forced her to eat, tutting that she was so skinny, smeared her wounds with the paste and lay her on the leaves.

By the time they pulled the sheet over her and left the tent the heat of the day had abated. The sun was dusking over cooking fires and bleating goats instead of the smoulder of ruin and the cries of the dying; and such gentle murmur was unsettling because it was alien, and because the long shadows rippling on the canvas reminded her of her own fragility.

The image of the red-haired woman came to her; how she had treated her like a whore, a slave, raping her dignity, and Tulascarri knew she deserved these Bandori women's disgust. Yet they tended her, nursed her; and humiliation and rage seeped onto her pillow. She did not deserve their help.

What right did they have? What right had they, to be so kind?

Fifthday, Day 11, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

A cluckbird crowed. Sound travels differently in the desert and it was loud enough to jolt Tulascarri into wakefulness which instantly made her gasp in agony. Though painful to move, she managed to turn onto her side.

She could see a rich carpet, intricate patterns of blue and green framed with gold. Wanting to see more of the pattern, she tried to raise her head but it swam as if in a narcotic trance and numbing tentacles seemed to be wrapped around her mind. Focusing on her breathing she steadied her racing heart and calmed the quivering of her limbs.

If this was the side-effect of the tonic perhaps she should stick with wine, but the disorientation would not last long. The Circle of Five would purge the dregs.

Her drowsiness shattered.

Anxiety ripped away the calm.

If she had only been wounded her body would, by now, only be sore, like a muscle worked hard; and her mind would not be filled with such churning fog.

What had happened?

Memories began to return.

The battle, the message to the generals, and then there seemed to be a gap of space filled with strange images and mangled dreams.

“*Vama ferra*,” she cursed as she tried to concentrate, tried to focus her recalcitrant mind, willing the whimsy to obedience.

Behind closed lids she could see the skirmish, remembered a call that arrows were incoming.

She knew she was in firing range, knew this was the moment of Kevorkai’s betrayal because the arrows were coming from behind. She had called on the Circle of Five to protect her, and in that moment she knew the depth of his deception... because the Circle failed her.

There could be only one explanation.

She had been poisoned by the only toxin an Akiun feared, a substance that severed their connection with the Sentience.

Shock, like a blow to the gut, drove the air from her lungs. Her body constricted, unable to breathe, her head shaking with horror that dribbled from her lips in gobs.

As a woman whose baby has been torn out through her womb she clutched her belly, weeping for the Life Seed that lay within, once the source of her power and connection to the Sentience, now a useless husk.

Violent with grief she felt the flame of purpose extinguished.

She had survived Carnath-Isia only to have her soul removed.

Inconsolable, she did not notice the man enter the tent. She did not notice him kneel by her bed, and could only bury her anguish in his beard as sinewy arms enfolded her.

It was only when he bellowed at somebody that she felt her body stop shaking. The harsh string of sounds stung her, and she fought for control of herself again.

The man continued to rant at the tent flap, periodically adjusting the turban on his head, or gripping the hilt of a dagger on his belt. He wore faded blue pantaloons, soft boots, and a shirt that was long enough to reach his knees.

“*I am sure that they have gone by now,*” she said, between reflexive sobs.

“What?” He turned back to her. “Speak plain. I do not speak the Ancient Tongue.”

Despite her grief Tulascarri raised an eyebrow in surprise. “You are the Bannator driver who rescued me?”

He had a leathery complexion from many days in the sun. His fingers were gnarled from hard work, and his essence was kindness the colour of hazel.

“I am Maloud Fed Ayed, and yes, I found the whore.”

There was no sting to his words, somehow. It was matter-of-fact as if he didn’t really care she was a whore. And in any case, now that she was no longer connected to the Sentience, maybe that was how she would survive.

Fresh sorrow, silent but riverine, began once more.

“Forgive me, my lady. I did not mean to insult you.” He knelt again, on knees that popped unnervingly.

Tulascarri shook her head, moved by the concern on his face. “You can never know my pain, khumo.”

“*Nagh hamorah!* Of course not if you do not say.” His accent was thick with rolled r’s and hard g’s. “But I know more about you than you think, huh?”

Tulascarri turned her head. “And what would you know about a discarded whore left for dead? And what purpose did you have in rescuing a whore, in any case?”

“Purpose, I know not, huh? Except that Clopax, all mighty and merciful slayer of men, has plans for you. And this is enough. But I also know that you are no whore. I let my wives think this because they do not need to know who you are, and it makes for sweeter favour and bigger meals if they are a little insecure.”

Tulascarri raised herself slowly, holding the sheet against her breasts. “So who do you think I am then?” She kept a wary mark on the dagger, calculating how she might kill him, though she knew her limbs would not obey.

He did not fail to notice and held up his hands. “Be at peace...” Using two fingers only he pulled the dagger from his belt and tossed it towards the entrance of the tent. “I know that in your weakened state you could probably still kill me. Maybe. But why would I want to kill you after saving your life, yes?”

Tulascarri relaxed visibly, grateful she would not have to fight, though for a moment she had contemplated letting him take her life. What use was it now...?

“At first I thought you were *Mirage*. One of the Queen’s elite. A spy sent to the invading horde. I saw them once, you know, as a young boy. So silent, so deadly, so disciplined.”

“I know who the *Mirage* are.”

“Of... of course. But then I saw the bare feet, the pointed ears, and I knew you were Trefolkian. And when I saw the marks on your cheek I knew you could only be...” He dropped his voice to a whisper, leaning closer. “Akiun.”

Tulascarri touched her right cheek, close to the ear where five small tattoos, one under another, were etched permanently

into her skin. Known as the Gates of Life and Death, they marked her rank within the Order of Warriors. This was one of the reasons why she never let anybody see her face, why she always wore a mask.

“Your Order is supposed to be... extinct...?”

“It is.”

“But *you* are alive.”

“Not anymore...” Slowly, gingerly, she swung her feet to the floor, pulling the sheet about her as he looked away long enough and turned back with confusion.

Tulascarri heaved a deep and sorrowful breath. “The village of Carnath-Isia was attacked and destroyed...”

“Several cycles ago, yes.”

“Carnath-Isia was the last Akiun stronghold to evade the Emperor’s purge. Me and my brother Hahn were the sole survivors.”

“Then there are *two* of you. How can you say you are no more?”

“Hahn was too young to learn anything of the teachings...”

“So there is one of you still...”

“Do you not *understand?*” Tulascarri’s yell hurt her throat and frightened cluckbirds into obscenities. She balled her fists and felt the sting of helplessness again as Maloud dropped his arms, thrown up in defence. Wiping her cheeks she spoke softly. “I have lost my connection to the Circle of Five, to the Sentience. I have been poisoned.”

His bushy eyebrows underlined deep creases on his brow. “But... you are still alive?”

“The poison does not kill you. It injures the Life Seed, causing it to shrink away from the Sentience.”

“Life Seed?”

“Here.” Tulascarri shrugged off the sheet.

At the unforeseen sight of her naked Maloud covered his eyes, muttering something.

“Don’t be falsely modest, Bannator driver. You have seen the world. You have surely seen a woman naked?”

“Seen a woman naked, yes.” He parted his fingers slowly. “But if my wives learn I have seen *you* naked I will be in deep dung.”

“Bigger, sweeter meals, remember?” Tulascarri touched a place on her belly, two fingers below her navel. “About two thirds into the body, at this point, is a small organ called the Life Seed.”

“Ah, yes. I know it!” When he realised he had been admiring the washboard stomach he averted his stare. “We call it *Batranega* in our tongue. Everybody has a... Life Seed.”

She pulled the sheet around her again, reflecting that her wounds no longer hurt as much, and it had been much cooler without the sheet on her body. “As you say. The Life Seed is what a warrior uses to connect to the Sentience, the Universal Source, the Energy That Binds All Things.”

“Ah, the Breath of Clopax; he that is the all-knowing and divine cause of rivers of blood.”

“The Sentience is in everything, flows through everything, seen and unseen.”

“Is it your god?”

“I believe it has a consciousness, but it is not my god. Akiun Warriors spend many cycles preparing their Life Seeds to be mature enough to connect to the Sentience, and when we do it is a great achievement, a *grand* achievement. That connection is then developed, deepened, and when the warrior is ready that connection allows the warrior to access extraordinary abilities.”

“My father once spoke of an Akiun he had met. He said this man could leap through the trees like a cat, he could become invisible... He said he once saw this man punch straight through a wall with the strength of a bull and no harm to himself.”

“The Circle of Five.”

“This is magic?”

“Through the connection to the Sentience the warrior learns to harness the power of the elements – The Circle of Five.”

“But there are only four elements: Earth, wind, fire, water.”

“To the Akiun there are five. Earth, Fire, Water, Wood and Metal.”

“It is intriguing that you consider the last two as elements... but this Circle of Five... This is how Akiun can leap through the trees, become invisible, and punch straight through a wall with no harm to themselves? So it is true...”

Tulascari’s spirit dropped. “It also allows us to heal quickly... But now... it is gone. I am... abandoned.”

“But there is a cure, surely?” Maloud clapped his hands and shortly the tent opened.

A young boy, scrawny and wearing a turban entered carrying a gourd. With significant effort he kept his gawking off Tulascari, but by the time he left the bulge in his trousers was unmistakable.

Maloud chuckled as he rose to his feet and approached a table. “Forgive my son. He has never seen a woman wearing so little.”

“How many cycles has he?” Tulascari took an earthen cup from Maloud, now filled with a clear liquid from the gourd.

“Eighteen.” Maloud’s chest seemed to swell a little. “He is a man in our culture, but still so much a young boy. I have forbidden him to marry until he is much older.”

“Marry?” Tulascarri did not know this term.

“You would say ‘entwined’.”

Tulascarri wet her lips with liquid that had a slight scent, like citrus, delicate even. It was smooth and cool, but fiery at the same time, and there was no denying that it was a powerful liquor. “What *is* this?”

“You like?” Maloud filled her cup. “It is called Calatti. My third wife, Nafeera, distils the best Calatti in the village, in the whole district.”

“My compliments.”

Maloud quaffed his drink and poured himself another. “There is no cure for the effects of *this*, I’m afraid, but for *you* there must be.”

Tulascarri had not dwelt much on the cure. “It is impossible.”

“So there *is* a cure?”

“One must lie in the desert for three days, in the heat. You must take no food or drink. In this time you will die from exposure. You will be cured, but you will be dead. Not exactly an option.”

“*Now* you wish to live?” Maloud filled his cup again.

“What do you mean?”

“When I came in here I saw a woman so filled with sorrow that I could see you were ready to walk with Clopax, the ever welcoming and fatherly butcher of sinners.”

She shot the contents of her cup and allowed Maloud to fill it again. It was too hot for the sheet and, emboldened by the

alcohol on an empty stomach, she shrugged it off. Maloud did not seem to notice. “Perhaps you are right.”

“Of course I am right. After all, what do you have to lose to try, if you were willing to die in the first place?”

“Well, for one thing I could fashion a man from your son.” She did not know why she said that.

Perhaps the heat was making her mad. Perhaps the liquor had caused the tingle of arousal to turn her thighs moist, and ejaculate the words without censorship, but she felt sorry, and apologised immediately.

“Ah... Calatti brings different gifts to different people. Pay no mind of it.” He guffawed. “My son would lose his seed before you even touched him.”

Tulascarri laughed. She laughed until her belly hurt more than her wounds. And it felt good to laugh like this. Calatti brought different gifts indeed.

“*Mekpak*,” Maloud said, when his perfect white teeth receded behind his beard. “I must go. Gonro and I have a caravan to join and I will return in about ten days. By then, you should be better recovered, and we will speak again. Until then, think on the words of Clopax the wise architect and destroyer of patience: Sometimes what we think is the road to death, is the road to life.”

With a sweeping bow he left Tulascarri and just like her cup, she felt like an empty vessel once more. However, the Calatti had warmed her loins and she lay back on slimy leaves, her fingers beginning a dreamy and sensual caress, and the arousal defied the pain of her wounds, encouraging her heart to fight the suffering and sorrow and a flicker of hope sparked in the darkness of her isolation.

This time, when her muscles constricted, it was with pleasure, a familiar respite, and the gift it brought was insight, and gratitude, for she realised that not only had Maloud saved her life, but he had, somehow, turned her back from oblivion.

*Sixthday, Day 12, of the Trefolkian Month of
Stara, 1626 ODT*

Though it was still difficult to move she needed desperately to relieve herself. With winces and grunts of pain, she staggered towards the chamber pot. By rights it should be dark but the moons were particularly bright and in a bronze curve she could see the reflection of the carpet, and the flaps of the tent.

She had never thought it a good practice to sleep close to where she urinated and with slow, careful and deliberate steps, each one punctuated by a stab of pain she pushed through the split in the canvas and felt the cold fingers of the night spiral around her bare skin.

The sky was clear, but by no means dark. Three dense lines of closely packed stars in milky ribbons of rose and emerald, punctuated with numerous shooting streaks, cast brilliance to the world below. Called the Belts of Gethras by her people, the stars were a source of poetry, philosophy, and wonder, but they were dull compared to the three moons of Bursha, Sentia, and Geldor.

As a young Akiun she had spent many, many nights training under their benevolent gaze, but now in the frigid air they seemed like eyes in a lifeless corpse, and as she shivered the pang of loss lashed her heart once more. Without the ability of the Circle of Five she could not call on Fire to cheer or warm

her – she was at the *mercy* of the elements, the cold blade of irony twisting within her, making her pain so much worse.

Yet she did not wish to return, searching the sky, and as far as she could see, trying to identify any landmarks. Bursha and Sentia were waning, and Geldor was waxing, and judging by the shapes of their crescents it was the month of Stara, but this was all she could glean. Though she wanted to stay, the cold and the pain would hear no argument. She took a few sideways steps, squatted and felt the steam from her bladder warm her legs and underbelly briefly before using what remained of her strength to return inside. Trembling, teeth clenched, she wrestled her body onto the cot and pulled the covers over her head for extra warmth. The exertion burned and there was no damming the surge of pain that wet her cheeks.

Once she had been the feared mercenary Tulascarri. Now she was nothing, nobody.

Only one eye stuck out from the covers and she noticed the top of the bottle of Calatti next to her bed. As fast as her pain would allow she uncorked it, eternally grateful that somehow it had travelled from the table, and allowed the cold orange-tasting liquid to slake her thirst and in time, maybe, kill some of the pain.

Once, she had been able to sense exactly where she was and in what direction she should travel, but now she was as helpless as a pup abandoned by its mother.

Abandoned...

Drops of sorrow welled once more and she drank them down with Calatti, trying to be angry, trying to be vengeful, but how, exactly, did she propose to take revenge when she was so impotent and pathetic?

She did not even know anything about the Bandori. Did they observe sixty days in a month? Did they call the moons by the same names? Did they sacrifice strangers to their strange god? Did they keep her here to extract retribution from her when she was healed? They already thought she was a whore; who would miss a whore?

In her inebriated truth she was exactly that.

There was little difference between whore and mercenary, after all. They both sold their services, and they were both *ferra'd* in the end.

Some part of her rational mind seemed to assert itself, reducing her sobbing to weeping and decorating the flagon against her cheek with snot. She had not lost her memory; she had not lost her training and all that she had been taught. Her mind, at least part of it, was sound, and this, she realised, was more redemption than she deserved.

Stretching out, warmer now, she dropped the Calatti onto the carpet and tried to calm her breathing. Though she knew her stupor would only lead to nightmares perhaps, on the other side of them, was some kind of meaning.

Chapter 3

Thir'day, Day 21, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

The highest structure on the Island, the Temple was built into a hillock with only two paths to its summit, one of which led up from the amphitheatre over which it presided. Nobody knew how old it was, or what masters had sculpted it from the rock, but with pillars styled in the form of nubile women and petroglyphs of people in coital bliss there could be no doubt it had always been dedicated to the goddess.

Ayr of Whispers was almost running, her sense of urgency speeding her into the grassy arena and past the central fire pit. Here it was that the followers of the Order received mass addresses from the Venerable Elm, who would lecture them from the lip of the ridge above; here it was they danced around the fires of transformation to sensual drums in mass celebration of the Rites of Athiera, but now was not the time for such reminiscences.

She had had to wait too long to see the Venerable Elm and would not afford time to a dalliance.

Entering the narrow gully to the Temple Ayr stopped herself, leaning against the wall to calm her beating heart and address her apprehension. With both palms pressed against the rock, she shut out the sights and sounds and one by one recited the mantras of the first five Rites of Athiera and, by the time she expelled her last deep exhalation, felt much more centred. It was important that when she met with the Venerable Elm she was poised and calm, and did not appear to be unladylike

by being hysterical and babbling like a child. Such behaviour may be tolerated from novitiates and initiates but it would not do for one of the rank of *priestess*.

Perhaps the pathway helped too, she considered, admiring the crystalline stairs warm under her bare feet. Embedded within were glittering strands of autumn and the occasional streak of spring. These were, after all, the stairs that led to the Temple, and were often used to enact a walking meditation before reaching the top of the hill and entering the sacred chambers of worship. Over the many cycles the walls had been worn smooth at a certain height from the trail of many fingers and to maintain her sense of calm she, too, traced the undulating grooves.

At the top the staircase splayed into a fan-shaped expanse of flagstones, latticed by dense lines of ground-covering, and she deviated from her route, coming to stand beneath the limbs of an ancient oak tree. Its boughs separated into arcs, fountaining into a leafy dome, and a few paces forward was the small dais where the Venerable Elm would stand and address her followers in the amphitheatre below.

From here she could see a trio of women on a quilt at the far side of the green auditorium. They were coated in the nourishing, lubricating juices of the silk bush and their bodies glistened in the benevolence of the sun. One of the women lay on her back, her arms stretched above her head, palms together. With her feet on each of the shoulders of the other two women her body was rippling slowly as they probed her with a phaldo.

Ayr remembered her first day as an initiate, when she too had been probed by the phallus of ministering priestesses, assisting her in producing her first offering of nectar. It had

been a glorious day. The celebration thereafter was one of her favourite memories and she prayed the goddess would similarly bless the initiate below.

A flock of small red birds flew in from the east, chirping as they dived at grubs and ants, and Ayr took a moment to check that her *sikrit* was perfectly draped.

Worn only when members of the Order attended to matters of the world, such as Ayr's meeting with the Venerable Elm, it was a thin garment of gossamer more symbolic than practical. A gift from Song in the Reeds, it was conservative in length, reaching Ayr's knees; and she had woven it to hold the faintest patterns of leaves, and hemmed it with gold thread.

Satisfied that she was suitably poised and collected, Ayr strode towards her right, entered the hallowed halls, and arrived shortly in the office of the Venerable Elm where she was met by one of the Venerable Elm's aides.

"Welcome, Ayr of Whispers."

The woman rose to receive the guest. She stepped around her desk and gently cupped Ayr's left breast, kissing her lightly on the cheek. Whispering, she added, "Sorry I am so formal, but the Venerable Elm expects us to maintain a certain distance in the Temple."

Ayr understood that the duties of a Yogini were demanding. Though this rank was just above hers, it took many cycles to reach it, and when it was achieved the duties were rigorous. Yogini Pollen of Lilies was a favourite among the priestesses. As one of their teachers she always invested the effort to befriend her lessers, and on occasion would engage in communion with them.

The office was large and rounded with rich carpet, and at the far end was an imposing double door of cedar and pine.

The Yogini rested long fingers on the thin chain of office she wore and Ayr noticed the gold complimented the freckles between her bounteous breasts.

“You are kind with such words, Ayr.” Pollen of Lilies had a wide mouth with lips as generous as her bosom and her round, open face took up the radiance of her smile, her nose wrinkling a little. “The Venerable Elm awaits you in the fountain room. Judging by the sounds I think she is just finishing communion. Go ahead, you may enter.”

Ayr was so nervous, only now did she hear the cries from beyond the door, growing louder as she neared it and touched the handle. The wood receded on silent hinges and she stepped into a chamber that was part structure and part cave. To her right, rows of bookshelves ascended to the roof, reigning over luxurious furnishings and plush carpeting, and where the pile ended a floor of smooth rock sloped upwards into a small cavern, at the back of which was a gurgling fountain.

The Venerable Elm straddled the stream in a broad stance, bent forward at the waist. Her well-muscled upper body was supported by thick vines from the rock above and between her legs one of her initiates was finishing her communion with strokes of her palm.

Kissing the top of the head of the initiate, the Venerable Elm purred into a standing position and lightly stepped away from the stream as the initiate began the First Rite, kneeling in the stream, her countenance turned up.

She looked so serene, so beautiful, and Ayr was pleased to think *she* might have looked so content when on her vision quest.

“Ah, Ayr of Whispers...” The Venerable Elm, Dancing Cedar, cupped the breast of Ayr of Whispers and kissed both

cheeks before hugging her warmly. Her face was still red and her nipples, still hard, pressed into Ayr's chest, and she felt immediately lifted and welcomed, and yet embarrassed that she should trouble the Venerable Elm, so self-conscious and awkward.

"By the rites of the goddess, Ayr, you are shaking like a leaf. Your heart thumps so hard I feel it in my own. You would do well to perform the First Rite. Shall I allow you a few moments?"

"Thank you, Venerable Elm, you are most kind." The groans of the initiate made the Venerable Elm's offer very tempting, but she sensed she was being tested. A lady in her *sikrit* was committed to the business at hand. "I shall gladly perform the Rite if you desire it, but I must speak with you first."

Dancing Cedar was a tall woman, taller than most Asde Fahdian women, and her body was curved as if by the goddess' own hand. Her buttocks were firm and rounded like juicy fruit, and her narrow hips swayed sensually above painted padding toes. A flagon of wine and several glasses awaited and tinkled as ruby liquid filled them.

The initiate was murmuring the mantra of the First Rite, her body swaying in tune as her hands glided with rising speed and insistence, her thin fingers positioned expertly as she had been taught.

Ayr accepted the crystal and waited for the Venerable Elm to drink first, admiring once more her deep purple gaze, and the curls of her white hair, which were a rarity among Asde Fahdian women. Her nose was slightly hooked; she liked to tell the story of how she had broken it in celebration of one of the Rites.

“I have heard your vision quest was one of rare experience, most auspicious. You will forgive me for not meeting with you sooner, but we have produced a most magnificent vintage of *Imana*, and I needed to oversee its safe passage off the Island.”

Imana; the Elixir of Athiera. With the superior nectar of the Yoginis as its base and refined with herbs and alchemical processes the elixir was a magical clear liquid with a hint of sapphire. It was a panacea, miraculously and rapidly healing all ills, but most importantly a few drops restored youthfulness and vitality and allowed Asde Fahdians to extend their lives well beyond their natural span. Some claims spoke of women living up to one hundred and fifty cycles in perfect health and beauty. The sale of *Imana* to the rest of Asde Fahd ensured the Island remained protected and well supplied, and the secret of its production was entrusted to the Venerable Elm and her Yoginis alone.

This was why Ayr wished to become a Yogini. With all her heart she wished to ascend this rank, not for the status, but for the confirmation that *her* nectar, *her* offering to the goddess was not only pure, but worthy and righteous.

She started as the Venerable Elm clinked her glass.

“You seemed lost in thought, Ayr. Contemplation is good, but I rather think you have something on your mind?”

Unsure of how to begin, she was abruptly confronted by fear that took her beating heart and threw it onto her forehead in beads of sweat. Not only did she not know what to say, or how to say it, but she was about to divulge her disobedience.

It briefly occurred to her to run away, or to lie, but the Venerable Elm already seemed to know. She drank half of the

glass with elegance and fortitude and then said, “I have also heard you have been troubled of late.”

The initiate moaned, an exhalation cut short, and her belly was quivering as she struggled to remain upright. Between her silky thighs her hands seemed to tremble and as her body bent forward in a foetal constriction she delivered a root sound; a guttural roar, long and low, a resonance that was primal and earthy and divine.

And arousing.

The fires that licked Ayr’s insides leapt up and she seized on this momentum, driving it into her courage so at last she could speak.

“Venerable Mother, the Southern Rune is gone.”

Save the gurgle of the fountain and the mewls of the initiate, twitching as bubbles banked and nudged around her prostrated form, the cavern was silent.

The Venerable Elm took Ayr’s glass and placed both on the table, and turned back with a deeply sorrowful stare.

“Now you know why it is forbidden for anybody save me to go to the sacred site. Now... you *know* why it is forbidden.” She touched Ayr’s cheek softly. “Oh my child I am so sorry you had to have this affliction befall you. If you had been patient I would have shown you. And you were *so* close to becoming Yogini...”

Doubt... Fear... They encircled her heart like a serpent threatening to choke the beat and still her blood. How calmly the earth seemed ripped away from under her...

So close to becoming Yogini... Her hope was stolen too.

“It is sad, my dear, that you chose to disobey for now you must bear the consequences.”

“C... consequences?” What did this mean?

“Yes.” The Venerable Elm clasped her hands in front of her, disheartened. “You will start to have visions. You will feel compelled to leave the Island. You will begin to doubt, and fear, and sadly... you will come to believe it is all my fault. And if you are weak you *will* leave the Island and you will be doomed to wander alone, never to find us again.”

Ayr was confused.

Her mind and heart seemed to interchange, tumbling about in her body as if they were unseated.

“But... Venerable Elm... I saw the monument, the open space with my own eyes. The temperature of the Island was too hot, plants were wilting; there was an icy blast like from an ice god. These things...”

“Are *all* a deception, my dear.” The Venerable Elm hugged Ayr to her bosom and rested her chin on her head, stroking her back in a comforting way. “Oh you poor, poor child. This is how the sacred stone protects itself. Through an hallucination that seems so real you cannot tell it from a deception. Do you not see? The Southern Rune, like all of the Sacred Stones is a powerful, magical source. The Four Runes keep our Island in a protective dome and maintain the climate. We are hidden from the rest of the world, and our home is safe and comfortable, a haven for our Order. The stone protects itself from thieves by creating the hallucination that it has been stolen, and then the resulting visions and doubt take that person away from the Island so that they can never return...”

Ayr was weeping like the child she had strived not to be.

How wrong she had been!

It made sense now. Of course the stone would protect itself; and had it not been surrounded by *hayasakawa*, the hallucinogenic weed?

“Shh... my dear.” The Venerable Elm was stroking Ayr’s head and comforting her back as she sobbed. “I can see tears of contrition are enough of a punishment for you, but now... do you see why it is forbidden to go there?”

Ayr understood and she wept even more.

How would her nectar ever be worthy and righteous if she disobeyed her teachers and the goddess? So close to becoming Yogini... now so far.

“Wilting Lilly was a priestess who went to the site of the sacred stone. Sadly, she followed the visions and we never saw her again. I tried to recover her. I sent the Aghari, but they failed to bring her back.”

“Wilting Lilly?” The engraving on her rucksack... She had not seen Wilting Lilly for too many days now and thought it was because she was busy somewhere on the Island.

“Yes. The Aghari reported they could not catch her, probably lost to the hunger of the desert.”

The Aghari were men of the Bandori, a special group trained in war and weapons. From birth they were raised in sworn duty to protect the Island and were loyal to death to the Venerable Elm. They were expert in all they set out to do. Surely they would have returned Wilting Lilly if they had located her.

“Forgive me, Venerable Elm...”

The Venerable Elm raised Ayr’s sikrit off her and used it to dry her face. “There is nothing to forgive... It is you who will suffer in solitude and... there is nothing I can do. You must be strong in your faith. That is all that will help. Not even *Imana*, I am afraid...”

Ayr bundled the breathy fabric into a tight ball, her fist crushing it as remorse crushed her heart. How silly and stupid she had been.

“Go now, my priestess, and tend to your studies and avoid more distraction. Your heart is in the right place, but you have much to learn of the living goddess.”

The words stung as if they were whips.

Ever since her quest Ayr had thought she was closer to the goddess than ever, but now, she was just a fool. With dashed hopes and humiliation flooding anew, her words of thanks bubbled on her lips, embarrassing her further. She closed the door and with blurred vision ran past Pollen of Lilies, not even pausing to say goodbye.

Thir'day, Day 21, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

The six wives of Maloud Fed Ayed rallied to ensure Tulascarri healed as quickly as possible.

She was not sure if this was because they wanted her to be healthy enough to leave, or healthy enough to work, for as soon as she was able to carry something they put her to labour, a kind of labour that was interminable.

She carried baskets and lifted sacks. She dug furrows and fetched water, planted seed and threshed wheat, milked goats and wove mats.

It was a world away from training soldiers and fighting battles, but every day she felt herself growing stronger. In the evenings some of the women would tend the wounds on her back, cleaning them, and dressing them with fresh herbs and oils.

Four arrows had pierced her back, shoulders and hip. Apparently only one of the arrows had broken off inside her flesh, requiring cutting; the others had been easy enough to pull out and it was a miracle that none of her internal organs had been damaged beyond healing.

“What god do you pray to, Tulascarri?” Rakha, the youngest wife, was kneeling next to Tulascarri, gently massaging oily paste onto the wounds as she lay face down on the carpet in her chamber. Now that she was strong enough to work her quarters had been moved from the tent to within Maloud’s compound and the paste was applied before sunrise.

“What gives the idea I pray at all?”

Rakha paused, hands suspended as she sat back onto her heels to stare at Tulascarri with incredulity.

“Everybody has a god. Some have *gods*. I hear some peoples have even a *goddess*. But everybody has a god. Some people worship money; some people worship hardship. But everybody has a god.”

Fingers of purpose renewed their work and Rakha’s toes splayed to grip the carpet as her feet flexed. For someone so sheltered she possessed some interesting insights.

“These... things... These tufts of hair do not bother you? We could shave them off?” Rakha was pulling one of the *shikai*, twirling it in her fingers.

Molten lava prickled through Tulascarri’s veins. To suggest such a thing was abhorrent, insulting. It was good that she was lying face down, for she did not show her outrage. With a force of will she made sure the *shikai* did not spontaneously rise into razor sharp spikes, for they would slice Rakha’s fingers off, and she did not know any different. Her insult was not intended.

Use of the Circle of Five would often cause the *shikai* to rise from their luxurious silkiness into hard points, but it was not a requirement. The ability of the Bed of Nails, as it was called, was one that came with martial training and technique, and was one more weapon in an Akiun's arsenal.

"It is not a good idea, Rakha..."

"Mekpak. It is finished." Whilst Tulascarri had been calming her flare of temper Rakha had finished and settled back again, wiping her hands. "You lie still so the paste can dry, and then I bring you food."

Tulascarri's tummy rumbled. Though meals here were far from ostentatious, they were nutritious and wholesome. In the mornings, or after a hard days' work and a hot bath, there was great reward in a good meal.

Tulascarri slowed her breathing and for a long while lay still, until she remembered Rakha's earlier question.

"Trefolkians worship two gods, typically. A male god, called Gethras, and a female, called Seisha. The evil one is called Sfarr."

Rakha seemed to recoil.

"No! A *female* god? How can this be? There is only one god – Clopax, the divinely revered tyrant and compassionate flayer of non-believers."

Tulascarri began to rise to her knees slowly. "As... you... say..."

"Why do your breasts not hang like udders?"

It was such an off-topic question that Tulascarri did not know how to respond. She paused on all fours. "I... pardon?"

Rakha knelt next to Tulascarri, her ample breasts swinging free.

Their customs were strange. Within the confines of their chambers, where no men were allowed, the women were allowed to dress, or not dress, as they saw fit. Outside, though, they were obliged to cover up completely, showing only their eyes.

“Look how they swing, but yours remain pert, as if you were standing. Granted, your breasts are too small to hang like mine, and your children will die of starvation, but they should at least sag a little. You are older than I, by many cycles. How is it you have such youth? And why do you have no hair on your blossom?” She sat back and opened her legs. “I have a bush that rivals Maloud’s beard!”

Tulascarri stifled a laugh. “Trefolkians are different to Bandori. Our bodies are superior to most.”

“You think you are better than us?” Rakha rose to her feet with a note of disgust, but she took Tulascarri’s hand and helped her stand.

“It’s not condescending, or arrogant, Rakha. It is a fact. Trefolkian bodies are resilient, and strong, and can do things that others cannot. Would *your* body have healed as quickly as mine, if you had my wounds? Just three days ago I was on a bed of leaves. Now I am much stronger.”

“I would not have had the wounds in the first place, whore!” Rakha swept into her gowns and scarfs and placed a hand on the door, but then stopped, sighing. “Sorry... I am unkind.” Turning back, she fixed her headscarf in place. “I have seen how you can walk barefoot across the hot desert sand, the sharp rocks, and gravel. Like you are wearing shoes, you do not seem to feel the earth.”

“Oh but I do, Rakha.” Tulascarri scrunched her toes. “I feel every breath of the earth, every sigh, but it brings me no pain.”

“I see the truth of it.” Only hazel circles framed with austerity were visible now, and they pierced the thin facade of Tulascarri’s humour. “But you *do* feel pain. I see you carry it deeper than the wounds on your body.” She took Tulascarri’s right arm where on the inner skin was the scar from a burn long ago. “The wounds on your body will heal. They will not even scar. But this... and that faraway stare... *They* tell me there is something inside you that will never heal.”

Fabric swished. Light flared momentarily, the door shut with a hollow accusation, and Tulascarri was back in Carnath-Isia, staring at memories unbidden, through a mist of tears unwanted.

Thir'day, Day 21, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

“Like this.” With a light rap of the hammer on the hard husk, Maloud’s son demonstrated how to crack the seed of the khabarga tree.

He watched as Tulascarri copied the move perfectly, producing a neat slit on the fist-sized seed.

“Mekpak!” he exclaimed, visibly impressed. “You know how to wield the hammer perfectly. Now we put the seed in the water for two days.” He dropped the hairy pods into a bucket of murky water, without his adoration leaving her. “Khabarga is a gift from Clopax, the ever generous and bringer of suffering. These seeds will grow into big trees from where we get the khabarga fruit. Some peoples call it ‘greenflesh’...”

“Like an abacado?”

“Yes!” His young face beamed, but then his brow creased and he stared at her feet. “But not, huh? Khabarga is much

bigger, stronger, more nutritious, and has more uses. The paste the women use on your wounds comes mainly from khabarga.”

She knew of the properties of khabarga, probably more than he or the women did but, bemused, she let his pontificating continue.

Maloud’s compound was some distance from the village, located in a sheltered oasis that was the envy of many in the district. The Bandori woman who had first tended Tulascarri was the third wife, Nafeera, and though she was only third in seniority, she was the one who ran the small farm, and the business prospered under her.

There were no men in the oasis, save the sons of Maloud, but they were banished from being within ten paces of Tulascarri. As a further measure Tulascarri was given a dress and headscarf to wear to ensure there was no temptation for the boys. She did not understand why *she* had to cover herself completely when it was the *men* who could not control themselves.

The women tried to insist she cover her feet, but this was one measure to which she would not acquiesce. They threatened her with the lash and she threatened them with Maloud. Even in his absence his authority was law.

The young man, Sekhmet Fed Maloud Fed Ayed, had been allowed near Tulascarri only when one or more of the wives were around. Although their interactions were rare, his infatuation with her had been plain from the start, constantly offering to carry her loads, bringing her bouquets, and always eager to show her things. Now he picked up the clay jar of water close to his knee and offered it to her. “Perhaps I can put the paste on for you tomorrow?”

Tulascarri swallowed her guffaw with the water. In the insane heat of the day it was welcome relief, but clearly *he* experienced warmth of a different kind. She drank slowly, formulating a response that would not bruise him, but a clanging bell spared her.

“The women call us to eat, my lady. I shall go and prepare your place.” Showering her with dust and debris he leapt to his feet and bounced down the small hill towards the compound. In contrast to the women he was permitted to wear next to nothing, but the turban was a constant. As he skipped across the boulders it began to unravel and he paused to fasten it in place again, turning to wave at her. The oldest son of Nafeera, he was entrusted with many duties, one of which was farming, and on this day Tulascarri had been sent with him to learn how to help him. Something about his innocence in just that moment reminded her of Hahn, and she hoped her little brother was alright. No doubt by now Hahn was worried about her, but it was not the first time Tulascarri had been away from him for longer than expected.

Tulascarri waved back. Sekhmet had taken to bare feet in an attempt to impress her, but was now slipping them into sandals. Harsh ground was one thing, but the admonitions of his mother were quite unnavigable.

Cursing the awkward and stifling robes she had to wear, Tulascarri assessed Maloud’s compound. With thick stone walls and heavy doors it was a small fortress built from rocks plentiful at the oasis. A channel had been built on the western side to allow the spring around which the structure was built to escape. Pausing with her feet in it, she was grateful for the wind which cooled the sweat-soaked robe and gazed south across the broad valley to the hills in the distance. Beyond them lay

another stretch of dusty ruins and beyond that, somewhere, her homeland, Trefolk. How far it seemed.

“Do your wounds trouble you?” Rakha appeared around the south-western corner, carrying a basket on her head.

“My wounds are all but sealed. This heat... is a wound on its own.” Tulascarri waited for her to cross the stream, and took pace alongside.

“It is a purification, burning away all that is false in the sight of Clopax, the ever righteous molester of orphans. Through his gaze we see ourselves cleansed. What would your pagan gods say of this? Ah but who are we to presume to know of the words of our gods?”

Tulascarri remained silent, allowing her to speak.

“You don’t like religion, do you? I see you shy away from these things. It makes you uncomfortable. Nagh hamorah, it is like this with all who are lost in the darkness and are surprised to find the light on them.”

“Religion is like a man trying to tell you about the Forest, but all he knows is trees. You seem to have something on your mind, Rakha.”

Rakha paused, and with Tulascarri’s assistance removed the basket from her head. Adjusting her head scarf she took one of the handles while Tulascarri took the other.

“My mind goes to places it should not, and I am in need of purification, surely. Nafeera will be glad to carve flesh from my back and feed it to me, of course. But I cannot help wonder why you have been sent to us?”

They reached the heavy door of the compound and turned to align with the entrance. The basket was filled with dates and Tulascarri contemplated how this woman could bear such a weight on her head, or speak so casually of being flayed.

“I have not been sent, Rakha. I was wounded. Maloud chanced upon me. That is all.”

“You would deny the will of your gods? You would deny that they have a purpose for your life?”

Entering a storage room, they hefted the basket onto a table where it would wait until after the meal. It was notably cooler here, thanks to the current of air from the many wind towers, an ingenious design.

What purpose could Gethras, Seisha, or even Sfarr have for an Akiun who could no longer wield the Sentience?

“Do not be sad.” Rakha cupped Tulascarri’s face. “Clopax, honourable father and rapist of ignorance, has brought you low, to surrender your whoring and seduction of men. He will build you up again. He will drive his manhood into your velvet and his fist into your ashenstar and when you are well enough we will go to the priests. They will flog the last demons from you, and teach you His ways.”

“I see the truth of it. There is nothing *quite* like a good flogging...”

Rakha slapped her so hard Tulascarri’s head scarf unwound. “Impertinence is the first thing they will take from you!” For a moment she blazed with an unnamed madness, but just as quickly her sweet smile returned and, taking Tulascarri’s elbow, she patted Tulascarri’s arm. “Forgive me, dear whore, but you drove me to it. I cannot watch idly while you continue to wallow in sin.”

Still nursing her cheek, Tulascarri allowed Rakha to guide her out of the room towards the women’s dining hall. Unsure whether to laugh or cry, Tulascarri took her place, prepared by Sekhmet, alone at the end of the low table and devoured her meal in silence while the wives and daughters and younger

children of Maloud ate in a great babble of grabbing hands and stuffed mouths.

She was just finishing the last drops of watered wine when a distant horn echoed through the hall.

The women froze.

“The Horn of the Forge!” Nafeera, her chin smeared with grease, seemed elated and agitated all at once.

All but the youngest stopped their eating, wiped their hands and began to bustle, replacing veils and headscarves.

“What is it?” Tulascarri stopped Rakha as she billowed past.

“The Forge, Maloud, our husband and father, returns. Thanks be to Clopax the divine donor of hate and lamentations. We must prepare for his arrival. You can go up on the walls to see, if you like? Would you like? Go. I will join you in a short while.”

She was not ungrateful to be sent to the ramparts, away from the impulsive hive of scurrying women who swarmed the compound, and marvelled once again at how alien their culture was to her.

From here she could see to the east, and appearing over the crest of the hill, with another loud peal of the horn, was the biggest Bannator Tulascarri had ever seen. Used as beasts of burden, Bannators were large and lumbering. The underside of their belly was high enough off the ground for a man to walk beneath without bending; their legs were thick and strong with broad, flat pads for feet. They had three horns that came from behind the ears and met just in front of the snout, and they were very, very strong.

“He likes you.” Rakha appeared at Tulascarri’s side.

At first she thought Rakha spoke of Sekhmet who had doted on her between orders barked by his mother during the

meal, but as Rakha juttled her chin over the ramparts, she realised it was Maloud to whom she referred.

“Why do you say that?”

“Oh... I know my husband. He gave us all strict instructions to tend you, to ensure you are fortified and strong. Clopax give me strength, I think he wants you as another wife. Of course the first wife must consent, and then the others, including me. I would not mind, if you were to turn to Clopax, and...” She leaned closer to whisper, “Share my bed occasionally.”

Tulascarri wiped her face with her fingers, trying to remove the sweat from her brow and the shock from her mind. When she took her hands away, the Bannator was close enough to see Maloud astride, and a small figure behind him. Following them was a short caravan of men on horses leading at least a dozen laden camels.

“Is that...?” Tulascarri craned out over the rampart.

“What is it? Raiders?” Rakha started muttering something in Bandori that could have been a prayer, but Tulascarri was already bounding down the stairs. “Come back, whore! We must stay in our places!”

But Tulascarri knew that tousled mop of brown hair. She knew the little body that had started to squirm down a length of rope while the Bannator still moved.

As if slung from a catapult she shot through the entrance doors, and bolted up the road towards the Bannator, past the first wife who waited patiently ahead of the others, and oblivious to their cries of outrage.

A brown blur crashed into her, gripping her waist ferociously. When he pulled away, orange orbs framed in white

with streaks of red from relief and sand glowered at her. He did his best to sound angry. “Where the Sfarr have you been?”

Tulascarri hugged him tightly again. “It is a long story, Hahn.”

Thir'day, Day 21, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

Rakha was pulling Tulascarri by the hand, leading her to the banquet hall reserved for formal gatherings. It was much larger and more lavish than the women's dining hall. Here there were high backed chairs of polished wood, an opulent and heavy table, rich carpets, furs, tapestries and ornate lamps that hung from heavy rafters.

They were being followed by a handful of servants who carried boxes of crockery and cutlery, fine porcelain, and silver.

Rakha barked instructions at the servants and then at Tulascarri. “As his new wife, you must learn to set this table properly.”

Much to the disgust of the women, Maloud insisted on taking evenmeal with Tulascarri and Hahn, which had only fuelled the rumours that he wanted her as another wife; and which were further compounded by the fact that he wished to dine in the banquet hall, and without the other wives.

A male servant, burly and stern, carried the Horn of the Forge and positioned it reverentially at the head of the table on a red velvet cloth. Carved, hollowed, and crafted from the horn of a dead Bannator, the Horn of the Forge was the sceptre of the leader of a Bannator caravan. Only a Forge may carry a horn, and it was a mark of status and authority.

When the room met Rakha's exacting appraisal she clapped her hands and the servants exited.

She squared Tulascarri's shoulders, whipped off her veil and made her open her mouth to inspect her teeth. Then she lifted each of her soles and wiped them clean of dust.

Seemingly satisfied she grunted. "You will wait here for Maloud, in this exact place. When the doors are closed and the men are seated, you may move. If he desires you, you will please him in any way he likes, and you will not complain. Do you understand?"

Tulascarri had never before tried so hard to suppress her laughter, but she nodded in a way that she hoped was suitably demure, and with disbelief watched Rakha swish from the hall, leaving her alone in austere silence.

Hahn was the first to arrive, barely minutes later, and he giggled at Tulascarri, saying she looked like a nun.

Maloud was next, followed by Sekhmet. He carried a leather tube similar to those used by cartographers and, depositing it on the floor, he closed the door to the hall.

"Now we can relax, yes?"

But his words were premature. The great doors opened and lines of servants with food enough for an army marched in. With no more noise than the clinking of plates and dishes they encircled the table, placed the delicacies, poured wine, and pulled out chairs.

Obediently, the foursome took the places they were assigned, but once the servants had left and the doors were shut again, Maloud rose, came to sit opposite Tulascarri and Hahn, and said, "*Now*... we can relax."

The Forge Maloud seemed little interested in conversation until they had finished eating, and this was perfectly acceptable

to Tulascarri. While she was still sated from her earlier meal, she watched Hahn affectionately over the rim of a glass of undiluted wine, pleased to see his appetite was as healthy as ever. She waited for his plates to empty and his chewing to slow before speaking.

“Tell me, little brother, how is it that you met Maloud?”

“He was trying to sell your sword!” Hahn glared at the Forge.

“Nagh hamorah! I was not!”

“My sword? How did you come by it?” Tulascarri had thought it was lost to the desert and was glad it had been recovered. It was no ordinary weapon.

“Thief!” Hahn shook a leg of cluckbird at Maloud, but his accusation was underscored by a smile.

“I can explain...” Maloud spoke to his son Sekhmet, who seemed confused, sending him for Calatti. The boy was smiling from ear to ear. Not only was his father home, and he was permitted to dine with him as a man, but he was able to feast with Tulascarri. He darted out quickly.

“I recovered your sword when I went past the place of the battle. It was quite by the will of Clopax, the merciful killer of widows. I was in a small village, at a smithy, trying to glean more about this strange weapon crafted of black steel and while I was there *this* young man accosted me.” He gestured at Hahn while he lifted the cartographer’s tube from the floor. “At first he was hostile, though I cannot imagine why, but when he met Gonro, I knew we could be friends.”

“Gonro?” Tulascarri took the tube from Maloud, withdrawing the elegant weapon. It was slender, slightly curved in the Akiun style of the master swordsmith Kanatana.

“His Bannator.” Hahn’s legs were swinging freely under the table, making his body bob as he smiled. “Biggest Bannator in the world!”

“That he is, my fine young friend.”

Already Tulascarri could see Maloud held her brother in high affection, but like all those who did, his mind was puzzled with the enigma that was Hahn. She could see it in the way people stared just a little too long, caught in that awkward place between intuitions and proof, when sight and mind do not concur.

“It is a fine blade, though not as fine as Wretian steel, I am sure.”

Tulascarri affectionately ran the flat of black Martmetal along a sleeve. “Not even the finest sword of master craftsmen from the province of Wret could stand against this one, Maloud. It is made of Martmetal.”

“Martmetal?” Maloud threw his hands at her. “A mythical substance.”

“Believe what you like...” Martmetal was indeed rare, and magical, and few were there who could craft such perfection. She hoped she would never need to demonstrate those qualities.

Just then Sekhmet arrived, turban askew, and presented his father with the Calatti. His words were filled with wonder when he saw the sword in Tulascarri’s hand. “You are a soldier? You are not a whore?”

Hahn’s chair fell back, dishes crashed. Over the table he flew, striking the taller Sekhmet hard and both boys fell to the ground. “*Vishuk!* You dare call my sister a whore! I will...”

But Tulascarri had him off Sekhmet, lifting him, limbs flailing, screaming into the air. “Hahn! Be still!” She stood him

on the ground and lifted the dazed Sekhmet while Maloud leaned on the back of his chair, laughing.

“Apologise, Hahn!”

“Why? He called you a whore.”

Tulascarri helped Sekhmet to his chair. “Forgive my brother, Sekhmet. He only defends my honour.”

“You... are *not* a whore?”

“I will *flatten* you!”

“Hahn!” Tulascarri checked her brother with a raised hand. “Maloud and I allowed his family to think I was a whore. It was necessary to protect me. *Mosh’na*. These people have been only kind.”

“I am... confused.” Hahn stared into a corner.

“As am I,” said Sekhmet. “But you have a punch like the kick of a mule.”

After ensuring there were no bad feelings between the boys, Tulascarri and Maloud filled them in on the details they were missing.

“Is it true?” Hahn touched Tulascarri’s back where he could feel the *shikai*. “You have lost connection to the Sentience? You can no longer use the Circle of Five?”

Sombrely, feeling like a failure, she said weakly, “I have tried.”

“But you can still fight?”

“I have not lost my training, Hahn. My body remembers. But I can no longer use the Shades, the Circle, the Change...”

“What are these terms?” Sekhmet leaned forward, but then raised his hands and addressed Hahn. “Forgive me, brother of Tulascarri, if I offended you and your sister’s honour. I shall purify myself.”

“Very well...” Hahn’s casual word might have been different had he known what it meant to perform purification. Instead, his legs were swinging again as he smiled.

“There is no need to purify yourself, Sekhmet.” Tulascarri knew from Rakha’s explanations that it was not pleasant. She looked at Maloud, imploringly. “Absolve him for my sake.”

Maloud’s soulful pride twinkled with affection. “You honour your father, my boy. I am proud. You shall not mark yourself with purification.”

Sekhmet’s chest swelled as he sat back. “But pray tell, my lady, what will you do now?”

“You could work for the Aghari,” said Hahn helpfully.

“Aghari?” Tulascarri swivelled round to read his little round face.

“More myth. Fantasy.” Maloud poured himself a cup of Calatti, and a small one for his son before passing the earthen bottle to Tulascarri.

“*Mosh’na!* They are real.” Hahn folded his arms across his chest. “I heard those men talking in the tavern.”

“Who are the Aghari, father?”

Maloud grunted and wiped his beard. “Men of the Aghar. Rumour tells of an island, a beautiful island surrounded by a sparkling lake and on this island is an order of Asde Fahdian priestesses. They serve some goddess...”

Sekhmet snickered. “What need would Aghari priestesses have of a... mercenary?” He chose his last word with a wary glance at Hahn, who graciously showed his approval.

“The Aghari are not the priestesses. The Aghari are those who protect them. Fierce warriors.”

“An Island in the desert, father?” Sekhmet rolled his eyes like his mother.

“Protected by magic...”

“I have an idea of my own.” Tulascarri waved an elegant wrist, smiling wryly at Maloud’s affectation of mystery and dismissing the idea. “It has nothing to do with magic. I have knowledge of herbs and oils...”

“You are a healer too?” Sekhmet touched her hand.

“Akiun know many things.” Hahn could not sit still and began to fidget.

“If Maloud permits it, Hahn and I will stay until my strength is full again, perhaps another month?”

“Mekpak. I shall permit it, of course. You will come with me on my rounds and you will learn of the Bandori ways.”

“Mother and the others will not be pleased, father.” Sekhmet’s voice lacked the concern his words might have conveyed. Equally amused, Maloud gripped his son’s shoulder affectionately. “You will come with us, too, yes?”

Sekhmet could barely prevent himself jumping with joy. “May I carry a sword?”

“Not yet, my son, but we shall begin looking for a horn for you.” Addressing Tulascarri with mirth on his face he added, “Perhaps you can train my men to fight better, too?”

Tulascarri inclined her head. “It will be my honour.” Then she winked at him. “And I shall also teach your son how to polish his horn.”

Sixthday, Day 30, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

Life with Maloud and his men was markedly different to living with his wives. Though she was required by their custom

to be completely covered, this was easily achieved by wearing her Swath, properly repaired and cleaned.

At first the men laughed about a woman being dressed as a man and they teased her heavily, but as she knocked them on their backs one by one the insults gave way to respect.

They visited small villages and larger settlements, collecting and delivering. Every day was hot and heavy labour but every night there was a feast.

A week ago they had celebrated Hahn's ninth Tribesday. He was slowly coming to appreciate that on this day, it was his progenitors who were honoured, whilst simultaneously his arrival in this world was celebrated.

Gonro, the enormous Bannator with his lumbering intelligence and playful humour, crept deep into Tulascarri's heart. Though incredibly strong, and ever mindful that he was towing two massive wagons, many were the times when a wet and playful tongue would surprise Tulascarri, knock her to the ground, and leave her cursing about having to wash out the mud, for he never left her dry.

On one evening she and Hahn climbed to the top of a rock formation, racing each other to reach the pinnacle.

"I doubt any of Maloud's men could climb this rock like we just did." Hahn was catching his breath, watching the men of whom he spoke moving about the encampment, some distance away. "Boots do not grip like toes."

"Be kind, Hahn. They do not have Trefolkian feet."

"They *look* the same?"

"Of course, but we know different, don't we?"

"They will sleep well tonight."

"Maloud asked that I train them. I shall keep my end of the bargain."

Hahn pulled a pack off his back. “You seem somewhat... lighter, sis.”

“Despite the dates and all the meat we have been eating?” Tulascari pinched her brother’s tummy because he too had put on a little layer.

“No, that’s not what I mean.” He took a seat on the rock and offered her some of the dates she was speaking of, and some water.

“I know...” She remained standing but turned briefly to check that he was not too close to the edge, pleased that his orange eyes were shining so brightly.

The wind brought the sound of Gonro’s snoring to their ears, by now a familiar sound, but it also smelled of a storm that was gathering.

“Heavy weather comes. We should be sure the animals are secure before we go to the arms of Morphas.” She took one of the dates from him and lowered into a squat. “I do not need the Sentience to tell me it will be rich with lightning. These very rocks bristle with the charge of stormvine.”

“Then we should climb down too.”

“In time.”

“Something vexes you?”

Hahn knew her well. “You may see me as lighter, but I am still very lost, Hahn. I feel I have no power against the wind. When we escaped Carnath-Isia...” Her voice cracked. She had thought she could speak of it without misting over, but she had been wrong. Those memories and horrors would never leave her. “When we left... we wandered. We staked our path. Now... I do not know what that path is. I... Should we journey to the Sage?”

The horizon was gold fading to blue, and the first stars were already in plentiful number and they pulled Hahn's contemplation. Distant thunder murmured over words he did not speak, and she knew he did not wish for such a trip. It was very, very far, in a land of cold weather and short days.

He sighed, pushing the dates away. "I must go where you go, sis, but I do not like it. It does not feel right, my misgivings aside."

The air turned cold and shadows flickered on the floor of the desert.

Perhaps he was right, but ominous billows with bilious bellies were building a rapid offence and she ushered him towards the edge. Matching the speed of her descent to his, she checked she was close enough to grab him if he fell, watching his hands and feet flex and grip as they dextrously guided him towards the ground, and catching him as he let go of the final ledge. It was a short walk back to the encampment but they had to lean into the wind, and were relieved when they were finally beyond the sting of the sand.

Joining Maloud and some of the men in the larger tent, they listened to the expressions of amazement over the gale, barely able to hear over the thunder and the rain that clattered on the tent.

"Hahn!" Tulascarri grabbed his arm.

He turned, knowing what she would say.

"The animals!"

"Stay here!"

She left without waiting for a reply, instantly soaked by the squall. Sheets of water obscured the horizon and stung her hands and feet worse than the sand. The ground had turned to rivers and was slippery, but her bare feet dug in and she

marched forward, testing each step before she transferred her weight.

Though corralled, the animals were in an enclosure that was hardly more than a wobbly rock wall with a wooden gate. Only when their number did not tally did she realise one of the mules was missing. As if in confirmation the gate flew open, banged on the rock, and amazingly it held.

Listening for cries of distress, she closed the gate, but with the noise of the storm she could not hear much and there was little point in searching for the animal. It was long gone, had maybe scurried into a hidey hole, or at least she hoped it would.

To Dranaga with the stupid beast! Why did it have to be so stupid? She turned back towards the promise of shelter but she could not shake the sense of duty.

Duty?

She challenged the roiling sky as if expecting to see the face of Seisha herself. The patron goddess of all Akiun, she was supposed to watch over all life on the planet. “You take away my powers and now you speak to me of *duty*?”

Forked white strobos froze the water in place, mottled dots and shadows; an almighty series of rolling crashes followed, and then there was a moment of calm, and she thought she heard a sound.

“*Vama ferral*!” She turned back towards the noise, cautious with her footing, shivering with the wind that tore through her Swath with icy blades; and a madness of anger possessed her. Up the hill she battled, shouting at Seisha with every step. Nobody but the goddess could hear her and they were overdue for a chat.

Why had she abandoned her? Why had she left her to die? Why had she allowed all those she loved in Carnath-Isia to die?

The storm did not relent and showed no mercy save to mask her frustration and swallow her condemnations. Stormvine coruscated caustically, crackling, flashing, taunting her in a ceaseless mocking. It threatened to blow her over but she would have her words out and by the gods, she would be hoarse before she relented. She picked up rocks and threw them into the rain. She waved her fists until her hair flew free of her Swath and in mid scream the storm instantly, inexplicably, stopped.

She had forgotten why she had been marching up the hill but the unexpected calm reminded her and she heard the mule clearly. It was close by, less than twenty paces, and when she reached it, her emotions twisted.

Crying pitifully, it had been burned by the stormvine and close to death. Two of its legs had snapped and there was bright blood trickling from its snout.

She felt sorry she had been unkind, apologised to the creature, but it was oblivious to her contrition.

Her whole body was shaking with remorse and the realisation that it could very well have been her here, and she was thrown into a pit of guilt and shame; and glanced about to see if there was somebody, anybody, who knew what she was supposed to do... for she knew not. Why was Seisha so cruel with her silence when she needed her the most?

And then there was a peace, a serenity, and words drifted to her through the mists of memory. Was she not Akiun? Was she not a Guardian of the Forest, and was it not her oath to protect Mother Forest and be her instrument?

The insanity left her and she lay a hand on the animal's head, speaking from the Akiun creed reverently as her sword glided from the scabbard on her back.

The Southern Rune

“Guardian of the Forest and a voice for Life shall I be; Treasure the Sentience and the Circle in me”.

Chapter 4

Fifthday, Day 41, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

“It’s been three weeks now, Tulascarri, and I have discovered nothing that works.”

Originally the chamber had been assigned to Hahn as a bedroom, but now it bore closer semblance to a laboratory. The tiny cot was shoved to one side and a large bench dominated, laden with books and bottles, implements and instruments. Something foul was bubbling over a flame, and Hahn glared at the contents accusingly.

He only had nine cycles and Tulascarri was ever puzzled at how he knew so much about potions. His studies in the Trefolkian Way had barely started when they had fled Carnath-Isia. When asked he simply shrugged and said, “I just *know*.”

Tulascarri opened the door and unlatched the coverings over the windows, welcoming the cool breeze that dispersed the noxious odours. Flipping over a crate she sat, fanning herself with a piece of folded parchment.

“Did you ever meet Master Grun, at the Akiun school?”

“No. I mean I saw him, heard him speak, but I never met him personally.”

“He was a great man. A great teacher, and an even greater Akiun.” It took effort to repress the painful memories.

“He was *your* teacher.” Using a cutting board on the table, Hahn wiped his hands free of a black goo.

“He taught me, among many things, the secret of Seru.”

Hahn blinked at her, his face brightening as he anticipated a good story and came to sit at her feet. "I am listening."

"Seru was a great Master, too. But his love for Bathcus was greater than his love for Akiun, ultimately."

"He was a priest then, because he worshipped the god of wine?"

"No, he was a drunkard, a liar, and a cheat. A scoundrel, but an honourable Akiun. He was Master Grun's teacher, and he discovered a way for the body to expel, reject, or even be immune to certain poisons. Master Grun taught me the secret of Seru."

"Then you can rid your body of the poison, and clear your Life Seed!" Hahn was on his feet, bouncing, but then stopped. "But you would have done that by now... would you not?"

Tulascari's shoulders sagged. "As part of the teaching you learn about various poisons, the most feared of which is called *kaigeb shemool*."

"A mother's sorrow..."

"Because to lose connection to the Sentience is like a mother who has lost a child and there is no greater loss. And Master Grun taught me there is but one cure, the one I told you about, and there is no other."

"There *must* be. There *has* to be. Master Grun may have been a great master but he was not Gethras, or Seisha, or Sfarr. He did not know *everything*... There must be a way other than to die in the sun."

"You have worked for three weeks, and nothing you have brewed has cured me. I know you will continue working, but in a short while it will be time for us to prepare to leave. Were you successful in...?"

"Looting Kevorkai's treasury?"

“Shh! Hahn! Not so loud. Somebody will hear.” Tulascari kicked the door closed.

Hahn giggled. “Of course I was. It took several trips of course, but the tunnel we stumbled on and the hole we dug served the purpose. I feel good that we stole Kevorkai’s treasure after he betrayed you.”

“Small compensation. If I ever do retrieve the Sentience, I shall place his head on a spike.”

Hahn crossed to the table and picked up a knife. “Or I can brew a potion to cause him to die slowly... and painfully.”

“I have no doubt. But the treasury?”

“Yes, I took it back to the cavern with the rest. I seem to have left my shortsword there, too.”

“*Shatsaloon*. If you had your shortsword Sekhmet would probably be nagging his Insem, and after travelling with them I think Sekhmet is better suited to use a staff. You made sure the traps were in place?”

He whispered now. “Nobody will find it, and if they do, they won’t emerge alive. You know that cavern is almost full. We have enough money for several lives.”

“You know Trefolkians can live for four hundred cycles, don’t you?”

“Exactly!” He stabbed the air with the blade, making a swishing sound.

“Then when we leave we will go back to Trefolk, and I shall open an Apothecary.”

“I thought you were going to be a Healer for the Bandori?”

“My green irises mark me as an outcast among the Bandori, and I will not convert to their religion. No... we go to Trefolk. For now, though, I must go to the village. Do you wish to come with me?”

Hahn grunted and pulled a grimace. “It is cool in here, and I have some things to do still. You go. I will see you at evenmeal.”

Tulascari left the door open, and savoured the cool stone and corridors before entering the stables. The heat of Cirilius, or the Eye of Clopax, depending on which province one was in, would soon peak over the horizon and blast the earth. It was best to reach the village and return before the heat of the day.

Opening the inner door to the stables, she fastened her head scarf and moved quietly through the stalls, whispering greetings at the horses who nickered in her direction, but they had just received their feed and otherwise ignored her. Aside from their munching, the barn was silent.

A snap, a shadow shifted. She jumped, whirling around, but it was just a bird and with a squawk it flapped to the rafters above.

Cursing the head scarf because it limited her peripheral vision, she tried to wipe the material further back from her face, but with little effect. At least her Swath allowed her to see, but it had disappeared mysteriously and she reminded herself to ask Maloud about it when she returned. For now, at least, the capacious abaya was more appropriate for the village.

In the tackle room she selected a comfortable saddle and lifted it with ease. Some time ago it had been a burden, but the exercise of the last few weeks, along with the steady nutrition, had returned her to full strength, and it was a happiness to be lithe and agile again.

The saddle was bulky, and she decided to take it to the stall and return for the bridle. Gently nudging the door open with her toes she stepped into the half-light.

Something moved. A figure in black. There was a sharp pain on her head and a cloth was clamped over her mouth.

She caught a sweet fragrance before everything went dark.

Sixthday, Day 42, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

The splash of water made her choke. She tried to sit up but could not.

Moving her head and limbs she realised she was tied fast to some kind of device, or platform. Above her, suspended from four poles, was a black tarpaulin.

It was dark and a cold wind pulled shivers from her naked body and splayed limbs.

“Where am I? What have you done?” She could sense the presence of somebody just out of sight.

“You are a long way from the compound of Maloud,” said a voice, heavy with the Bandori accent. “They will not save you.”

“What do you want with me? What have I done?”

“If you could answer the second question, you would know the answer to the first.” A man with broad shoulders, carrying a lantern, appeared above her. He was clean shaven and his triangular face was scarred. A strange insignia was tattooed on his chin.

“Kevorkai has sent you.”

“Kevorkai? No. That usurper and his army lie dead in the desert, as do thousands of *my* people.” His eyes narrowed as he added, “Only one, the Dark Wyrder Tulascarri, escaped.”

“But...”

“Now my task is fulfilled.”

“So this is revenge. Kill me now, and have done with it.”

“You do not value your life, the life of your brother?”

“What have you done with Hahn? I will slit you from balls to brains if you have harmed him.”

“*Shatsaloon*. He is safe. He looks for you, but will not find you. *You* are with the Aghari now.”

“Aghari? So you do exist as Hahn said.”

“Indeed.”

“But I have done no harm to your priestesses, why do you seek my life?”

“Harm, yes. This you *have* done. So you will atone for your sins. The goddess will decide if you live.”

“Goddess? Which goddess?” Tulascarri heard him walking away, heard him mount a horse, and heard the hooves beating until she realised it was only her heart.

Firstday, Day 43, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

Apthar emidranaga - the breath of the underworld.

It was the term Trefolkians used to describe the heat of the desert; the kind of heat so intense that it draws water from the eyes even when closed.

She struggled until her skin bled, hoping the blood would render her bindings slippery enough to escape, but they were not. Some were rope, some were chains, and there were irons clasped on her wrists and ankles. She fought with all her strength, well into the cold hours of the night, and until the pain made her pass out; and that pain woke her, shivering with cold, and with angered breath in white clouds she opened the wounds again.

Retreating within herself she focussed her mind in a deep meditation, but the baking sun brought a thirst she could not escape from, and she grew weak and desperate.

That night she thought she would freeze to death, shivering uncontrollably, which opened the scabs and the bonds bit deeper still.

On the second day she screamed for help until the searing sun slew her scream in dust. Her skin felt blistered and her tongue turned to sand.

A rocking sensation, and pain in her loins brought her mind to the surface and if she could have, she would have wept.

A man, naked below the waist, was straddling her, washing her soiled groin.

“Take my body,” she wheezed. “Set me free.”

He leaned close to her face. “I have *had* your body. Only the goddess can set you free.”

Biting her tongue hard she spat what little mud she could gather in his face, but he inverted a canteen of water on his head, wiped it off, and laughed as she fought her bonds.

Her heart raged in her ears as his horse galloped away.

Once more she drifted on the edge of oblivion, this time begging Seisha to take her.

Thír'day, Day 45, of the Trefolkían Month of
Stara, 1626 ODT

Cool.

It was a cool breeze on her. Not cold, not scorching; comfortable, as if coming off a lake on a spring day. She could smell mouldering dust overlaid with incense, and could hear the distorted echoes of dripping water.

The tarpaulin was gone. In its place was the roof of a cave. The bonds were gone and she had been laid on a comfortable bed inside a cell of iron bars. Though weak, she felt her body moving instinctively towards a bowl of broth close by. It was cold and she swallowed each mouthful whole, but after only a few gulps she felt her stomach twist and lurch and the bowl crashed as she threw herself aside, retching.

Too fast, she told herself, willing her trembling limbs to push away from her own vomit. Rolling over, she lifted a mug of water and sipped it slowly. She counted off the six days of the week, the names of the twelve sons and daughters of Gethras, the five elements of the Circle of Five, then tried the broth again, taking time to chew, time to let it settle. Thankfully the bowl had not shattered, but it had tipped over, and she scooped the food off the floor.

When the food was finished and the water was gone she felt some of her strength return and she could stand. Holding onto the bars of the cell she noticed that her wounds had healed, somehow, and she had been cleaned.

Searching beyond the small room, she could see it was at the end of a passage that curved away to the right. Flickering light, presumably from a torch, pitched shadows to dance and sway on the uneven walls.

Movement. She jerked her head to one side, backing away from the bars.

“Forgive my intrusion, child of Seisha, but I see you are awake.”

A tall woman emerged from the darkness, a side tunnel perhaps. From the light of her lantern Tulascarri could see long white hair, deep blue eyes in an ovoid face with a dimpled chin and pale skin. Her feet were bare with elegant toes and she

wore a thin, delicate transparent robe that drifted about her like silken wings.

“I am Leaf on the Wind, priestess of the Island of Athiera. I believe you are Tulascarri, the mercenary.”

Tulascarri accepted a fresh plate of food from her. Though it was laden with meat she doubted it would be sufficient.

“I am,” she said between mouthfuls.

“You are a woman of extraordinary beauty. It is hard to believe you are so deadly.” The Asde Fahdian woman’s voice was gentle, with a slight accent that made it sound almost musical.

“Why am I here?”

The Asde Fahdian stepped closer, laying a hand on one of the cross bars, her movements fluid and sensual. Her elegant fingers were sprinkled with freckles and a fragrant attar wafted from her skin. “It is a question all of us ask, and those who ask it early in life are blessed with answers. But only the true seeker will be rewarded with true purpose.”

Tulascarri was surprised by the smile that curved her own lips. “I meant why have you brought me here? Did you rescue me from those men?”

“Forgive me. I answered you with Spirit, when your question was of Earth. For your answer, which you will have soon, you must speak with Ayr of Whispers. She is in communion now, and cannot be disturbed.” Softly she reached through the bars and cupped Tulascarri’s left breast with a warm hand. “Please, do not pull away. No harm will come to you. I mean only to give you welcome.”

She seemed hurt.

Who was this woman who so freely became intimate?

Tulascarri knew much about Asde Fahdians. Perhaps the strangest and most reclusive of all peoples under the Emperor, they were a fair race of only women. When they wished to procreate a woman would choose a mate and one of them would cocoon, metamorphose into a male, and after a child was conceived, would slowly return to being female. This was perhaps the main reason why they were so reclusive; and probably why they favoured the desert, a place where outsiders were less likely to venture.

Common Asde Fahdians had little interaction with the world beyond their borders. All the Asde Fahdians that Tulascarri had come across were haughty, looking down on others. They had strict cultural norms and were reserved to the point of prudishness; nothing like this woman, Leaf on the Wind.

“Ah, I see it now.” The creamy line of her high cheekbones lifted a little. “I am unlike any Asde Fahdian you have ever met.”

“It seems you can read my mind...” Tulascarri swelled back into the woman’s hand. “Are you a Weaver?”

Her laugh was light, and it echoed in the cave. “No, I am neither Weaver nor Wyrder, but the goddess has blessed me with sight into sight, to a degree.” Now she touched Tulascarri’s face with a soulful stare. “You have spilled so much blood, yet you are still so innocent. I see now why the goddess has chosen you.”

“Your goddess...?”

“Athiera, is her divine and blessed name. She shares many traits with *your* goddess, Seisha. Perhaps the two are sisters of a sort? Our Order often debates such things.” Still smiling, she withdrew into the shadows, leaving a waft of perfume.

“Do not leave, priestess.” Tulascarri extended a hand beyond the bars. “I have...”

“Many questions, I know. But be patient, you will have answers soon.”

“And clothing?”

“Are you cold?”

Tulascarri blinked, her lips open but silent. “I... uh... no?”

“Then there is no need.”

The pool of light swayed away into the shadows to the light spip-spap of bare soles on smooth rock and Tulascarri was left holding a plate of questions and bewilderment.

Thír'day, Day 45, of the Trefolkían Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

Two figures possessed of purpose marched through the passage with no sound but the clink of weapons. Though still shrouded in shadow, already she knew the uniform. She did not recognise the first man but she could not forget the face of the second.

Instinctively she desired retribution, and her cheeks flushed with anger, but she checked herself. There were too many questions and too much confusion for her to be entitled to cast any sort of judgement on their fate.

They wore clothing similar to that she had worn when commanding Kevorkai's army; black trousers and tops that were designed to hug the body as much as possible. Over this they wore leather breastplates. With soft soled boots they moved quietly, hands on their swords, stopping just outside the cage.

For long moments they stared at her, their faces ponderous, as if they could not quite decide on what she was, but there was no mistaking their displeasure at seeing her alive.

Curious.

This was inconsistent with the sense she had from Leaf on the Wind. She had thought, perhaps erroneously, that these men worked for the priestesses. Were the Aghari not guardians of the Island, after all?

The first man was older. He had traces of grey in his beard, and he walked with a slight limp. The rapist had a scar across his neck that begged to be opened again, and his beard was cropped short. They both had square faces, brown eyes, and broad shoulders; brothers no doubt.

“The goddess indeed moves in mysterious ways,” said the younger one. “If it were up to us, you would be food for vultures now.”

“You were not sent by the priestesses?” Tulascarri neared the bars to where she could smell them, but they had no scent that was easily discernible.

“We had family in the battle with Kevorkai.” The older one’s voice was a deep baritone, not unpleasant. “You were to die as they did, without mercy, under the sun, like them.”

“Then why the tarpaulin?”

“It was supposed to be slow, a fitting death for a sorceress.”

A sorceress? They thought she was a Wyrder?

This was consistent. The man who had captured and bound her had said that the Dark Wyrder had escaped. Because her name sounded so much like ‘Dumasarri’ she had thought the reference a minor confusion. However, while the *priestesses* seemed to know who she was, *these men*, too, thought she was the Dark Wyrder.

But that meant...

The fingers on one of Tulascari's hands twitched.

She barely heard the words that followed.

"Yes. We know who you are. When we learned you had been rescued and nursed back to health, we captured you, and took you to die as you should. You have no kindling in the cell. Your magic is useless here."

"And besides," the younger one grinned, "If you do not do as we say, your brother will die. We have him now."

At the mention of Hahn she snapped back to the present. She needed more time to deduce what had happened. The implications of their divine ignorance had thrown her mind into a tumble and kicked her heart to race. Using those symptoms as part of her ruse she feigned fear.

"No... please... not my brother. Kill me if you must, but spare him. He is but a young boy."

Self-satisfaction coloured their disdain. It was a typical reaction of the self-righteous, and just as a spark could be fanned to flame, it could be blown into hubris; but more importantly such people, unlike Kevorkai had been, were predictable.

She knew what would happen next. Almost as if she had written the words for them to read out loud, they began to threaten and berate.

Sweet Seisha they took their time to leave!

If gloating had been Calatti they would be waving like reeds!

For an eternity they droned about the excruciating promise of pain, lashings, peppering their threats with blunt references to torturing her brother. Only when they started to repeat themselves did they spit at her, curl their lips, and put their

backs to her, leaving her, she assumed, to contemplate the terror of her predicament.

Turning back to the mattress she finally had a moment to absorb the miraculous.

Confusion gave way to joy as she realised she could feel power surging through her body once more; but the joy bowed to a sense of profundity, like she had felt that night of the storm when the mule had been struck by the stormvine.

Was the hand of Seisha at work? Had she reclaimed her child?

Despite the questions, and her crisis of faith, drowsiness threatened to overwhelm her and her tummy screamed for food.

Hahn.

From the way the men jerked their heads in reference to him she sent out her mind, revelling in the familiar sensation, and let it wander through what was revealed to be an extensive cave system.

It did not take long to discern the young heartbeat and she breathed her apprehension into stillness.

It was strange how richly comforting the mattress had become in such a short time, and she lay down to contemplate the wonder of her predicament.

The Sentience woke her well before the shadows of the men touched the cage and she pretended to be distraught, gripping the bars in a way that she hoped communicated how much power they had over her.

From here it would be easy to grab the men and stamp their foreheads with iron. She could escape quickly, but she really should be thanking them.

“You have had enough time to wallow in your pity, sorceress.” The older brother regarded her from under one continuous eyebrow. “Now you will hear us or you will suffer once more.”

Tulascarri decided it was time to find more answers and relinquished her role as the vanquished. With legs crossed and back straight she took the cold stone.

“Then tell me what it is you want.”

The older man seemed surprised that her demeanour had changed so abruptly and his feet shifted back a little. For a moment he seemed unsure what to say.

“The priestess, Ayr of Whispers, needs your help to recover something that was taken. Fulfil this task, and your brother will be released unharmed.”

“What is it that has been stolen?”

“The priestess will tell you. We want your agreement before we go any further.”

“Why did you rape me?”

The younger man’s face twisted into a smile.

“What is this?” The older man turned on the younger.

“She was supposed to *die*, Sabal!” The younger one held up his hands, stepping back. “You said yourself she deserved to be treated like a whore!”

Sabal released the grip on his brother’s breastplate and spat on the ground, once again confirming that they had not known what might happen when she had been tied in the desert.

“Agreed! I’ll do what you want.”

Her heart was racing. She had fallen asleep earlier, before completing her meditation, but the revelation came to her now as the men argued. Had she not, in her darkest hour, asked Seisha for a sign? These men had wanted her dead, and yet they

tried to kill her in the very way that would give her life. Though it would be easy to escape and return to Maloud, there was... there *must* be a reason why she was here.

Dare she hope?

“You... agree?” Sabal seemed incredulous.

Tulascarri rose from her cross-legged position. “When do we leave?”

Chapter 5

Fourthday, Day 46, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

Dear goddess, was she doing the right thing? Were the visions real, or part of what the Venerable Elm had told her would happen? Had she lost her mind?

After her meeting with the Venerable Elm, Ayr of Whispers had sought the comfort of solitude. She had moved her home, a simple domed structure called a *domu* to the northern arm of the Island, far from the Northern Rune of course, lest she truly go mad, but far enough from the other priestesses.

She was in disgrace. They knew that, and they would leave her alone to atone for her disobedience.

It was not long after that the visions began. At first she had awakened at dawn to hear a cry for help. She had risen to investigate and encountered nobody. The next morning she had embarked on a walking meditation through the forest, pulled south by some mysterious force and when she stopped, realised she was on her way to the sacred site of the Southern Rune. Weeping all the way back to her *domu* she had fallen asleep on her bed, only to be roused some time later by the cry for help again.

There was nobody to talk to, nobody who shared her grief and anguish and she felt in danger of being lost forever.

That was when Leaf on the Wind had found her. She was a kind and gentle Initiate, and said she had been a friend of Wilting Lilly. She said she had known Wilting Lilly with a depth she had never shared with anybody and they were not just

celebrants of the Rites, they were lovers. Leaf on the Wind said that Wilting Lilly had not been mad. Until she left the Island she was of sound mind and body, and had been so possessed of her conviction to recover the sacred stone that not even Leaf on the Wind could stop her.

Ayr of Whispers had listened patiently, but ultimately had not been convinced. The Venerable Elm was clear on what would happen after visiting the site and all that Ayr could hope for was that this malady would pass in time.

But the next evening, when the moons were high, the forest grew hushed; quiet as if a predator stalked its prey through shadow dappled leaves, and Ayr had been visited by a woman so rapturous of beauty she thought she was the goddess herself. Had it not been that Leaf on the Wind had seen her too, she might have disbelieved her senses.

The lady of beauty had said she would send somebody to help, she would send somebody who would guide Ayr on her path to the stone.

This time Ayr could not rationalise the experience and relegate it to her madness. Instead, she began to question the Venerable Elm's certitude, and Ayr's lethargy had been fired.

Leaf on the Wind had a friend, another Initiate who had contact with the Aghari. This friend, Amber of the Dawn, was a woman of rapacious appetite for the Rites and was fiercely devoted to the Island. She helped oversee the crop fields and she too had noticed a change in the air of the Island, but only in the south. She had not been willing to come forward, but when Ayr and Leaf spoke to her some time after sharing communion, the blue lady appeared again to all three.

“You are thinking of that time when the blue lady appeared to me and you and Leaf on the Wind?”

Knocked from her reverie, Ayr welcomed the voice. The lissom curves of Amber of the Dawn appeared on the opposite wall of the embankment, gently trailing her fingers over the thin trunk of a paperbark sapling and pausing on the edge of the wall, strong dextrous toes gripping the stone.

She spread her arms out in one of the *athanic* stances and inhaled, gazing upwards, demonstrating what Ayr was to do. “Open the heart, Ayr. Your energy will not be free if you sit all closed up.”

From her slouch Ayr straightened, relaxing her shoulders, feeling better as Amber had said she would; and she smiled lightly, her brow easing.

“See?” Amber settled into a gentle squat, pushing her knees open with her elbows, adoring the pink flesh of her petals. With one hand she began to casually stroke herself as if running her fingers over the strings of a lyre and her voice turned to cream. “You are not mad, Ayr of Whispers, and you know in your heart what you do is right. Why do you fret so, on such a... divine morning?”

Ayr wanted nothing more than to be rid of her burden, but how could she express her heart when she had not the words.

“How do I speak when my mind cannot understand what is in my heart?”

Amber of the Dawn sat down with one knee still raised and one leg dangling off the wall where her toes flexed and bunched. She leaned on one hand, crooning lightly as she coaxed liquid velvet from succulent lips. “You should not over think this.”

Her words were slow, the lazy sounds plump with promise. Shimmering locks draped across high cheekbones and a sharp nose in a manner that spoke of carefree days in the sun and Ayr

was entranced by the graceful yet economical rise and fall of her arm, rigid fingers serenaded by raptured breath. Sturdy thighs clamped and Amber's crimson throat vibrated, the tremble extending into her body, her limbs, even her hair and toes.

Charmed from the soft blanket, Ayr took Amber by the hand and invited her from the stone to the quilt-covered grass and together they lay down.

"Am I truly doing the right thing, Amber? In a short while I will meet this 'warrior' that the blue lady has sent to us and I am afraid."

Amber turned Ayr onto her belly and rubbed her back, comforting her with gentle kisses as her fingers slid towards her flower. Ayr felt her knees part and her hips rise as the warm and tender touch penetrated her moisture and travelled the silk within. Her own hands slid under her waist and began to caress the mysterious little button of pleasure that thrilled her so that even her earth-stained soles tingled and her toes curled with praise.

"We are committed, brave priestess. Know that there are *others* on the Island who share our feelings on the sacred stone, though they are in the minority. We carry their hopes too."

Amber's hand was wet with honey and her digits slipped upwards, carrying the sweet dew and, depositing it on the ashenstar, began a sensual massage that was entirely new to Ayr.

All her senses ignited, responding first with apprehension, then relaxing as the point of the finger began to work in small circles, spreading the warmth, exciting the flesh until the finger became two, rubbing, massaging, gentle at first, then a little harder, pressing inwards until she could feel the pressure

building, feel it pushing slowly but deliberately until her skin felt engorged, and then with a firm insistence the fingers penetrated her. The digits slid in, deeper, deeper, her ashenstar yielding, opening like a virgin bloom.

As her own hands trilled her bud of pleasure she surrendered to this new sensation, trusting in her friend, and trusting in her goddess.

She groaned involuntarily and in a most unladylike way, but this was no time for deportment and she was seduced by the intensity of the heat within. She felt how the tension in her began to melt away and her body relaxed and wanted more, opening wider, almost greedily as the fingers pulled out a little, then slid back in, then out, always slowly, building into a gentle rhythm like a lazy drum; and she felt her petals filling, throbbing, yearning. It was a feeling of being gratified, an emptiness that till now she had been unaware of and as the surge of ecstasy turned her twitches to shudders she felt the root roar loosed from her belly and erupt from her throat.

Her mind was swimming in waters of... liberation! Her body was drifting in skies so vast she could see no horizon. How was it that she could feel such release, such deep surrender? In the blissful afterglow of the mantra it was as if the goddess had sent her another sign; it was like the goddess wished to penetrate her with her guidance and it was fitting that Ayr should submit, even as she had surrendered to Amber of the Dawn.

Surely Amber of the Dawn was a Yogini, with such skill and insight.

“Not a Yogini yet, priestess,” sighed Amber. “But I have had much time to think on some of their teachings. I am

pleased your spirits are lifted. Would you minister the same to me?"

But Leaf on the Wind interrupted them with a call, arriving shortly. "We must ready. The warrior will join us soon."

With a note of disappointment, Ayr of Whispers kissed Amber of the Dawn lightly on the cheek. "Will you join us?"

"I shall complete the First Rite. You go and we can commune when you are done."

It was uncommon to break communion and Ayr of Whispers felt a deep regret for she wished to return the gift she had received, but there would be time for this at a later hour. It was important that she meet with the mysterious warrior, and she followed Leaf on the Wind, slowly, her body still tingling with pleasure.

Leaf on the Wind had prepared a table with food and drink on the stone platform under the gnarled wisteria tree and, with nothing to occupy her hands, Ayr of Whispers was not sure how she should act or behave. This was the first time she had interacted with anybody outside the Island other than the Aghari. Trying not to fidget she stood waiting alongside Leaf, expecting to see the guards emerge with the warrior in chains, and jumped in fright when only the warrior appeared, bounding up the stairs. With alarm she and Leaf recoiled.

In the weeks that followed Ayr of Whispers would come to reflect that it was not simply a fearful reaction; but there was an element of wonder and curiosity. The Yogini's taught that the mind comprehends faster than any pupil, and what Ayr perceived of such explosive power fascinated and enchanted her.

"Fear not, priestesses." The warrior touched her temple where soft auburn turned gold in the light, then her lips so full

and red, and swept her arm downwards in a gentle curve, palm turned up. There was a scar there, on that arm; but where some would see imperfection in her skin, which was otherwise perfect and smooth, Ayr of Whispers discerned a sadness, a sacrifice, and an element of melancholy.

“Antsun’alun,” said the warrior. “May your roots grow deep, and your branches never stand in shadow.”

The warrior wore her sikrit awkwardly, like a novice, but she was unaware, and Ayr thought surely such covering could not please the goddess because under the fabric was a body of primal power, a predatory confidence; her breasts were pert and firm and showed no evidence of sagging; her stomach was like a washboard and Ayr saw tones of definition in the musculature she never even knew existed. Her feminine mound was smooth, slightly rounded and her petals neatly tucked. Her thighs were ripples of strength covered in bronzed skin and her feet with their high arches and elegant toes that begged to be adored were the most perfect Ayr had ever seen.

“Where are the guards?” Leaf on the Wind had moved in front of Ayr, a protective gesture that warmed Ayr’s heart. She knew this warrior could slay them as carelessly as the sun parts the mist, but she would die in defence if she had to.

“I have allowed them to rest from their duties for a short while. I am sure they will join us very soon, though *they* may not be as pleased to see me as you.” The warrior’s voice carried authority, and her tone was buoyant.

“You will not harm us?” Leaf on the Wind relaxed somewhat, though Ayr knew she would need a deep massage to ease the knots from her shoulders.

The warrior’s oval face moved slowly from left to right with the trace of upturned lips. “These men, and you, have saved

my life. Though they sought to kill me at first, your intervention was timed, as if by Seisha herself, and I am... restored." Now the trace became pronounced and she lay flat hands on her belly, inspecting her navel through the thin fabric as if seeing it for the first time.

But what were these words? She seemed indebted to Ayr and Leaf. "Intervention? Take your life? I do not... understand."

The warrior seemed to inspect her; and those eyes, those eyes of emerald so deep and bright they put the forest to shame, seemed to shine straight through her, lighting the deepest recesses of her mind, comprehending her darkest thoughts so that Ayr felt exposed, vulnerable, and yet somehow excited, and a hungry flame sparked within her.

"I am Tulascarri, my lady. The men who will be joining us, men of the Aghari, captured me, and were in the process of roasting me alive in the desert when you arrived... when you must have arrived, and rescued me, somehow. No doubt they are very obedient to you."

"N... no." Leaf on the Wind lay a hand on Ayr's shoulder and her face was filled with concern. They both suspected what must have transpired but neither could speak the words.

"No?" The warrior seemed disturbed, her gaze travelling. "You did not intervene? In any way?"

"No." Leaf on the Wind gestured at the table, but the warrior did not move.

"Then how did I come to be here?"

In the briefest but deepest burst of insight Ayr of Whispers knew it had been the goddess, working through the blue lady who had wrought this Sign; and it was intended for her. The vestiges of doubt that had been lingering like accusers on the

edge of her purpose were silenced. This messenger of green omens and mysterious power was yet another instrument of the hand of the goddess, and the import of this sent foretelling up her spine. She fixed her certitude to her words and said, "We believe the goddess herself intervened, as you say, in answer to our prayers." Apprehensive, anxious fingers extended and encircled the firm round of the warrior's breast in welcome and unconscious hopes.

"Forgive me for my rudeness. I am Ayr of Whispers. You have been sent to us in our hour of need."

Fourthday, Day 46, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

She was awakened by the grating sound of a key in the lock, and the cold whine of hinges. The Aghari warrior Sabal entered while his younger brother, Jamal, stood just outside the door, hands on his belt, close to his sword.

Sabal put down a tray on which was steaming food, an earthen jar, and what could be a folded gown.

"You are very fortunate, sorceress. The priestesses tend you with favour. They will call for you in a little while, and you will learn of your purpose." Retrieving the chamber pot from the corner of the cell he paused, returned, and tipped some of its contents over the food. "Enjoy your meal."

Jamal snickered as the key turned in the lock several moments later. "We will return for you soon."

The air was cool and damp beyond the comfort of the blankets around her but her anger warmed her enough to throw them aside. Sitting up, her hair tumbling over her shoulders she glared at the tray. Reaching for the jar she sniffed

it, and satisfied that it had not been tainted, drank deep of the water.

Though it had been a peaceful night and she had slept well, she was not undisturbed. Since being rescued by Maloud a pattern had emerged, events had transpired that brought her to question her purpose for the first time.

“It is time.”

Jerking her head towards the doorway she saw the two Aghari warriors, legs swishing in haste. “So soon?”

“Put on the sikrit. Your presence is required.”

“Sikrit?” She stared at the folds of material on the tray.

“You must be dressed to meet the priestess.”

Taking hold of the material she noticed it was the same kind of dress that Leaf on the Wind had worn and, standing up in the transparent garment, discovered it was stronger than it appeared, and warmer too.

“You call this ‘dressed?’”

“The sikrit is the traditional gown of the Order. You will show respect and gratitude to wear it.”

The men stood back as the hinges screamed again.

Making her walk ahead, their swords aimed at her back, they marched her down the corridor from the cell. It seemed to be the main one, though they passed by numerous entrances to other tunnels.

The darkness began to recede and Tulascarri could hear the sound of water lapping and saw at once a brightly coloured palette, verdant vines, and roots, stopping at the entrance to the cave, in awe.

What met her gaze was breath-taking. As if stepping into Trefolk, she saw a long wooden bridge leading across azure water that lapped a white shore. The bridge joined another

piece of land where a forest, teeming with birds and gentle wildlife sang a symphony to a sapphire sky.

The point of a sword dug into her back. “Move!”

With a brief swirl of rainbow colours she disappeared from view. Seconds later the two men lay unconscious on the ground.

Removing their breastplates and their tunics, she tapped several points on their bodies, setting them in a timed stasis, and after tossing their swords into the water, slipped Jamal’s dagger from its sheath. Slowly, methodically, she used the point to carve the rune for “Rapist” into his forehead, careful not to slice too deep because she did not wish to leave a bad scar.

Satisfied, she planted the dagger in the ground next to his neck, and stalked lightly along the bridge. Though apprehensive, it was wonderful to feel the warm wood under her bare feet, and a kind sun on her skin, and a playful breeze in her hair. Urged by curiosity she reached the end of the bridge and followed the path of moist earth to a raised plateau where two women awaited her.

They drew back in fear when they saw her charge up the stairs without the guards.

“Fear not, priestesses.” She touched her temple, then her lips, and swept her arm downwards in a gentle curve, palm turned up. It was called the triple-greeting, and common throughout Trefolk, as were her words. “Antsun’alun. May your roots grow deep, and your branches never stand in shadow.”

“Where are the guards?” Leaf on the Wind had moved in front of another, shorter woman who was truly beautiful.

“I have allowed them to rest from their duties for a short while. I am sure they will join us very soon, though *they* may not be as pleased to see me as you.”

“You will not harm us?”

Tulascarri shook her head. “These men, and you, have saved my life. Though they sought to kill me at first, your intervention was timed, as if by Seisha herself, and I am... restored.” She lay joyous flat hands on her belly, inspecting her navel through the thin fabric.

“Intervention? Take your life?” The shorter woman stepped out from behind Leaf on the Wind. “I do not... understand.”

Like Leaf on the Wind, she had cool blue in an oval face, though her jawline was square, her forehead high, her lips fuller with an upwards curve at the corners. Her long blonde hair hung loose and straight except for a single thin plait that ran past her right ear. There were small leaves woven into her plait and she smelled of delicate but intoxicating spices.

“I am Tulascarri, my lady. The men who will be joining us, men of the Aghari, captured me, and were in the process of roasting me alive in the desert when you arrived... when you must have arrived, and rescued me, somehow. No doubt they are very obedient to you.”

“N... no.” Leaf on the Wind padded forward, laying a hand on the shorter woman’s shoulder. They both looked concerned.

“No?” Tulascarri felt unnerved. She was sure this is what must have happened. “You did not intervene? In any way?”

“No.” Leaf on the Wind gestured at a table behind them, where a veritable feast awaited.

Though she was ravenous, Tulascarri could not move away until she had answers. “Then how did I come to be here?”

“We believe the goddess herself intervened, as you say, in answer to our prayers.” The shorter woman seemed to shake herself free of something, shivering. She touched Tulascarri’s breast, cupping it as Leaf on the Wind had done. “Forgive me for my rudeness. I am Ayr of Whispers. You have been sent to us in our hour of need.”

The sound of running feet interrupted them and the Aghari men darted up the stairs, ready with new weapons.

“Come away from the priestesses, sorceress!” Sabal’s words were harsh, and his jaw was rigid, but he did not attack.

Jamal did not share his brother’s reservation and advanced, sending Ayr of Whispers staggering to one side. He lunged at Tulascarri who deftly avoided him, moving between him and Sabal.

“Stop this at once!” Leaf on the Wind was accustomed to being obeyed, but her words fell on an animal committed to its prey.

“Men of the Aghari.” Tulascarri was making sure no harm would come to the ladies, or the meal. Especially the meal. “If I wanted to kill you I would have done so. Consider our debts resolved. Please, I implore you.”

“Debts?” Jamal pointed at his forehead. Blood had trickled down his face and he wiped it from his eyebrows. “How do I forgive *this*?”

“As a point of departure I would submit you should never have raped me in the first place, but what is done is done and...”

“Enough!” He lunged again.

Tulscarri stepped in to intercept, no longer so playful. She called on the Circle of Five, and the element of metal. With a ridged palm she shattered his sword, grabbed his hand and flipped him onto his back while Sabal was sent flying into the dirt with a kick to the sternum.

Holding Jamal's contorted fingers in a grimace of pain she increased the pressure until he yelped.

"Words. Use your *words*."

Again he yelped.

"Please! Stop!" Sabal was on his knees, holding his chest, barely able to speak.

Tulscarri released Jamal, and held out her hand to help him up.

Glaring at her he shuffled away, collected his limbs, spitting on the ground.

"I will warn you men this once, because you have saved my life. If either of you attack me again, I shall kill you."

"We have your brother, sorceress. If word from us does not reach the others he will die." Sabal had found the strength to rise. Tulscarri had found the table with food.

With a sigh of relish she spoke through a mouthful of cured ham. "Send your word... I will help you. I mean, I shall help these priestesses of yours."

Ayr of Whispers and Leaf on the Wind exchanged wild looks.

"No, sorceress, it is we who are in charge, not you." Jamal was massaging his hand. "Our brethren will put him to the knife if you do not do as we command."

Tulscarri ignored him, unable to stop the sounds of pleasure as she devoured a leg of cluckbird, and drank deep from a flagon of wine.

“Do you not hear me?” Jamal advanced on the table, but his steps were slow.

“Let me tell you what I hear, Jamal of the Aghari...” Tulascarri sat back, wiping her hands on the sikrit she wore. “I hear every bird and animal in the forest. I feel the water of the underground spring beneath this rocky slab. I hear your heartbeat, and I sensed the heartbeat of two men and a young boy in the tunnels we passed. I assure you that they will die before they know to harm my brother, and then I shall make you wish you had killed me quickly. You can command all you like, but I shall do as I must, and if you do not have my brother brought here this instant, this island will be your grave.”

Since Tulascarri did not trust Jamal or Sabal, and would not let them out her sight, Leaf on the Wind, aghast that they had captured a young boy, undertook to retrieve Hahn from the men holding him.

“Leaf on the Wind is genuinely angered that your Aghari would threaten a child.” Tulascarri considered Ayr of Whispers who had regained some of her composure, but still looked a little frightened.

“In the recent while, many things have happened that are beyond our sheltered world. We never dreamed the Aghari could be so... brutal.”

“They dirty their hands so your souls may be clean.”

“No...” Ayr of Whispers seemed distraught at the very thought. “No. They protect us, they ensure nobody discovers the island. They afford new arrivals safe passage. They are our link with the outside world. I have never met these men, until... until the goddess brought you here.”

“The goddess brought me here? Speak plain, priestess.”

Tulascarri poured wine into two fine crystal goblets. They were hand crafted with exquisite detail and great skill, filigreed with gold, surely worth a small fortune. As the sun caught the wine it splashed crimson into the work, and ruby swirls seemed to drift through the very glass itself, as if with their own life.

“For what seems like moons eternal I have been vexed with the problem of our island. I have spoken to the Venerable Elm, the leader of our Order, but she says the problem is in my head. Then I had a vision of a blue lady who came to me and said she had heard my prayers, and I was to come here where men would bring a warrior who would help me.”

Tulascarri sipped the wine, wholesome and rich, wondering who it had been then; who had intervened in the plans of the Aghari to sacrifice her to Cirilius for her crimes.

“We do not know who she is, but the Aghari say she appeared to them too.”

“Is this true?” Tulascarri threw a grape at Sabal, hitting him on the shoulder. He and his brother had taken seats on rocks close by.

“Jamal is right when he says you were supposed to die.” Sabal’s uniform squeaked on the smooth stone. “We had no plans other than to see you pay for what you have done. By the end of the third day, you lay still, and we knew that by the end of the fourth your spirit would return to the void. We were sitting at our fire that night when a woman came to us and was nothing like we have ever seen. She was like a vision, but in plain view. She glowed pale blue like a sapphire in the moon and through her we could see the night sky.”

“She was transparent?”

“Like glass. She told us we were to bring you here to the island, where priestesses would tend you, and in her presence

we... felt... only compassion for you.” He kicked his brother’s boot. “Jamal cried like a mourner.”

The younger man glared at Sabal. “We were tricked!”

“And yet when we brought you here, the priestesses were waiting with herbs and oils. They dressed your wounds and returned you to this world.”

“Tulascarri!” Hahn appeared, holding the hand of Leaf on the Wind.

He bounded up the stairs, smiling and waving at Sabal and Jamal, and rushed into Tulascarri’s arms. When he saw how she was ‘dressed’ he blushed and looked away. “Why is everybody naked?”

“The body is a beautiful thing, young Trefolkian,” said Ayr of Whispers, smiling at him. “It is the Temple of the goddess, and is glorious. Why should one hide the perfection of such creation, except for protection and warmth?”

“But...”

“I shall explain to you one day, my brother.” Tulascarri gestured at the table. “Are you hungry?” His friendliness towards the men told her that they had treated him well. They would never have harmed him, and their bold threats were hollow. They, like the priestesses, were completely overwhelmed by the alien territory that lay before them.

It was no wonder she had been ‘sent’ to them.

Fifthday, Day 47, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

When Tulascarri and Hahn returned to Maloud’s compound, he rode out to meet them on horseback.

“Nagh Hamorah! Thanks be to Clopax the ever merciful punisher of the innocent and exalter of repeat offenders. I have been beside myself with worry. First you, then Hahn, was gone. I sent men north and south but they have not returned. Then a goatherd came to tell me he had seen two people on the horizon. I knew it had to be you. What took you, and what returns you?”

Tulascarri disengaged herself from Maloud’s fierce embrace. “It is a topic best discussed behind doors that are closed, my friend.”

“Ahh...” His pristine white teeth disappeared behind his beard and he was instantly solemn. “Why do I feel you will be leaving us too soon?”

“We have a...”

Tulascarri hushed Hahn. “There will be time to explain when we reach the compound. The wind carries our voices.”

“No... not here, if it is privacy you want. Let us go into the village. There is a tavern that keeps good Calatti, and there will be nobody there at sundown. It is the hours of prayers.”

The shadows were long when they entered the village.

Hahn was invited, but declined. “You, Maloud, Calatti and a tavern...? I shall be in the library, if there is one in the village.”

“Down that street, just beyond the smithy,” said Maloud with a grin. “Have no fear. I will see to it that your sister comes to no harm. She is a respectable woman with a respectable man. I am a pillar of this community.”

The streets were mostly deserted, as he had said, and Hahn had already turned his horse, but a short while later as they entered the town square the Pillar of the Community gave a loud wail.

“What is it?” Tulascarri reached for her sword, but remembered it was not with her.

“No, no, no... this is wrong!” He rose up in his saddle and bellowed. “It is wrong!”

Tulascarri brought her steed to a halt next to his. The object of his wrath was a man-sized statue erected in the middle of the square.

“What is wrong with a statue?” She slid off, landing in the soft warm sand next to Maloud.

“A statue there is nothing wrong with, but this... *this* is an abomination!” He yelled at the buildings surrounding the square. “Abomination!”

People were beginning to peek out of windows, and a party of church guards had paused on the far side. Tulascarri inspected the statue, which depicted a man with a curved sword and a fierce glare into the distance. One of his booted feet rested on a stone beast, and in the other hand he held a globe of some kind. The workmanship seemed superb.

“How is this an abomination? Great skill has been employed...”

“Blasphemy!” Maloud wiped at his torment and sank to his knees.

It was then that Tulascarri discerned it was a statue of Clopax, the Bandori god. To sculpt a statue of him was considered heretical by many who interpreted their scriptures. Taking Maloud’s arm she helped him to his feet and led him towards the tavern where a single, ascetic looking man was watching them.

“Is this your new bride, Maloud?” The man bowed lightly at Tulascarri. “Women are forbidden here unless accompanied by their owner.”

“Owner?” It was the first time Tulascarri had entered the village. It would also be her last, she decided.

“My... sister’s cousin’s daughter’s niece three times removed...” Maloud sank onto a broad dusty cushion, sniffing. “Just bring the Calatti, Paluk. Nagh Hamorah, bring it now.”

While Paluk the tavern-keeper fetched the Calatti, Tulascarri tethered the horses, marking that the fifteen guards on the opposite side of the square had left.

She returned to a full cup of Calatti while Maloud refilled his. Purposefully, he had placed his back to the offending statue, but every now and then cast a glance and a derisive grunt at it, mumbling obscenities in Bandori. “So... what takes you away from us?”

“It seems the goddess has plans for me.”

“An intolerable statue of Clopax the butcher and bringer of plenty, and now you talk of a female god? The world is upside down.” He quaffed another cup.

“Not *my* goddess, the goddess of...” She leaned forward and whispered a synopsis of her story to him, then leaned back and shot the Calatti. It was ice cold, somehow, and delicious. Had she been so thirsty? Another cup followed suit.

“Oho!” The jar of Calatti clinked and Maloud bellowed for more. “So the Aghari exist, truly. I never believed.”

Tulascarri began to fidget with her Bandori robes. The heat was stifling, an unwanted contrast to the cool Calatti. “And the island of priestesses also. How do your women *stand* these things?” She was feeling delightfully light-headed, and could not recall the reason why she should be wearing so much.

Paluk appeared, a horrified look on his face when he saw Tulascarri had drawn her garment together, exposing her arms and her legs. “Maloud, please...”

Maloud took the jar from Paluk and bellowed for another. “You... you, my own brother-in-law, stood in the council and agreed with me that no statue would ever stand before your tavern and now...”

Paluk left, returning promptly with another jar. “This is the last. Then you can take this shameless cousin’s niece to your bed or the underworld with you for all I care. You are no longer welcome here!”

“Then you will never see your sister *again!*”

“Go away, innkeeper.” One part of Tulascarri was aghast that she was slurring. The other didn’t care, and the prickling of her petals was making her squeeze her thighs together surreptitiously.

“I cannot stop you going... Tulascarri.” Maloud stopped trying to fix his turban and removed it from his head, setting it down on the cushion next to him. “I would be breaking... oh I shall miss you so!” Tears spilled into his beard. “How is it possible that I have come to love you like a daughter, and Hahn like a son, in such a short while?”

Tulascarri touched his calloused hand. “I have grown very fond of you, too, Bannator driver Maloud. If it is the will of Clopax, we will meet again.”

She realised her mistake too late. His weeping froze and his face turned red. With a wild shout Maloud seized a nearby farming implement and charged at the statue, frightening the horses.

With an inebriated giggle Tulascarri leaned back, remembered she was too hot and peeled off her robe, reclining naked, save for her headscarf, on one elbow, raising a cup to the madness of the Bandori as Maloud struck his first blow, yelling curses on those who had erected it.

“This is a sight that cannot be tolerated!”

What might have been an arm shattered with a loud crack.

Two men appeared from the other side of the statue and tried to reason with Maloud, but he charged at them, and when they ran off, returned to bashing Clopax the ever intolerable abomination and bringer of dust.

In her haze, Tulascarri saw Paluk materialise by her side. His look of horror at Maloud turned to lechery when he saw a woman who was clearly drunk. Her legs were open, and one hand idly stroked her flower, and he seized his chance. He lifted his aprons, kneeled down in front of her, and with lips that were almost slavering he reached for her.

Tulascarri had wondered how long it would take for somebody to disturb her. She had thought it might be the guards, because no doubt somebody would be fetching them, and was a little surprised that the first bone she broke was in Paluk’s arm.

The injured tavern-keeper scurried away in pain and fright and she stood up, calling on the element of fire. As the carpet beneath her feet took flame she felt the Calatti purged from her body, and neared the enraged Maloud, watching him swing the hammer with all his might.

Shouts from the other side of the square. Peering beyond the statue, she could see soldiers rushing towards them and in a palette of colour she moved to intercept. If her friend wanted to bash an idol, she would let him bash an idol.

Three men fell unconscious before the others reached Maloud. They tried to restrain him, but the sound of cracking bone signalled they were unsuccessful. Orange tongues had begun to lick the wooden façade of the tavern, and the horses were scared.

Several more soldiers were sent flying by an invisible force but by this time the effigy was broken into hundreds of shards, and Maloud's chest was heaving when she reappeared in front of him. The front of the tavern was ablaze by now but Maloud waved at the smoke as if it was no more than an irritating insect buzzing about his head.

He blinked at her. "Now *this* is a sight that can be tolerated!"

She took his arm and helped him onto his horse. People with buckets of water had begun to rally towards the tavern, and others, with impromptu weapons, were headed for them. She grabbed the reins of his horse and kicked her heels into hers. It was time to make an escape, and the rhythm of the saddle was *most* delightful.

Sixthday, Day 48, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

"Do you think we will ever see Maloud and Gonro and the rest of his family ever again?" Hahn dipped a finger into the surface of the lake as the vessel glided towards the Island under some magical power. This way he could avoid looking at his naked sister.

They had left their belongings and weapons with the Aghari at the small encampment on the shore. Weapons and clothed women were not permitted to cross.

Tulascari was staring at the water, contemplative. "Once, I was sure of where we would be going next. When one mission came to an end we always had a plan. We would meet, hide our treasure, and move on to the next opportunity. There was a certain comfort in that."

The barge was broad and long, large and sturdy enough for heavy goods and at least twenty people, transported in luxury. Now, though, they were alone, except for a few gulls that pecked at the deck. Behind them lay the shore, and they could see the encampment, and the desert beyond it. Conversely, when they had first approached the small community, all they could see beyond the Aghari tents was more and more desert. Like the Island, her destiny seemed obscured by forces beyond her understanding.

“But now you doubt our course?” Hahn lay flat on his belly now, his feet bobbing up and down on bending knees as he watched the waves ploughed by his hand.

“The irony is that I am more certain than ever that we must engage this mission.”

“You do know we’re not being paid?”

“We’ve already been paid, Hahn. I am once again connected to the Sentience. My Life Seed is restored.”

Hahn grinned at her then looked away, blushing. “I was hoping you’d see it that way. This time I can come with you, instead of plundering some treasury. Our treasure trove is larger than the coffers of Trefolk.”

“And yet our mission will be to recover a treasure that has been stolen.” The wind gusted as the Island grew larger, blowing Tulascari’s long auburn hair behind her, and she stood up, closing her lids to listen to the sound of the birds sweeping about the cliffs. It was an extraordinarily beautiful Island, very much like Trefolk, except the trees were smaller by far.

“Have the priestesses told you about this treasure?” Hahn emulated his sister, standing in front of her, his arms outstretched.

“It is a magical stone they call the Southern Rune, because it is engraved with magical symbols. There are four of these magical stones, one at each of the compass points, and all four are needed to maintain the Island and the lake in their tropical state. Without the Southern Rune the heat of the sun will slowly kill the Island, and it will become a desert like the rest of Asde Fahd.”

“This is a rare mission, Tulascarri. Usually we are employed to kill somebody or bodies.”

The barge had begun to slow down, heading directly for a small quayside where a feminine form waited.

“Be on your guard, Hahn. We may have idyllic beginnings, but there are forces at work here we do not comprehend.”

“What do you mean?” He turned to look at her, momentarily forgetting her nudity.

“Think on this. Maloud discovered me in the desert, took me to his home and his wives nursed me back to health. As part of it they fed me on nutritious food that built up a small fat reserve, not unlike that of a camel. Then the Aghari try to kill me in the exact way that I described to Maloud would reconnect me to the Sentience, thinking I was the Dark Wyrder Dumasarri, except I was rescued by the vision of a transparent lady, the blue lady, to help an order of priestesses on a mythical and secret island.”

“You think that Maloud is behind all of this?”

“When we were drunk on Calatti he started to say something. He said he would be breaking... perhaps a promise, but did not complete his sentence. No. I believe this blue lady, whoever *she* is, is the one behind all of this. What I don't know is why.”

Firstday, Day 49, of the Trefolkian Month of
Stara, 1626 ODT

“I do not think it is wise.” By this Tulascarri meant there was no way under Cirilius that Ayr of Whispers would accompany her in recovering the lost stone.

“I do not want to go, I assure you, but it must be a priestess of the Island who recovers the stone.” Ayr of Whispers rose to her knees, touching her chest imploringly.

“Why?” Tulascarri leaned forward on her round cushion, resting her hands on a low wooden table.

“Only pure hands may touch the rune.” Leaf on the Wind crossed her arms.

“Will it lose its magic? Because, trust me, priestess, by now impure hands have touched the stone.”

“It is not ‘magic’, it is Mystery.” Ayr of Whispers held up a small box of what looked like crushed herbs mixed with sawdust.

“What is the difference?” Tulascarri inspected the box as Ayr poured some of its contents into her palm. With dextrous fingers she massaged the small pile and then, using the same fingers she carved a series of precise lines and curves in the air, whispering softly.

Tulascarri knew what she was doing, felt the hair on the back of her neck rise and her skin erupt with gooseflesh as the invisible traces began to glow, forming a glittering glyph.

“*Tarneem!*”

The word of power rippled through Tulascarri, the pulse of the Sentience, aware that her *shikai* had risen into sharp spikes on her back. From her reflection in the glasses on the table she

could see shining brilliant green and her palms and soles grew extremely hot.

The carved rune collapsed on itself, into a tiny ball of light that shattered into a million sparks, and the table rose up from the floor, hovering at head height.

“*That* is magic!” Ayr smiled triumphantly at Tulascarri from between the legs of the table.

“What you call magic is the way of Wyrding. Through the use of kindling such as the ground bark and herbs, you carve a rune and intone a spell in the Ancient Tongue, and the Sentience is bound to the will of your creation, and so it happens.”

“Precisely. We understand Wyrding, and how to use the Sentience. We do not understand the stone, and so it is mystery.” Ayr stretched forward and touched Tulascarri’s belly, much to her surprise. “Your Life Seed allows you to call on the Sentience. As an Akiun Warrior you can use the Sentience to your advantage, and possess phenomenal powers because of it. Wyrders need spells, and Kindling, and many cycles of scholarship to learn the runes, but you... you do not need these things.”

Tulascarri did not like Ayr’s hand on her skin. It was warm and brought butterflies to her belly, and she felt the tips of her pointed ears blushing. She stood up and paced the room. “You imply I am a Weaver, then?” It was ridiculous, of course.

Ayr rocked back onto her heels and also stood up. “The point I seek to argue is that you have mystery inside you too. With training and discipline you could *become* a Weaver.”

“There is a massive gulf between Wyrding and Weaving, priestess. Just because I am Akiun does not mean I am a Weaver. Though I am surely complimented, it does not change

my resolve. It is not wise for you to come with to recover the stone.” She stared away from the beautiful blues that challenged her, watching a small deer cross the open expanse of the doorway of Ayr’s *domu* then considered the pretty bare feet of the priestess. There were healthy spaces between her dirty toes. “You have never been in the desert, you have hardly ever worn clothing, and you have never worn shoes.”

“Neither have you! Ever worn shoes, that is.”

“Trefolkians never need to. Our feet are born that way, naturally. But that is not the point. You have lived a sheltered life without hardship. You would need my constant protection and that will be too much of a distraction.” There was another reason Tulascarri did not want Ayr of Whispers to go on the journey. Though she could not name it yet, there was something about this priestess that bothered her.

“There is no option, despite your objections, Tulascarri.” Leaf on the Wind was watching the table slowly descend, leaning sideways to be seen.

Tulascarri knew she would not like what she would say.

“Ayr of Whispers has been chosen. She can sense the stone. It calls to her...”

“But...” Hahn poked his head in from where he had been eavesdropping, making them jump. He raised a finger at Ayr. “She’s a *Wyrd*er.”

“Hahn, what do you mean?” Ayr of Whispers took a concerned step.

“The use of the Sentience is forbidden by Imperial Decree...” Hahn was standing on a carpet into which was woven a beautiful map. It was suddenly very fascinating.

“But...” Ayr of Whispers glanced at Leaf on the Wind. “The Queen of Asde Fahd would never forbid the use of the Sentience. Do *you* know of this?”

Leaf on the Wind shook her head, puzzled. “No. All priestesses of the Order are Wyrders to a greater or lesser extent. It is not our main focus, but we practice it freely.”

“Precisely Hahn’s point.” Tulascarri was watching Hahn’s face. From the moment Hahn had met Ayr, Tulascarri knew he liked her. Hahn had also sensed that Tulascarri did not, exactly, like Ayr; and he knew Tulascarri would have brought up Wyrding as the only remaining reason to dissuade Ayr from joining the search. There was no way around the fact that a Wyrder could be detected by those trained to discern the Sentience, and Hahn knew this too. So why did he pre-empt her only to smirk so confidently now? Though she was uneasy on some level that his keen mind had already defeated hers, Tulascarri delivered her closing statement.

“You have been sheltered here too long, or you would know that it is not your Queen who forbids it, but the Emperor himself.”

“But I thought all the provinces were self-governing?” Ayr of Whispers looked down at the carpet, studying the provinces of the South.

“Mostly,” said Hahn, unsure where to stare since Ayr had dropped to her hands and knees facing away from him. “But in certain matters, the Emperor’s decree is absolute. The ways of Akiun, use of the Sentience, are forbidden, punishable by death. Only those with official sanction from the Emperor – Sages – are permitted to use the Sentience in any way.”

“When a spell is cast,” said Tulascarri, “There is pulse that echoes through the Sentience. The Emperor has people specially trained to detect illegal use, and weed out offenders.”

“And prolonged use of the Sentience leaves a trace, an aura, around the Wyrder,” said Hahn. “It can take days for those vestiges to dissipate.”

“Many days,” added Tulascarri. “Many, many days...”

Ayr of Whispers uttered a faint cry, kneeling now to look up at Tulascarri. “Then how did you become Akiun?”

“I was trained in the village of Carnath-Isia. It was destroyed by Pillagers some cycles ago and Hahn and I were the only survivors. The Akiun Masters took great pains to hide the school from the Emperor’s spies, but... ultimately they failed.”

“*Mosh’nal!*” Ayr had picked up the word from Tulascarri and Hahn, but she would not be dissuaded. “Then I shall have to forego using the Sentience. It will take many days to cross the desert and all vestiges will leave me. It does not stop me from going.”

Tulascarri had been outwitted, not a pleasant sensation, compounded by Hahn’s self-satisfied grin.

“Then... you will take me with you?”

Tulascarri’s jaw would hurt in the morning. With balled fists she stomped out of the *domu*. “We leave at first light.”

Secow'day, Day 50, of the Trefolkian Month of Stara, 1626 ODT

“Welcome, your majesty.”

An Aghari woman extended a hand for Ayr of Whispers as she alighted from the barge. There were several Aghari women

present, all dressed in similar fashion to their male counterparts, armed and armoured. Save the woman assisting her, all of them kept lower than Ayr.

“Majesty?” Tulascarri had donned her mercenary’s Swath, but her emerald curiosity was naked. Sweet Seisha, was she to protect a princess and a priestess all in one?

“I am of the royal house, yes.” Ayr smiled, allowing the Aghari women to dress her in black, voluminous robes, and a headscarf. “But it is inconsequential because at a very young age my mother gave me to the Order.”

“Your mother gave you up?” Tulascarri had been very young when *her* parents had delivered her to the Akiun School, and had very few memories of them, but she knew her mother had not been happy about it. “What mother gives up her child?”

“Oh my mother is not the Queen or anything like that. She is a lesser royal, so to speak. And it was her duty. I am pleased she did, for now the goddess is my mother.”

“Majesty, your horses are prepared.” The Aghari woman adjusted the headscarf and prepared a veil on Ayr’s head, covering her face.

“What is this?” Ayr of Whispers pulled away, removing the veil. “It is bad enough I must cover my body, but you would blind me too?”

“Forgive us, majesty.” The woman seemed to cringe. “But your eyes... You are disguised as a Bandori woman, and none of us have such blue. You would be discovered, surely.”

Ayr of Whispers absorbed the six autumnal gazes that emphasised the need, and sighed. “Very well. Goddess forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive, majesty. You do the goddess’ work.”

While the women fussed over the royal priestess, Tulascarri took Hahn towards the horses and made a show of inspecting the saddles.

“Hahn, why do you think there were no other priestesses to see this Ayr of Whispers to the boat this morning? Why did we never see any priestesses but her and Leaf on the Wind? Why, when you wanted to explore the Island, did they discourage you?”

“You suspect something?”

“Priestesses of the Order are not permitted to leave the Island. If they were, you would think there would have been some sort of party to see her safe, especially when she is doing the goddess’ work.”

Boosted by his sister, Hahn swung into his saddle. “You think flames will follow this smoke?”

“It is rare when they don’t...”

“You know she has never been around men before; not for any length of time?”

Tulascarri’s hand paused on the pommel. It was an astute observation for one so young of age. She had not considered this before. It might have lent weight to her argument not to allow Ayr to go with them.

“But I am sure you will keep them honourable, Tulascarri,” added Hahn.

“*Shatsaloon, Warrior.*” One of the Aghari women appeared from the other side of the horse, startling them. “The Aghari are honourable men. They will not dishonour their code.”

“Tulascarri...” The man called Sabal approached, his brother Jamal close behind. He presented Tulascarri with the

long tube that contained her sword, and the bag of provisions she and Hahn had left at the encampment.

“Thank you, Sabal.” She noticed that Jamal wore a turban, covering the scabs on his forehead, and she wondered what code *he* espoused. “Does it heal well?”

Jamal growled between clenched teeth. “My wife has left me; my family has disowned me. I will see you pay for this disgrace.”

“It won’t leave a bad scar, Jamal. I saw to that. The rest, you deserved.”

His lips formed an insult but Sabal pulled his brother away, speaking to him in Bandori.

“They ride with us?” Hahn had already mounted his horse.

“It seems so.”

In the guise of a Bandori trader with his two wives and son, together with their servants, the party consisted of six people, the newest member of this group being Tarek Fed Salman who, before his life with the Aghari, had been a smuggler of Asde Fahdian sand pearls. He was an older man with a beard as long as his forearm, and had spent most of his life travelling the southern provinces. As a result, he knew many secretive routes through the desert and ancient ruins.

The party had travelled for a while when he brought his horse to a halt, turned in his saddle, and offered a canteen to his veiled ‘wife’. “The shadows grow shorter and the Eye of Clopax thirsts even for the water of our bones. You are brave, my lady, to venture so far from your home, and with strangers. Fortunately it is winter now and the days are not so hot.”

Ayr of Whispers took the warm water and drank, thanking him. “You call this *winter*?”

“Just a little further, my lady, and we will pass through the Pink Canyon. It is very beautiful, and the wind that blows through it will bring much relief. We should rest there until nightfall.”

Ayr of Whispers agreed, her voice breathy and faint. She was unaccustomed to the heat, especially with the robes. “Is it a big deviation from the road?”

The road of which she spoke was little more than a dry riverbed filled with dead wood and rounded rocks.

“No deviation. It is on our current course.”

“I can hardly breathe. Will there be any shade?”

“Yes. Once, many cycles ago, it was a settlement. The rock is soft and water seeps through the rock from underground.”

“Thank the goddess.” Ayr of Whispers was the navigator, determining the direction in which they travelled by the pull of the sacred stone. “Very well.”

“Is the place well known?” Tulascarri nudged her horse forward, bringing her abreast with Tarek. There was a constellation of pockmarks on his left cheek, and a portion of an ear was missing; his hands were charts of lines and callouses, and his beard was coarse; yet under this map of worldly scars there was an unblemished generosity of spirit that made Tulascarri trust him.

“Some, but there is a village a little beyond it. Most travellers will go there instead.”

Though satisfied with the answer, Tulascarri was still cautious and determined to ride ahead to reconnoitre. Whispering to the horse, its head rose and its body responded so that moments later they were galloping along a narrow track that entered a ravine and then began to descend.

The canyon was worthy of its name, with streaks of pink in differing hues, interspersed with clear quartz and some darker striations of orange and brown. The strata in places looked like they had been bent or curved or folded on each other and under different circumstances it might have taken an effort not to be lost in such splendour.

Crooning reassurance she pulled on the reins, marvelling at the walls of the ravine as they gradually rose in height. Centuries of wind-blown dust had smoothed the sides of the rock face into sensual curves and hollows. As Tarek had said, there were numerous caves and alcoves, and the wind was gentle and cool.

As her bare feet quietly touched cold, smooth rock she freed her mind to the Sentience. Wisps of consciousness probed the caves, the ridge above, and a good distance ahead. Sensing nothing but animals and insects, she turned her attention to the group that followed, distinguishing her travelling companions, and then beyond them.

Bringing her consciousness back to the ravine she thought she caught a faint hint of something on the edge of her awareness; a strange intention. Though it was unwise to form assumptions at such a distance, she resolved to sense behind them more often. It was not inconceivable that they were being followed.

A small airy cave with a roof blackened by smoke provided shelter and, after several scorpions were promptly relocated, it was comfortable and adequate for their needs. Sabal took the first watch while the others slept.

It was quite a while later that Tulascarri sensed Jamal's approach, and she made her eyes glow as he neared her, startling him.

“You did not sleep?” He kept his voice to a whisper, trying to hide the shake in his words.

Replacing her sword in the scabbard on her back, Tulascarri cocked her head at him and strode past to the entrance of the cave. The sun had moved well beyond its zenith and it would be cool enough to travel soon. She should wake the others, but decided to give them more time, and sat down on the outside of the entrance, surveying the expanse of the gorge.

“It is truly beautiful.” Ayr of Whispers emerged from the cave, coming to sit next to Tulascarri. She wore only the undergarment of her robes, but the flush on her cheeks was only slightly less.

“You look like a wilted lily.”

“She was never found.”

Tulascarri was confused, started to speak.

“Do not be so concerned, Tulascarri. If somebody comes we will hear them, and I will quickly get dressed.”

Tulascarri knew she had missed something. Perhaps this Wyrder priestess toyed with her. “There are always bandits about, priestess. If they attack it will be quick and quiet. You should be inside for your own protection.”

“There are many things I should do, Tulascarri, but I am sure that the goddess would not send me away from the island just to allow me to perish before I have even had sight of the stone.”

“I have not the indulgence of such faith.” She wanted to tell her that arrogance and ignorance were the same thing. “Beyond your sheltered world is a world of greed and lust. And they travel in arrows and swords, not in prayers and supplications.”

“Tell me about the scar on your arm? Tarek says Trefolkians heal so well that a scar is significant.”

“Did Tarek not tell you it is rude to pry?”

“What happened to you?” Ayr’s supple feet scraped the smooth rock as she bent her legs back and leaned on one hand. “Why have you become so bitter, when I can see compassion in your heart?”

Tulascarri turned her head away towards the south of the ravine where a bend obscured the rest of the road. A few plants clung to the rock, their stubby leaves quivering in the wind. She sniffed at the air, detecting no scent of man or beast. “Compassion is slitting the throat of a wounded enemy, or pulling a tooth that no longer serves...”

“And who do you serve?”

Tulascarri snorted at Ayr, her gaze a withering blaze. “You, of course. It is my oath to help you recover the stone.”

“But...”

Tulascarri stood up, having had enough of this conversation. The priestess knew nothing of the ways of the world, and had no experience with which to balance her airy philosophies. “You waste my time, priestess, and we should be going.”

She kicked Sabal a little harder than a nudge, and was disappointed when his grunt woke Jamal because she would have enjoyed kicking *him*.

Hahn was already awake, having scurried away when she had entered the cave, pretending he had not been eavesdropping.

Taking the reins of her horse once again, Tulascarri assessed the Sentience before they continued through the

ravine. With no threat ahead, and relieved there was none behind, she was nonetheless disturbed.

Ayr's words had secured lodging somewhere deep within, and it annoyed her. She was Tulascarri. She was Akiun. She served nobody, and her purpose was exactly what *she* set it to be.

There would be no further discussion.

Chapter 6

Secon'day, Day 12, of the Trefolkian Month of
Ainkor, 1626 ODT

After several weeks of being led steadily south, the party entered the foothills of the Kuornedan Mountains. A massive range, the southern arm formed the border with Trefolk and the eastern arm bordered the province of Guiyner, and once the party descended on the other side, the customs and climate changed significantly.

“Welcome to Trefolk!” Hahn stripped off his tunic and charged half-naked into a rocky pool. The splash was drowned out by the roar of a waterfall, and thousands of birds.

“You are happy to return to your homeland?” Ayr of Whispers had not spoken to Tulascari save a word or two since the Pink Canyon. Now, any offence she may have taken by Tulascari’s abruptness seemed to peel away even as she peeled off her robes to join Hahn.

“I am happy to be away from the heat of the desert. Where do you lead us next, priestess?”

The passage through the mountains had been cold, but now that they were in Trefolk Tulascari was glad to pack away her traveling cloak for the last time.

Ayr of Whispers stepped closer to Tulascari, a gentle undulation. “Would you join us in the pool?”

“You would...”

Sentience.

The warning pulsed through Tulascari like a blast of heat. Darting away, she reached Hahn in moments where he was

building a small house on the rock from twigs and leaves. Calling on the Circle of Five she summoned the element of wood, and rooted herself as she threw him to one side.

In the same instant she summoned Metal and, as the crocodile launched, she drove a hammer-fist down on its opened snout, slamming it into the shallow water.

The enormous body thrashed and spun, pulling away rapidly.

Tulascarri launched backwards, noting Hahn had scampered away. From a semi-submerged position, two reptilian slits regarded her dispassionately and she touched her mind to the predator. She observed primordial hunger, and massive power, but a strange stillness, and for a few moments there was a sense of peace before the creature moved away, rippling the water with gentle movements as if nothing had happened.

Tulascarri laid a hand on the arm of Tarek, making him lower his bow. “The creature is hungry. We do not kill it because it does what is in its nature to do. When you are in his world, you must respect his code.”

“He would have killed your brother!” Jamal shook his head, helping Hahn to his feet. “Do you not even care for your kin?”

“Hahn must learn to mind his surroundings.”

“He is but a child.”

“*Is* he now?” Tarek’s interjection was carried on a meaningful stare.

It was not lost to Tulascarri. “Avoid the rock but lose the grass. A pampered sole may be spared the gravel, but it will never savour the earth.” She inspected the grazes on Hahn’s hands and ruffled his brown mop.

Orange irises beamed at her as he shrugged. "I was just testing to see if you were still so quick."

Fondly she pinched his arm. "A tasty morsel you would have been, ho-ho?"

Hahn squealed and searched the opposite side of the pool for the crocodile. "We should use the Starry Shield tonight."

Until now Ayr of Whispers had been silent with shock. "Starry Shield?"

"Though the use of the Sentience is forbidden, the Emperor has allowed people who are travelling to use three 'Sanctioned Spells' for protection, shelter, and food. Hahn, be careful, but would you see if you can gather the Kindling?"

"What is this 'Starry Shield?'" Ayr of Whispers watched Hahn disappear into the lush foliage.

"It is an invisible dome that forms over a sleeper to protect them from animals and the weather. It dissolves in sunlight, but allows one a peaceful night's rest, a welcome comfort when the ground is already cold and hard. Surely a Wyrder of your level would know this?"

"Sorcery!" Jamal turned away, muttering to his brother.

"There are many wonderful things in Trefolk, Jamal," said Tarek. "Be careful or you may like it here."

"Tell me of your province, Tulascari?" Ayr of Whispers had followed her to the edge of the rocky shelf, where the forest began, following her in. "Where are you going?"

Tulascari was weaving between bushes and shrubs, following a natural trail carved by animals who came to the rock pool to drink.

"The forest is full of fruit and nuts and herbs if you know where to look, priestess. We have had nothing to eat but dried meat and dates these last few days."

The path was moist but, though it had been churned by hooves, it was not muddy, and it was delicious to feel the hum of the forest through her soles once more. The desert had its charm, but there was no replacement for the feel of rain-nourished earth.

“Trefolk is much like the Island, but I have never seen such enormous trees.” Ayr of Whispers stopped at the gnarled root of a trunk as wide as three men with arms outstretched. It towered into the heights, along with those next to it. Here the forest floor was clear except for a carpet of mulchy leaves.

“You know, I know *many* things as a Wyrder. More than you would expect...”

Tulascarri took hold of Ayr’s arm and pulled her away from the tree, slowly. She yelped as she caught sight of the camouflaged snake that had been a hand away from her.

“And there are many things you still need to learn.” Tulascarri could not understand why she felt such agitation with the priestess. Why did she have to be so endearing?

“The climate of your Island and the vegetation are similar, but that is where it ends, priestess. The forest is full of creatures shy and bold, and they are all hungry. Try not to be food for them, if it please you?”

Tulascarri looked upwards, inspecting a branch about twenty paces above them and uttered a note of satisfaction.

Ayr could see the bunch of fruit hanging heavy and ripe, seemingly untouched by birds. “It looks like a melon.”

“Speckled melon, in fact.”

“How will we reach it?”

Tulascarri sprang upwards, grabbed onto the branch with a hand that had become clawed, and dangled there while she harvested the fat yellow bulbs. Dropping lightly to the ground

she lifted the hem of Ayr's gown, and made her hold it, setting the fruit in this makeshift basket.

"Your... hand!"

The fruit tumbled to the ground as Ayr took hold of Tulascarri's arm. Five razor sharp retractable talons were rapidly receding into a normal hand again.

"This is what you call the Change?"

Tulascarri was gathering the melons. "It is."

"And your feet can do this too?"

Tulascarri gave the hem of the gown back into Ayr's hands, suppressing a smile. "An Akiun's eyes will also glow when the Change is full."

"Such a wonder..."

They returned to the camp site some time later bearing a load of more fruit, nuts, and a small deer which Tulascarri dumped to skin and clean.

She pulled out her dagger and was about to begin when Ayr of Whispers knelt down on the ground next to her.

Until now Ayr had been asking questions about Akiun, but ceased when she lay a hand on the dead animal's head, her voice solemn. "Thank you, gentle deer, for your gift to us; thank you goddess, for your sustenance." An open hand gestured at the knife. "May I?"

"You know how to skin an animal?"

"I may live on an island but I do not live in ignorance, Tulascarri. We must eat like everybody else."

"I thought you survived on fruit and nuts and berries alone."

"You forget the ham, the wine, the bread you ate? The body needs different forms of sustenance, and no bodies are the same. We all have differing needs, not so?"

Tulascarri handed the blade to this enigmatic woman, at once so innocent and experienced. What ease was this, that she thanked her goddess so readily?

“Tulascarri!”

She turned as the excited thump of Hahn’s heels on the rock brought him and fistfuls of weeds to her.

“Well done, little brother.” She took one of the bamboo stalks and broke it open. Inside was what looked like a hair, a thin filament which was the main Kindling for the Starry Shield. They would need one stalk for each of them.

“The Starry Shield will not protect us from bandits.” Jamal sneered as he lay back against a log. “I will take the first watch.”

Hahn was about to launch into an explanation of the efficacies of the Starry Shield, and how it would keep the sleeper safe even from powerful spells, but Tulascarri stopped him before he could speak.

“You really don’t like him, do you?” Hahn’s hair was full of tiny leaves and twigs and his naked back and chest were dusted with pollen.

“Those who say the Circle of Five can never be attained should not interrupt those already using it.” Taking the other stalks from Hahn she cracked them open and helped him prepare the small piles of Kindling that they would need when they were ready for sleep, and then helped Ayr of Whispers with the cuts of meat, tossing the excess to the crocodile.

As she watched the creature slither into the water she crouched down to wash her hands and Ayr of Whispers joined her.

“Why did it not try to come and take the deer from us earlier? Surely it smelled the blood?”

“Animals know when a Guardian is near.” Hahn squatted next to Ayr. He offered her a small mat of moss to scrub her fingers. “This moss has sap that cuts through fattiness and will leave your hands cleaner than the soles of a new-born.”

“*Thathennu*,” smiled Ayr. “What is a Guardian?”

“Quiet!” Tulascarri’s fine hearing had picked up the sound of bells. Retrieving Ayr’s robe, she handed it to her. “A goatherd approaches.”

By the time Ayr had dressed the first three goats had bleated into the clearing, their bells jangling loudly. They were followed shortly by several more, and then a man dressed in an old pair of billowpants appeared, carrying a stick and wearing a rucksack.

Blue surprise stretched as he saw the travellers. “Antsun’alun! Forgive me passing through.” He paused at the fire, a welcoming look on his round face. “It is not often I see travellers here. From Asde Fahd?” He spoke a few broken words in Bandori, bowing.

“You speak well.” Tarek bowed. “May we offer you wine? You are surely tired and thirsty?”

The goatherd grinned, resting on his walking stick as the goats clanged around him, heading into the forest. “*Thathennu*, kind host, but I cannot tarry.” His knuckles were scarred and his thick brown hair was cropped short in precise lines and Tulascarri watched him, probed him with her mind, but discerned nothing more than mild curiosity.

“There is a small village about a day’s walk from here.” The herder pointed his stick down the course of the river. “You should reach it tomorrow. The people are warm and welcoming, and would treat you well. Where does your journey take you, if I may ask?”

“We journey south, to family.” Tulascarri took a cloth and poured a mug of tea from the kettle on the fire. “Will you not sit upon the same colours as us?”

“Ah... careful, now...” The man held up an open palm, his nervousness palpable. “Such talk will land you in trouble. Those are Akiun words you use there.”

“It’s just a phrase...” Ayr stepped forward, gesturing at Tulascarri. “Is a Guardian not allowed to speak such words?”

“*Guardian?*” The man stopped his nervous retreat, staring at Tulascarri’s masked face. “You... are a Guardian of the Forest?”

“Yes.” Hahn stuck out his chest proudly.

Visibly relieved, for it was entirely plausible that a Guardian should use such words, the man rubbed his aquiline nose and exhaled. “Forgive me, my lady. But if you are Trefolkian, why do you dress as a Bandori woman?”

Tarek sat forward, throwing a small log onto the fire. “My wife has a hideous deformation, sadly. We do not want to frighten people.”

“By the tears of Seisha!” The man bowed, blushing. “I meant no offence.”

Tarek waved in the air. “Ugliness is not a bad thing, and she is good spirited. Think nothing of it.”

Clearly embarrassed, the herder apologised again. “Bandori customs are new to me. You are only the second group of Bandori I have met in all my time.”

“Truly?” Tulascarri lowered the steaming vessel. “When was the other time?”

“Perhaps two months past.” The goatherd seemed to relax a little, though he was concerned about his animals. “I chanced upon a group of five Bandori men. They were very friendly,

and bought one of my goats. Were they, perhaps family of yours? They were also headed south.”

“Perhaps.” Tarek’s beard touched his chest a few times. “My cousin’s father’s brother’s son is *very* fond of goats.”

“That would be another cousin, Tarek.” Sabal spread his palms.

“Is it? So it is!” Tarek laughed. He had the unnerving habit of sticking his tongue out whenever he did so, but it was a deep and infectious sound. “Age creeps upon me I am afraid. But no matter. You say they were headed south? Hmm... No doubt kin of mine. I shall send them your greetings.”

“It would be good that you bring them a Guardian of the Forest. My lady, your knowledge of herbs and oils will be of great advantage for one of their party seemed very ill.”

“In what way were they ill?” Ayr of Whispers adjusted her seating on the rock, clearly uncomfortable.

“Some kind of fever. Red eyes and pale clammy skin, and trembling hands.”

A loud splash and cacophony of bleating made them all jump.

The herder dropped his stick and held his face in dismay.

“Dear Gethras, I forgot about the crocodile!” He picked up his stick and began chasing his goats into the forest, shouting a hurried ‘Gundsenaday’.

“A fever?” Sabal quizzed Tarek.

“It is the reason why only a woman may touch the stone.” Ayr of Whispers was removing her veil and robes again. “Anybody who is not from the island and sufficiently initiated will suffer the wrath of the goddess.”

“You think they are the ones who took the sacred stone?” Jamal’s face contorted with disgust as the rock pool churned with a happy reptile.

“Beyond any doubt. And fever is the least of that poor man’s troubles.”

Secon'day, Day 2, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

It took many weeks of travel before they entered the Dominai of Depthres. Having made a deliberate circuit around the settlement of Kadrak, they only joined the main trade route when traffic had thinned considerably.

By now they had settled into a comfortable rhythm of travelling by day and resting at night. Tulascarri grudgingly entertained Ayr’s questions about Trefolkian culture, walking away when she became too irritated, only to find she felt like something was missing when she was apart from the princess.

It also bothered her that she occasionally detected that strange intention behind her. It was thus entirely logical to ensure she slept close to the priestess; close enough to hear her breathe.

It was just before dawn, one morning, when Tulascarri awoke with a jolt, her *shikai* ripping through her Swath.

She could not hear the priestess breathing.

All the Starry Shields were still in place, the magical domes marked by drops and trickles of dew. Hahn and everybody else lay sleeping peacefully on their bedrolls.

But Ayr of Whispers was gone.

Leaping into the trees Tulascarri summoned the Change. With slight cracking noises her hands and feet morphed into

claws and her limbs strained against the Swath even as her etheric perception flowed in all directions.

The day after they had met the goatherder, they had joined a road leading east, and the stone seemed to pull the priestess in that direction. Until today they had travelled without incident. Now that vague intention that she had picked up on no longer flickered on her periphery. It screamed through the ether.

They must have closed the distance during the night.

There – a heartbeat.

The priestess was in distress, and there were four others with her.

As fluid as a cat chasing its prey she leaped through the trees, using the branches and trunks to propel her. Saï'ing at this speed, she would reach the group shortly and she called on the Shades, disappearing from view.

Though she was unarmed, having foregone her sword in favour of haste, it mattered little, for she would take the weapons of the kidnappers and use them against them.

By their shape and height and movement she deduced the kidnappers were women. They wore formless clothing cleverly designed so that to the untrained eye they would seem as if the jungle itself was moving.

Ayr of Whispers was naked, her hands bound and a gag in her mouth, but she was struggling hard, making their progress slow.

Mirage.

They moved with purpose in their haste, possibly to horses nearby, but why would a foursome of the elite forces be sent to capture a humble priestess?

She attacked quickly and silently, snapping the neck of the first woman with ease.

The second had drawn her sword, but it was removed from her grasp and her head flew free of her neck.

“Show yourself, Akiun!” The lead warrior, weapon in hand, was staring at the tree behind which Tulascarri crouched.

Using the Change caused her irises to glow, and this could be seen even if the rest of her was invisible. She had to wait a few moments for the Radiant Sight to abate, her claws to recede, and her sharpened vision to return to normal.

The Akiun crouched low, ready to spring, bare feet digging into the earth, using this time to sense her opponents.

The *Mirage* were well trained, calm. They were the closest fighting force to Akiun that existed beyond the borders of Trefolk. Some said they had been trained by a Master Akiun whose teaching had been handed down through generations and refined for Asde Fahdians.

Masters of deception and a myriad of tricks and strategies, the *Mirage* were known for being able to disappear in a flash of smoke, to melt with the shadows. One moment they could be there, and the next moment they would be gone; but any *Mirage* knew that such tricks were no match for an Akiun who could define them with the Sentience.

Ayr of Whispers had had the presence of mind to shrink into a ball on the ground. She was frightened, and there were welts and cuts on her body from where she had tried to fight off her attackers.

Peeking out from under the root of the tree Tulascarri could see the dirty leather of her soles, her womanhood, and ashenstar. The surge of arousal was inappropriate but useful.

Channelling that energy into her limbs Tulascarri knew the *Mirage* were watching, waiting for a leaf or a branch to move, and their daggers would fly at any disturbance. Jumping, she used the trunk of the tree to propel her towards the next. As she tumbled through the air she heard a blade strike into the tree, followed by another, and a trail of silverstars sailed overhead as she landed in the small clearing.

Intercepting the dagger thrown towards where her head might be she returned it to its owner, who fell with the handle protruding from her head.

“Have you no...”

But the last of the *Mirage* fell before she could finish her sentence.

Dropping the Shades Tulascarri cut Ayr’s bonds, and the priestess slammed into her, wet faced, holding her as tight as she could. “*Thatbennu*, you saved me...”

“It’s alright now...” Tulascarri was unnerved. She had never had anybody hug her like this before. Not even Hahn, who hugged her often, and vigorously. Prizing herself from the priestess, she helped her stand. “How did they succeed in taking you? They could not have entered your dome.”

“I... woke up early, and I wandered off to find a place to pray.”

“It was cold. Why did you not dress?”

“One does not commune with the goddess wearing clothing. It is an insult to her.”

Tulascarri located the *Mirage* with the dagger in her skull and stripped off her clothing. It was sad that such a beautiful woman should die, but it had been an honourable death. The clothes were somewhat too large for Ayr of Whispers, but they would do.

“My thanks, but no, Tulascarri.” Ayr refused the soft but sturdy boots presented to her. “I am in your land now. I will observe your customs.”

Tossing the boots into the undergrowth Tulascarri concealed a smile, impressed with this priestess’ fortitude, but she had noticed Ayr had started to show signs of stress. Her hair did not shine as it had done when she met her the first time, with a small patch of grey at the temples, and her brow seemed more wrinkled. She also seemed to tire quicker, as if she had aged beyond her cycles.

“Next time you need to pray, take care I am with you, priestess.” Tulascarri rolled up the legs of the trousers until they were above Ayr’s feet, then used a strip of material to bind them in place so they would not trip her up. “Why do you think the *Mirage* wanted you?”

“I do not know...”

With one of Ayr’s feet still on her knee it occurred to Tulascarri that beauty could serve as easily as camouflage. “Do not take me for a fool, priestess. You are away from the Island without the permission of the Venerable Elm. She has sent them to reclaim you.”

“Tulascarri!” Hahn’s voice echoed through the trees.

“Here! We’re alright.”

“Yes, I confess, I left the Island without permission. But the Venerable Elm would not send the *Mirage*. They answer to the Queen alone.”

Hahn came crashing through the underbrush, stopping when he saw the bodies. He was followed closely by Sabal and Jamal.

“Perhaps the Venerable Elm sent a request to the Queen?” Tulascarri allowed Hahn to inspect her, lifting her arms to check for wounds.

“You killed them all. We could have questioned them.” Ayr felt threatened by Tulascarri’s suspicion. “How should I know where they came from or why?”

“Tulascarri does not let an enemy live.” Sabal knelt down to search the nearest body. “She is known by this. But... yes...” He extracted a flat leather pouch from the corpse, and opened it to reveal a detailed map of the north-west of Trefolk. “They knew the territory but the map won’t tell us much more than that.”

“That crest...” Ayr of Whispers was mesmerised. “I know this crest. It is of the Asde Fahdian House of the Falcon.”

“Why does it disturb you so?” Tulascarri took the map from Sabal. The heraldry was detailed with opulent ornamentation and in the centre was the image of a falcon with wings outstretched, as if in flight.

“It is the crest of my family.”

Thír’dá, Day 15, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

Without further incident they had travelled for almost another two weeks. They covered ground swiftly on the trade route, but one morning, as the echo of their horses returned from the massive trunks on the road, Tulascarri sensed pursuit.

“You know your right shoulder pulls up slightly when you tense up like that.” Hahn’s voice was barely a whisper as he turned in his saddle to inspect the road behind them. “And you have a silly grin when you look at Ayr.”

A gentle shower of purple blossoms, interspersed with insects of all colours, inspired the air with glittering colour.

“You have always had keen sight, Hahn. You were an eagle or an Ulutloy in a previous life, no doubt. She is not as irritating anymore.”

“It took them a while to catch us again. Are they far behind?”

The other members of the party were well rested, and were making light-hearted conversation and did not hear the exchange.

“I hear the growl, but see not the beast.”

Galloping hooves.

Sabal’s horse nearly bumped into Tarek’s. “Imperial troops approach. We must get off the road.”

“Why?” Hahn trotted closer. “Imperial patrols are not uncommon. All they do is keep order. They are disciplined and well mannered, usually.”

“These are no ordinary troops. I have never seen their like before and they move rapidly, even on foot.”

“What do they look like?” Tulascarri felt she already knew.

“They have four arms and their skin looks like a tortoise shell.”

“Nehari soldiers.” Hahn was about to explain who they were to the calls of confusion around him but Tulascarri interrupted.

“Sabal is right. We should leave the road.”

“But we can’t go back, Tulascarri. You said there were people behind us?” Hahn gestured at the tunnel of foliage behind them.

“If I may?” Tarek held up a hand, rising a little in his saddle to adjust his seating. “There are many animal trails into the

forest. I suggest Tulascarri and her majesty take one of these trails. If you journey south for some time you will come across an old smuggler's route. When you see a lot of rocks with yellow moss that look like a bird in flight you will know it. Follow the river to the waterfall and then head south east until you reach Depthres. We will meet you there."

"Good thinking." Hahn deduced what Tarek's plan was. He dismounted and began to rummage in one of the saddle bags on Ayr's horse. Withdrawing her robe and head scarf, he mounted his horse again and began to wrap up. "From a distance it will seem I am Ayr of Whispers. We will pass the patrol without incident and our pursuers will not have noticed you leave the road."

Tulascarri agreed with the plan. "We meet in Depthres, then. Hahn, you know where to go?"

Freshly veiled Hahn lifted the material, making a face. "I will contact Valar. I am sure he will have a bottle of that Muollian Red that you like."

"We will need a boat." Ayr of Whispers spoke for the first time now. "Don't ask how I know this but we must cross the Lake. We will need a boat."

"Depthres is on the shores of the Mystic Lake of Souls, my lady," said Tarek. "We will secure passage without any doubt."

"Then in that case, Hahn..."

"Yes. Valar is not the right man. I will seek out Edemon instead. Do you think he is still in love with you?"

Tulascarri nudged her horse towards the forest. "Tell him I cannot wait to have him between my legs again. That should work, either way."

"Did you mean what you said, about having Edemon between your legs again?"

It was some time after they had parted from the others and, lost in thought and navigation, Tulascarri was taken off-guard by such a pointed question. “I have had many men, priestess, and women. But none of them have had me.”

Ayr was quiet, did not even acknowledge. This also disturbed Tulascarri. “You think I am a whore?”

“No, of course not. I was just thinking that I could say the same thing – except I have never been with a male. I have never really had the company of men before.”

“You never interacted with the Aghari on the Island?”

“A few brief exchanges. Mostly it is the Yoginis and the Venerable Elm who deal with the Aghari.”

“They are to be commended for their restraint.”

“Restraint?”

In my experience, when a man is in the company of a naked woman he expects it will lead to union.”

“Why?”

“You have been sheltered priestess. You have lived your whole life on an Island with women who share your values. No doubt our journey has shown you something of the world beyond it.”

“*Indeed.* I have noticed that your women seem to prefer *men.*”

“Many religions in this world would have you believe that that is the natural order of things. But the spirit has no gender. The physical is secondary to the spiritual.”

“Is this a teaching of Seisha?”

“It is.”

“It is a teaching of Athiera, too. What is it like to have a man?”

“We should camp here tonight.” All too glad to truncate the way this conversation seemed headed, Tulascarri pointed in the general direction of where she thought there may be a place to rest.

The animal trail had narrowed considerably and the branches were too low for Tulascarri and Ayr of Whispers to ride. They had taken to the muddy trail, easing their steeds under boughs and over rocks. Tulascarri’s instincts had been correct and they were welcomed by a small clearing littered with boulders, through which a small river skipped.

“It is so pretty!” Ayr of Whispers was enchanted by the glittering rocks, rich in scintillating deposits. “And the ground is so warm!” Standing on one leg in front of a dried log she was using it to scrape mud from her soles, she called over her shoulder, “Shall I gather wood for a fire?”

The warrior paused and in the brief moments before Ayr joined her she had an insight into what it was about the priestess that had bothered her.

She was untouched.

With blue innocence and golden, forest-kissed locks she had no guile, no secret agendas. She was simply a priestess on a quest; focussed, enthusiastic, inspired. For too long Tulascarri had associated with people who had plans within plans; who had designs on ends for which Tulascarri was the means. It had been so long, and the company of such people had been so constant, that it was difficult to accept that one such as Ayr could exist.

“No fire tonight, priestess...”

“Please call me Ayr...”

A hand on Tulascarri’s arm – elegant fingers and short, clean nails; a small blister from holding the reins too long too

tight; tiny fair hairs and a streak of mud. There was tenderness there, yet determination.

Tulascarri hooked her fingers into the bedroll, pulling with too much force, her muscles too tightly sprung.

Deftly Ayr caught it before it fell into the mud. "I do not address you as 'Akiun', do I? And any distance that might have been instated by titular means really has no place when somebody has saved your life, now does it?"

"Very well... Ayr." The name was sweet on the tongue, but something unusual seemed to be happening in her belly now. A strange sensation, not unpleasant, but troubling nonetheless. Perhaps she was hungry, or maybe even dehydrated?

Tulascarri removed the other bedroll from the second horse and laying out their resting places for the night, she checked the position of the sun. "We should forage for nuts and fruit. They will do nicely with some of the cured meat from the traders we passed a few days ago, and a small hunk of bread."

Ayr of whispers bounded to her horse and from her saddlebag withdrew a sizeable skin of wine, wagging it at Tulascarri.

"Tarek will be quite angry that you took his wine."

"It is against the Bandori religion to entreat... what is the Trefolkian god of merriment called, did you say?"

"Bathcus." But Tulascarri was laughing inwardly about one particular Bandori who was not aware that it was against his religion to drink. A glass of Maloud's Calatti would be welcome now. It would calm this queasiness in her belly.

When they had gathered and washed the fruit and nuts they sat under the rocky overhang, talking, sharing the simple evenmeal and funny stories, trying to keep their voices down.

The moons were high when they finally cast the Starry Shields, and the stars shone their luminescence on two women, worlds apart, but within arm's reach.

"Tulascarri?" The silhouette of Ayr's head appeared in the moonlight.

"Hmm?" Already Tulascarri could feel another Trefolkian god, Morphas the god of sleep, approaching.

"No... never mind."

The blanket was warm and enfolding, and she knew Morphas would be generous tonight, but Ayr's voice seemed to stir new energy in her sleepy body.

Then it occurred to her that Ayr may need assistance. "Do you need to... commune with nature?"

Ayr laughed lightly, smothering the sound with her blanket until she could speak normally again, and then in a quiet voice she said, "I just wanted to thank you for being kind, when you do not have to. I am sure the goddess knew what she was doing when she chose you."

Tulascarri did not answer immediately. She was trying to find the right words.

There was a time when she would have ridiculed the priestess for such assumptions, but over the months Ayr had become more than just another person to babysit.

Maybe she was right. Maybe the goddess *had* chosen her... How did she explain this to her without the words coming out all wrong?

And why was her heart beating so hard?

When she had formulated something in reply she twisted around, but Ayr was already breathing deeply. Perhaps it was better to be silent and preserve the words for sensible hours.

Thir'day, Day 16, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

The smuggler's route was not too difficult to find and it followed a turbulent river, roaring over boulders and gnarled roots and it soon became apparent why it had been abandoned. The force of the water was strong enough to overwhelm a horse, and the path was slimy, a peril to anybody transporting valuable cargo.

The need to guide their horses under, over, or around obstacles slowed them considerably and Tulascarri began to wonder how long it would take for them to reach Depthres.

"I have only read about Depthres in books in our library." Ayr had to raise her voice in competition with the rapids. "Is a Dominai like a province?"

"If Trefolk were a country once more, then I suppose a Dominai would be a province, yes."

A branch protruded, obstructing the path as it curved upwards and out over the rushing water. It was too thick to bend out of the way, and the space to go around it was narrow, and though it would allow the horses to pass, the decline of the bank was slippery and they risked losing the horses to the torrent. Fortunately a broad upright rock was close by. Rooting herself with Earth Tulascarri placed one foot on the ground and braced the other against the rock.

She instructed Ayr to lead the animals around and steadied them as they passed. Bringing up the rear now, she craned her neck to scan ahead and spied an open area. Surely they must be nearing the waterfall by now?

"And what about Trefolkians? Your people? Tell me about Depthres?"

“So many questions!”

“Well?”

“We stop to rest over there, refill the waterskins, and I will tell you.”

As she had suspected, the waterfall was close. From here they could see out over a valley and veils of spray were blown about like sheets in a wind.

“Trefolk has only two cities located on the ground. There are also some *villages* that are on the ground, but most settlements are in the trees.” Tulascarri approached the edge of the river carrying one of the waterskins from the saddlebag.

Ayr was next to her bearing another. “I have only seen those people we passed by on the road, and those Trefolkians seemed much like Asde Fahdians, just more conservative, but not as conservative as the Bandori.”

Though her face was turned to the river, Tulascarri’s mind was turned to a time long ago, a nobler time. “Trefolk was once much like your island, especially amongst Akiun villages and schools.”

“You dedicated yourselves to your goddess?”

“Not entirely. Akiun celebrate the feminine as well as the masculine. The interplay of those energies is important in the study of the Sentience. We wore no clothing, save for ceremonial or practical purposes...”

“Some of the Aghari women have been to the island. They were uneasy and uncomfortable with being naked, but you were not...”

“I have worn this Swath since I became a mercenary. There has been little occasion to wear much less. I was apprehensive at first, but nudity is a natural state.”

“Only when there is a code that people adhere to, it would seem.”

“For my people, it was part of our culture. With the rise of the Emperor, our culture changed. When Akiun was outlawed that culture all but vanished. Truruch, the Trefolkian church, taught the people that nudity was shameful, that their bodies were imperfect and should be clothed... The code of the Akiun faded and waned, and now to mention any part of it endangers one of being branded a witch, and executed...”

Ayr lay light fingers on the arm where Tulascarri carried her scar. “This is why you are sad...”

There was something in that touch that made Tulascarri feel like all her blood was rushing towards it; there was a concern there that was so alien that she dare not trust it. Something intangible, scary...

“There is a Prophecy.”

“A prophecy?”

Somehow Tulascarri had placed her feet in the water on a narrow lip. She squatted, uncorked the waterskin and recovered her cynicism. “Yes, that at the rising of the Blood Moon, Trefolk will have a new Queen, who will bring the old ways back.”

“I have seen the Blood Moons. Even as recently as the beginning of this very cycle. Once every five cycles the moons turn red. But I have never heard of the fulfilment of a prophecy in Trefolk.”

“Nor *will* you. The Blood Moons come and go, every five cycles. And every five cycles it is the same – no Queen. And my people sink deeper and deeper in the mire of delusions and falsehood.”

“This is a heavy burden you bear...”

The light touch again. Blood rushing to her shoulder, but Ayr squatted next to her, and she felt like something was lost when the hand was taken away.

“Trefolkians are descended from Shape Shifters, and a race of tree people whose origins are mostly forgotten. Because of these roots we have longer lives than most races, we heal quickly, we are very resilient...”

“And you have the ability to change your bodies. I suppose that with training, anybody with a Life Seed could employ the Circle of Five, but only *your* race can use the Change. In most respects Trefolkians are a superior race. Did it ever occur to you that this is why the Emperor outlawed Akiun?”

It had.

“The Akiun Masters knew very well that disarming a population made them more manageable. Many a conflict was avoided in the past because invisible Akiun crept into a sleeping enemy’s camp and removed his weapons. By forbidding the use of the Sentience, the Emperor outlawed Akiun and took away the heritage of my people, all in the name of keeping us safe.”

Pausing for a moment, Tulascarri drank, then dipped the neck of the water skin back into the river. “But it’s my turn to ask a question and I want to ask about...”

Sentience.

Acting reflexively, she snagged the arrow with the water skin.

Calling on Metal she shielded Ayr from a hail of spears.

Pushing Ayr towards the forest she briefly assessed the opposite side of the river. Five masked men were nimbly crossing the boulders. They wore swords on their backs, and they moved with sure booted feet.

To the left was a path down the side of the hill. It was wide enough for the horses, but they would have to wait for now.

“Go. Take the path and hide. Leave this to me.”

Ayr was frightened but obeyed. Moving rapidly, skidding on the muddied sand, she began the descent.

The assailants were fast but two of them were lost to the torrent, skewered with their own spears.

The first to touch land also fell back to the river, the severed halves of his body churning the rapids red.

With multiple gashes from talons that cut to the bone, the next one collapsed and lay still; and with her knee on his chest and a clawed hand on his throat she pinned the last one to the rock.

“You are Bandori!” Fire sizzled his skin.

She was angry. More than she should be. Perhaps it was because she had come to hold the Bandori in a place of respect and she would never have expected *them* to attack the priestess; perhaps because she had been so engrossed in conversation that she had not sensed them sooner and thereby she had granted them the element of surprise.

Perhaps it was because of feelings she could not yet name.

“Who sent you?”

Sentience.

Ayr was in danger.

She did not wait for an answer. With a frustrated snarl she closed her fist and turned his throat to ash.

Ayr sought protection in a thicket, two men stalking her. They might have killed her but her feet were fast and her reflexes quick, and their arrows were flying wild.

Tulascarri summoned Earth and dropped like a rock onto the first archer. She could hear his head pop with the force, and his spine burst his back as her descent pulverised him.

Picking up his bow she nocked an arrow and let fly.

The second archer screamed with an arrow in his hand. He screamed again as a second arrow buried itself low in his calf. He drew his sword with his remaining hand but Tulascarri's blade was far superior and it snapped away from him.

With her blade at his chest, Tulascarri checked the Sentience, and was relieved he was the last assailant. Replacing the sword on her back she ripped off his mask and pushed him against a tree. The impact was so hard that he folded double and vomited.

“Who sent you, Bandori?”

“Bandori?” Ayr hesitantly came closer. “Is he of the Aghari?”

Tulascarri waited for the man to stop retching. “Answer her.”

The man burred some noises, clutching his injured hand to his belly.

Tulascarri grabbed his ear and yanked him up. She hit him hard on the ribs and then jerked his head back by the hair.

“Stop!” Ayr's lids swam with horror. “Please! Do not hurt him anymore. He...” She approached the Bandori. “You will tell us, yes? *Say* you will tell us?”

The man shook his head, then screamed as Tulascarri shattered his knee, a sound equalled in magnitude by Ayr's note of dismay.

“Please, Tulascarri!”

“This man tried to kill you, Ayr. Not like the *Mirage* who just wanted to kidnap you. There are two factions at play here, and I mean to uncover why.”

Tulascarri could not believe the force in her own voice. She knew she was overreacting but could not stop herself. Something inside wanted revenge, and drank of this wine deeply. She turned back to the Bandori, who was holding up his remaining hand in a defensive gesture, and began to strip him.

“No...” The man’s body recoiled in fear. “Please... do not disrobe me. If you disrobe me my shame is exposed and I cannot enter the after-life.”

“Who sent you?” Tulascarri paused, crouching. She began to pat him down.

“It is taught in our scriptures that at the time of our passing we must face the east so that when the Eye of Clopax appears he will see we are ready to go to him.” The man spoke with difficulty, clearly in great pain.

“And are you ready to face the east?”

The search yielded no more than a small collection of coins. Some part of her marked the directions of the cardinal points, noting the man was facing south.

“I... always thought my life would be crowned with glory...”

“Then why do you seek to kill one you are sworn to protect?”

His mind was lost to the horizon. “I thought my service would make me worthy. I thought I... would be ready... to die but...”

Ayr of Whispers had stumbled off some distance and was sitting on a fallen trunk, holding herself, looking so small. She

seemed so forlorn and vulnerable and something about it dispelled the dark retribution within Tulascarri.

She placed the man's uninjured arm around her shoulder and slowly and gently lifted him to his feet, propping him up against a tree, and turning him to face the place where his god would see him.

She fetched the sword from the other body and placed it in the Bandori's hand. "You die honourably – on your feet, with a sword in your hand, and facing the right direction."

Placing the black point of Martmetal over the man's heart she assured him there would be no pain. "May we meet again as friends."

There was relief and regret in the saline waters of his life. "Thank you."

The elegant blade slid in and out with little effort, and with a swish the blood was shaken from it.

Before the man sank to his knees he spoke only two words. "Venerable Elm."

Chapter 7

Thir'day, Day 16, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

Only when Tulascarri wrapped the blanket around her shoulders did Ayr of Whispers realise she was ice cold on a warm day, and only then did she realise her fingers had dug into her arms in an effort to stop herself from shivering to pieces of grief.

The force of Tulascarri's rebuke had hit her harder than a blow to the belly; the determination of the men to kill her wounded her to her core, and the violence she had seen displayed by one on another was more than her mind could endure. She felt in danger of having her consciousness parted from her soul and she had run away in fear, tripping over rocks and undergrowth until stopped by a fallen trunk.

But the last two words from the Aghari man had halted the chaos within her and a part of her wondered how? She wanted to cry but droplets did not swell. She wanted to scream but her neck was too tight for voice, and it struck her that she was not in shock so much as she was in anger.

Just two words were all the Aghari man had uttered as he surrendered his life. Two words were all it took to confirm what Ayr had begun to suspect since leaving the Island.

The Venerable Elm had lied. She had used kindness and manipulation to convince Ayr that she was losing her mind. She knew now that Wilting Lily had, in fact, been murdered.

Never before had she ever borne such hatred, such impotent rage. She was aware of Tulascarri disappearing down

the path, dimly aware of the horses that grazed unperturbed nearby. Her mouth was sore from clenched teeth and her fingers ached from bracing herself.

Under all this was grief. Pure sorrow. The Venerable Elm had been a mother to her; had raised her since her earliest days. Ayr had listened and obeyed as a good daughter, never questioning, always acquiescent. How heinous this betrayal; how... evil!

She would not let the tears loose. No, by the goddess she would store them up and in the crucible of her heart would turn them to cold and bitter poison and she would feed them to the Elm at her roots and watch her die of frost and wind...

The inside of her throat was hoarse like she had been screaming, and she wondered how it was that she had come to be on the ground. Momentarily possessed of panic, she looked around for attackers, confused, until she saw the body of the Aghari on the ground and reasoned she must have blacked out.

Her clothes were restrictive and she could not breathe. Scratching at the garment until she was naked, she jumped onto the trunk and crouched like a wild animal, her heart beating as if she had been running, her muscles bunched as if after *athanas*, and her skin was covered in sweat that made her bristle in the breeze.

Letting go of her clutch on the wood she willed herself to stand, spreading her trembles to the sunlight, feeling the warmth return the colour to her cheeks, and calming her breathing. It was no longer important to be ladylike. Grief knew nothing of composure, but she would not let grief rule her. Nor would she, she decided, let bitterness control her, for this too would be a hindrance. She served the goddess, and the goddess would deal with the Venerable Elm in time.

She just hoped she would be there to witness it.

Gathering her things she dressed, resenting every strand of restriction with every fibre of her being; and she took the horses' bridles, speaking to them in a voice that sounded calm and cool, amazed at how detached it seemed compared to her real inner state.

In this field blood had been spilled to protect her. The warrior had performed her duty, but in her attack on the men Ayr had seen a ferocity that was different from the usual calm and poise she had used to despatch the *Mirage*. It had an element of outrage, an element of vengeance. Tulascarri had taken the attack on Ayr as if it was an attack on her own person and she had defended Ayr with the vengeance one could only expect from... a lover?

Her heart skipped.

Dare she... hope?

Did this mysterious warrior, nay – Akiun – have feelings for Ayr, as Ayr did for her? Since their first meeting she had tried to deny the attraction, but those long days and weeks of travel had seen them share laughter, silly girlish jokes, and under scowls of disapproval from Tarek they had only grown closer.

How complex was the heart that multiple emotions could war for control of her mind? Yes, she was angry and she was bitter and a part of her felt numb, as if cut out of her by a Healer's knife, and yet the hollow was simultaneously filled with fairies.

The beasts followed her obediently making noises like pompous old women clearing their throats, and their hooves timed a beat on the earthy plateau, a counterpoint to the song in Ayr's heart.

It was like she had died and been reborn in an instant and the feeling of abstraction was stranger still when she came to name it, for it seemed so foreign and she realised she had never, truly, been in love before.

She had lost some innocence today but perhaps, the goddess willing, Tulascarri would help her find it again.

Thir'day, Day 16, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

Wrapping Ayr of Whispers in a blanket, Tulascarri recovered the horses and led them down the side of the waterfall to the small plateau below and, leaving them to graze, she scouted the woodlands ahead.

The plateau was less densely forested with larger spaces between the trees and from here the path continued to wind down, ending abruptly at the river. Though it was shallow and calm enough to cross, there was no passage on the other side, not even an animal trail.

Puzzled, Tulascarri waded a little down the river. Only when she returned did she see a wide gash in the rock and upon investigation discovered a cave that must have been part of the watercourse at some time. It appeared to head under and into the hill and away from the falls.

Ayr was humming to herself and leading the horses, meeting Tulascarri at the top of the path.

“You have located a passage, then?”

The priestess seemed as if she had processed the attack quickly, but she was too calm, too composed. “Yes... back there.”

“Ugh!” Ayr’s lips curled. She picked up a stick and flicked several pieces of bloodied flesh and fragments of bone from the dry areas of Tulascarri’s Swath. “Take this off. We should wash it.”

Tulascarri shook her head.

“Oh – I am sure there are no more attackers...”

The warrior had no defense against such logic and relented.

Notably, Ayr did not seize the opportunity to be forestclad, but this did not surprise Tulascarri. The priestess hid her shock in hands that scrubbed furiously, using the kind of moss Hahn had shown her after they had fed the crocodile.

“There is a breeze blowing out of the cave.” Ayr wrung out the garments and draped them over the saddle on Tulascarri’s horse. “Your Swath will dry as we walk...”

A short distance into the subterranean corridor, a dry stock of torches and tinder piled on a rock to keep dry awaited them. Lighting these, they followed the smooth and rounded stone deeper into the mountain and for a long time there was silence between them.

It felt surreal to be naked in her homeland yet in times gone by this had been the norm; times Tulascarri hoped would one day return. It was at once liberating and disconcerting. Her Akiun teachings were at odds with her mercenary’s judgement. A part of her was comfortable, confident and free; the other screamed cautions and conventions, but since she had no other clothes to wear she quieted her misgivings and did her best to relax.

In doing so, Tulascarri became aware of something else that was troubling.

The sensual air about her, the delicious textures against her soles, the caress of her tresses on her back. These, combined

with the memory of the priestess balled up naked on the ground, made her relieved the torches gave such poor light. Each time her inner thighs touched she felt tiny sparks in her belly, and there was little she could do about the gathering dew on her petals.

“They have a lot of hair.”

“Who?” Tulascarri was glad her attention was drawn away from watching the fluid sway of Ayr’s hips in front of her and there was mercy in the fact that the priestess had elected, for some reason, not to disrobe.

“Men.”

“You mean Bandori men.”

“I have had the company of no others. Are Trefolkian men different?”

“Trefolkian men are as hairless as Trefolkian women, except for beards. They can grow beards.”

“The Aghari men have hair all over. I find it fascinating.” She stopped, tiptoed to Tulascarri, and dropped her voice to a whisper. “They even have hair, you know, on their groins.”

Tulascarri chortled. “You have obviously studied them when they bathe.”

“*Truly* fascinating.”

Feeling her Swath Tulascarri found it had dried quickly. It was with pointed regret that she slid the fabric onto her body.

The roof was too low for them to mount up, and at times it dipped so low the horses almost had to be forced through the space. With echoing hooves and dripping water they wandered between stalagmites and ducked stalactites for a good while before they saw light ahead, and when they emerged from the cave they could see night would be falling soon.

“By the goddess, what a magical place!” Ayr’s face was enrapt as she took a few halting steps.

No more than fifty paces at its maximum, the enchanting clearing was most likely the bottom of a sinkhole that opened long ago. Over the cycles it had filled with plant life, rich in colour and bloom and in a small enclave at the far end steam from a hot spring wafted over a clear pool, nourishing the ferns and shrubs that crowded around it.

“We will camp here tonight!” Ayr began to remove her bedroll from her horse.

Though she would not argue because of the lengthening shadows, Tulascarri was silent for another reason.

Sharp senses discerned the incongruous smell of fresh bread, and upon investigation could not believe her find, exclaiming so that Ayr rushed quickly to her side.

“What did you...?” Ayr also gaped. “How is this possible?”

Tulascarri had removed a covering from the ground disguised to appear as grass and leaves. Under it was a store of bread, cheeses, fruit, and even wine. There was enough here for many people.

“Is it a trap?” Ayr stepped back warily. Wild glances made her whip around, suspiciously examining the ridge that was the top of the sinkhole.

The thought occurred to Tulascarri at the same time and she directed her perception, searching as far as she could. In so doing, she discerned the use of the Sentience too. “I sense only animals and birds. And I think I know how this came to be here.”

“Then how?” Ayr seemed to have difficulty removing her concern from the ridge.

“Being a smuggler’s route, it is not inconceivable that they would have left provisions, enchanted to preserve them. Judging by the growth, nobody has been here for many a cycle. Tarek *did* say it was an ‘old’ smuggler’s route.”

“Then...” Ayr was drawn back to the impromptu larder. “Do you think it is safe to eat? What if it has been poisoned?”

Tulascarri selected a loaf that was as fresh as the day it had been baked. “The spell to preserve food renders any poisons inert. It cannot harm us.”

Ayr needed no further assurances and with eager fingers she tore off a hunk and eased onto the ground, sighing with satisfaction. Greedily, she tucked into the cheese and gulped some wine.

Tulascarri recognised the signs. She knew what would happen and went to fetch some water. When she returned, Ayr of Whispers was retching in a bush, weeping. The shock had finally hit her.

Tenderly she held back the priestess’ hair, though it was already stained red; gently she bathed her in the pool and held her as she quivered, and sobbed, and by the time Tulascarri covered her in blankets under the stars she could no longer deny to herself that this priestess had somehow, and despite her best efforts, captured her heart.

Thir’d day, Day 17, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

Gently the arms of Morphas withdrew by a symphony of birds tweeting and chiming their pre-dawn Laudlifting to Cirilius, lord of the day. In a hole in the ground on the far side of the clearing she left the ashes of previous meals, and by the

time she had had a bathe in the hot spring and stood drying in the warm air, the first golden rays were kissing the tops of the canopy.

She cared not that her skin prickled with gooseflesh in the cool wind, for she felt reborn. The cave from whence they had come, the healing hot water of the spring, this ensorcelled clearing served as a womb from which she emerged somehow lifted, as if Seisha herself had cleaned and dressed the wounds of her past.

Could it be that there was a purpose to her life more than seeking vengeance? Had she survived for a reason?

Since the massacre she had sold her sword to the highest bidder, killing for coin. She told herself that she was searching for other, lost Akiun schools, but while this was true, she now understood she had been driven to exact vengeance from the gods themselves; for letting her people die, for letting her live. But now that weight seemed lifted; Ayr was the whisper of reprieve in a burdened heart.

The ground beckoned to her, and she dropped silently, knees apart, feet flexed, as she had been taught, so many cycles ago – before she was known as Tulascarri. In this manner it was that thanks to Seisha should be offered. She was surprised how easily the sign of Seisha was remembered by her hands before they drifted down to cup her flower in a warm embrace.

“Tulascarri...?” The soft voice was warm, filled with curiosity, and surprise. “Are you... praying?”

The warrior leaned back, rose on her toes. “I offer thanks,” she said, feeling painfully self-conscious. Even though Ayr had seen her naked she had never seen her exposed.

Ayr took a hand, gently, instinctively, a nurturing comfort, so close her breath was sweet invitation. “The priestesses of

the Island offer prayers to our goddess in a very similar way. It is said...”

Tulascarri placed a trembling finger on Ayr’s chin, a hopeful scar curled around her waist; and tender, tentative lips touched. The moment seemed suspended behind closed lids and between pressed, moist ruby; so delicate, like a butterfly as it emerges from the chrysalis, soft, vulnerable, filling with potency.

Travel blankets became their bed. Hearts charged as hands moved too slow.

Her breath was sugar and her moans were spice and her body quivered as if the passion could barely be contained. Her breasts were firm like the promise of sunlight and that light shone between their souls. Her sighs were like the wind in the trees in summer, and her cries were deep, unexplored mysteries.

With gentle demand, Ayr’s fingers danced and dived until the desire could no longer be controlled and the thrill of her entry pulled a guttural pant from Tulascarri’s lips, her spine arching, her legs bending and shaded soles curling. It was like touching her essence, and she wanted more.

The princess straddled her, and took petals between lips, even as her tongue explored and trilled, and the small shoot of pleasure sang sweeter than the nightjar.

She never knew she could produce such sounds of ecstasy, never knew she could surrender so openly. Tulascarri wished to give as she received, but her body was immobile, the tingling warmth rising like the heat in the desert. The force built in her until her knees were pulled back like a bowstring, and the jolt hit her core with rapture so sublime it was the envy of any god.

She felt her nectar jet, golden and pure, and Ayr did not stop, commanding another crescendo from her that left her legs weak and quavering, and falling like notes at the end of a melody.

Taking Ayr in her arms, she lay her down and showed her love and gratitude and desire with all the skill in her hands and lips and tongue. Her honey was molten gold and her cries scrunched in hands that clutched Tulascari's auburn locks. She was weeping in joy and thanks and worshipped her goddess when her nectar sprang like a fountain, again and once more until she pulled her lover, the warrior, onto her heaving chest and held her with all she had left.

Blue met green, and from the concert of that clearing a new harmony was born, a new colour; and it was one of sublime warmth, and innocent acceptance.

Fourth'day, Day 22, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

“We were almost growing worried.”

Hahn ushered Tulascari and Ayr into the sparsely furnished dwelling which was filled with delicious aromas, the fresh notes of roasting.

“Is this one of Edemon's places?” Tulascari gestured greetings at Tarek, Sabal, and Jamal, setting down her saddlebags.

“He was not happy to see me.” Hahn grinned at his sister, offering wine.

Taking it, she cupped his cheek. “You did well, as always. Edemon forever owes us hospitality, does he not?”

Hahn pulled in closer, conspiratorially. “He did not like it that you were not with me, kept searching for you on the roofs, behind things. Skittish...”

“As always.” Tulascarri caressed Ayr’s back briefly before offering her the wine. Hahn’s raised eyebrows were not lost on her and she winked at him.

“Sweet Seisha,” he whispered, nimbly hopping up onto a table, blushing deeply. “You’ll be wanting your own room then.”

“Your brother is a resourceful boy.” Tarek’s hands dripped with roasted cluckbird. “He would teach my eldest a thing or two.”

The Aghari men did not say anything about the obvious affection between Tulascarri and Ayr, silent as they devoured the sumptuous meal, but Jamal did nothing to hide his scowl and Sabal’s lips remained taut until Tulascarri told them of the attack at the river.

“I do not understand.” Sabal and Jamal sat close to a fire in the grate, despite that it was a balmy evening. Sabal was poking the logs with a stick, his movements conveying his irritation. “The *Mirage* try to take the princess, but... *you* say Aghari tried to kill her; and they were sent by the Venerable Elm?”

“They *were* Aghari, Sabal.” Ayr stood up from where she sat next to Tulascarri on the floor, indignant. “How can you not believe us?”

“Forgive me... your majesty...” Sabal held up his hands, contrite. “I meant no offence. It’s just...”

“These men had to be imposters, mercenaries perhaps.” Jamal was equally irate, though his posture was controlled. “I cannot believe the Aghari would try to kill a priestess of the Island. It is our sworn duty to obey the Venerable Elm. From

our earliest days we are raised to protect you. It is our sacred charge.”

“You adults are all simpletons.” Hahn slid from the table and joined them on the rug. “You stare at leaves hoping to see branches.”

“And there it is. What branches do you see, young Hahn?” Scars of adventures adjusted Tarek’s turban. Every day it was wound about his head with meticulous care, and every evening it was removed, folded and coiled in readiness for the new day, a time-consuming ritual.

“I see neither branches nor leaves, Khumo Bandori. I see trees. I see the forest.”

Pride swelled within Tulascarri. “Speak of the forest, then, my brother.”

“I agree with Tulascarri and Ayr of Whispers. As Jamal said, the Aghari owe a sworn duty to the Venerable Elm. She knows one of her priestesses has fled the Island and seeks to kill her. That means the Venerable Elm is the one who stole the southern stone. The *Mirage* seek to capture Ayr of Whispers, which means the Royal House of the Falcon wishes her returned alive. In both cases Ayr is hunted, one for grim, and one for gain.”

Ayr’s arms were still folded, the last vestiges of resistance to the truth. “If a priestess wishes to leave the Island, which is rare, they are free to do so, but they are excommunicated from the Order. That is the worst of it. To wish to murder them is proof enough that the Venerable Elm does not want the sacred rune returned to the Island, but it does not make sense! Though I see the truth the Venerable Elm loves all the priestesses. There must be something more behind this that is hidden from us.”

“It matters not that you are a fugitive or even guilty of a crime.” Hahn could not sit still and fidgeted onto his knees. “We are all, here, criminals of varying degree and it matters not that the Venerable Elm wants you dead or that the *Mirage* want you in their possession. What is of immediate concern is for us to find the stone, and return it. *Then...* we will discover why.”

“Time and Light are the greatest sorcerers.” Tulascarri flexed her crossed legs, holding a hand for Ayr. “We must continue our journey. And whilst it may hide from light, the truth cannot hide from time.”

Fourth'day, Day 22, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

With murmured wooden notes, the door closed and the latch clicked. Ahead of them was a narrow staircase that led up to the bedchambers and it sighed under their bare soles as if woken from slumber.

A serving woman waited for them at the top of the stairs, greeted them formally. She avoided their gaze, showed them to the rose and jasmine-scented room, gave them instructions on the ablutions, and bustled out.

“We are the guests of Edemon.” Ayr of Whispers repeated the woman’s words as she began to disrobe slowly, a playful note in her voice.

In the corner of the room was a large wooden tub that had been filled with steaming water. The surface was dappled with petals and the aroma of spicy oils perfumed the vapours, lifting the spirit. Tulascarri had thought a bath would be in order but the sight of Ayr’s naked buttocks and back was too much fuel to the flame. Shedding her own clothing quickly, she helped

Ayr free of hers and pushed her back onto the bed, sliding onto her, and kissing her tenderly on the lips, bodies melting into each other.

Perhaps it was the heat of the day, the charged emotions of the rooms below, or perhaps it was just pure desire, but their lovemaking was fierce, insistent, guttural.

They paid no heed to propriety and cried with abandon, bodies folding, flexing until primal demands liquefied into release. They tumbled into the abyss together, drinking deep of this intoxicating love; drinking deep of the nourishment of this freedom.

With heaving chest and honeyed lips Ayr of Whispers moulded to Tulascarri, and buried her head in an auburn pillow. “Your nectar is the sweetest I have ever tasted.”

Unsure what to say, or what this meant, Tulascarri kissed her forehead and said nothing.

“It gives me life, you know.”

Ayr’s breath was warm on her neck and Tulascarri was loath to leave it. Idly she stroked the smooth skin of her back. “I know not of what you speak.”

“Nor would you, *athelu*. It is a well-kept secret of the Asde Fahdians. Did you not notice how my brow had become creased, or how my hair had begun to grey?”

Tulascarri had noticed, but had assigned it to the stress of the journey. Now, though, Ayr appeared youthful once more, as if no more than an adolescent. “How is this so?”

Athelu. It meant ‘Beloved’ in the Ancient Tongue. How musical it sounded.

“When we drink the nectar of a lover it nourishes us.” She giggled at Tulascarri’s confusion. “Let me explain. When Asde Fahdian women reach a certain maturity, they begin to produce

a nectar that is deeply restorative, but such high quality of nectar only becomes available when the Life Seed has reached a certain... evolution?"

This was something Tulascarri understood. Akiun Warriors needed to train their Life Seeds to be able to use the Sentience in their abilities. It required many cycles of devotion and dedication to the teachings.

"Yes!" Ayr sat back on her heels and splayed her knees. Coating her fingers with the dew from her petals she inspected the sweet fluid with fingers that rubbed together. "In some ways it's like a wine that must mature. The Order of Athiera is to my Life Seed as Akiun is to yours. Through our dedication to our rituals and Rites we achieve a maturity of the Life Seed earlier in life than other Asde Fahdians; and because you have achieved a high maturity with yours, your nectar nourishes me."

She spread Tulascarri's legs and lay with her face close to her flower, kissed it delicately. "This is why most Asde Fahdians must have a mate. And if they wish to conceive children, it is the nectar of the one who has chosen to be mother that initiates the changes in the body of her mate to cocoon and become male."

"I see the truth of it." Tulascarri had never even imagined such a phenomenon was possible, but with Ayr's warm breath right there, she would soon be ready to nourish her again.

"On the Island, the priestesses harvest this nectar, when the moons are in the right phases, and then it can be transmuted into an elixir we call *Imana*, the Kiss of the Goddess. It is the only thing the Island produces that leaves the Island, and people pay ransoms for it. We gave you a little when you first arrived."

Rolling Ayr onto her back, Tulascarri searched her face. “Could this be the reason why somebody would wish to destroy the Island?”

Pensive, Ayr left the bed, pulling Tulascarri with her towards the bath. As they sank into the water, kept warm by some magical process, she turned with a handful of rose petals and began to place them on Tulascarri’s head. “Why, though? If the Island is destroyed the production of the Kiss of the Goddess will cease.”

“Surely the priestesses are not the only ones who possess the alchemy of the elixir? It may be a competitor. Gold has always been a leading motivator for death and...”

Tulascarri’s lids fluttered, a moan escaping from her throat. Her deliberations evaporated with the steam and she raised her feet onto the sides of the tub, gladly surrendering mind to body.

Beside her, Ayr pushed one leg back, tilting her hips forward, driving deeper, curling up hard, demanding, and Tulascarri’s spine arched and her throat opened to lift visceral praise to the goddess.

When the soft footfalls of Morphas could finally be heard in their heartbeats, Tulascarri mouthed a mantra of thanks, and wished in her deepest being that there *was* no sacred stone, no island, and no end to this night.

It was deep into the night that she was jolted from her sleep by a clap of thunder. The warrior rose to see the silhouette of Ayr standing at the window, her body framed in silver by the moons, just before they were eclipsed by clouds. Moments later there was complete darkness, save for lightning illuminating rivulets on the windows.

“What steals you from our bed, *athelu?*” Gathering the blanket, she came to enfold her lover.

“I had a dream, a vision maybe. I saw the sacred stone on an island among islands. It has been hidden there, where no man may go.”

“There is an archipelago of islands on the Mystic Lake of Souls. It is the home of ruins, inhabited by fearsome birds and, some say, a monster.”

“I cannot go there.”

“Why? You are no man...”

“The goddess told me in the dream. It is a place of ancient magic that seemingly also prohibits the feet of Asde Fahdian women. I cannot ask this but...”

“Of course I shall go. Of course I will retrieve the stone.” Tulascarri touched a cheek with her lips, and it was moist with tears.

“*Thatbenu, athelu.* Every day the Island grows weaker and I do not know how much time is left. Somehow you will be protected. You will save us all.”

Chapter 8

Fifthday, Day 23, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

“Two weeks?” Tulascarri banged the table. “How is it possible that there will not be another boat for two weeks? They sail daily!”

With wary fingers Hahn removed all breakable objects from Tulascarri’s immediate reach and then took a large scroll from a chair and unrolled it on the floor.

“There is an island settlement in the middle of the Mystic Lake of Souls. It is called Bridge Town, and all vessels going across the lake must stop there to take on supplies. There is some kind of conflict happening there right now and all transport is by road.” With his big toe he indicated the symbol on the map that was labelled ‘Bridge Town’.

“What about Kaana birds?”

“The Kaana birds in Depthres mostly fly across the Mystic Lake. They have been grounded.”

“Then we fly *around* the Lake?” Tulascarri cast a large circle in the air over the map. It was very detailed, showing the trade routes, the rest islands used by Kaana birds and their riders; even settlements were marked with names.

Hahn counted off the people in the room. “Let’s say we stole six birds, you are the only one trained to ride one. I don’t think we want anybody falling to their deaths?”

“You could ride with me and Ayr. We are light enough. Then all you need is strength, which the others have.”

“You and me, maybe. You and Ayr, maybe. Not the three of us together. The birds are big and strong, Tu’, but we would spend more time resting them than travelling. And even if we hired the expensive birds legitimately to fly around the Lake, we would be alerting *everybody* to our presence. There is, after all, a handsome price on our heads.”

Tarek and the others had been listening to the conversation until now, absorbed in ‘*Ithaim mithidie*’, the second breakfast celebrated by Trefolkians. He wiped his beard and grunted. “We travel as pouch-riders. It is the fastest way. Smugglers have done it for many cycles.”

“What are pouch-riders?” Ayr rose from the table and padded round to stand behind Tarek. He had not yet wound his turban and his long black and silver hair hung loose. With practiced hands she began to plait it.

“When there is a parcel that is urgent and which must be delivered quickly, a horseman is despatched. He rides from station to station where he gets food and shelter and a fresh horse.”

“So his journey is not delayed with hunting for food, or setting up camp or resting horses. Tulascarri, your Trefolk is a very organised province.” Thick strands wove nimbly, and Ayr was nearly finished.

“We will need the sashes worn by pouch-riders, a difficult thing to obtain.”

“Not for my Tulascarri.” Ayr beamed as she tied the thick plait with a thin ribbon.

The note of pride, the affirmation of belonging; as Tulascarri watched Tarek begin to wind his turban she knew she would do anything for the priestess, and it did not bother her at all. For the first time since her home and the people she

loved were destroyed, she felt she had direction. Perhaps it was dangerous to trust so completely, but for now, at least, she felt whole again. She also knew that to masquerade as pouch riders was not the fastest means to travel.

It was her turn to remove breakable objects, but from Hahn. "There is... another, faster way."

"*Vama ferral!*" Hahn's face was turning red. "You are *really* thinking about it, aren't you? And after I begged you never again!" He folded his arms. "I knew it! I knew it the moment Ayr said we needed a boat!"

"It will take longer than a *month* to ride around the Mystic Lake, Hahn. We do not know how much time we have left. We have to?"

"By the goddess, you have lost us." Ayr touched Tulascarri's arm, bringing calm to the tension there. "What is this of which you speak?"

Tarek, Sabal, and Jamal had all paused in winding their turbans, arms aloft, glancing at each other.

"Hahn is scared of heights."

"I am not! That pirate tried to push me over the edge!"

"You slipped because you thought it was funny to put something on your feet, Hahn. I told you bare feet are the most stable, but you wanted to try and you slipped and if he hadn't caught you..."

"*You* caught me, Tulascarri. *You*, with a rope, and I dangled like a worm on a hook before you pulled me up."

He seemed on the verge of panic and Tulascarri took him in her arms. "I won't let you fall this time, Hahn. I promise."

"And have you forgotten what we took from him? He had two men killed because you wanted his mother's ring."

"It is a very pretty ring, Hahn. You said so yourself. The emerald matches my eyes." Failing to prompt laughter she gave up. "Fine, we will return it to him. Just... some time later... not now. We do not have time to fetch it."

Hahn's face brightened. "Well, as it happens..."

"You kept it all this time?"

He was rummaging through his rucksack and removed a gold band with a large emerald. "I packed it last minute before I met Maloud for the first time. I thought I might need it to sell, but I always knew I would need it..."

Turning the ring over in her hand, Tulascarri was again mesmerised by the way the light splintered when it hit the surface.

"You have Ayr now, Tu. You don't need the ring." Hahn slipped it from Tulascarri's hand. "Sweet Seisha! I've just committed to going, haven't I?"

"By the tears of all the gods!" Tarek could not bang the table. His hands were still winding the long thin strip of cloth that was moulding itself to his head, but his bellow made even Tulascarri jump. "Who is this person from whom you stole this ring, and how is he faster than a pouch-rider?"

Fifthday, Day 23, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

The streets of Depthres were crowded with people and animals. Many nations used Depthres as a gateway to the north and south of Trefolk. It was a prosperous city with cosmopolitan tolerance, host to the arts and a home of bustling trade; but like any prosperous city, it had its share of thieves and cutthroats.

She did not need the Sentience to alert her to the three men following her some distance behind, or the three female archers who tracked her on the roofs. In fact their presence meant she had already been identified by the underworld and this might lead her to the man she sought.

If she was to meet the man himself, there was a specific place she needed to go, close to the largest textile shop in Depthres. If he wasn't there, he would be close by.

As she approached, she saw a group of older men sitting around a board, playing cards and drinking wine. They were laughing and cajoling each other, while a young woman in the shop scowled at them from the shadows.

"Antsun'alun." Tulascarri's black soles traded cobbles for carpet and it was soft and spongy.

The men barely raised their noses, murmured their response.

They seemed puzzled but Tulascarri was not sure if it was because of the mask or because she was not accompanied by a man. Even though Depthres was so multicultural, Trefolkian patriarchalism was still so intolerant. As an observance of their limited ways she kneeled on the carpet next to the men. Her fine senses and perception caught a delicate scent, no more than a waft, but it was all she needed to recognise the toxin, cleverly hidden in the liquor. Under different circumstances she might have ignored it; the affairs of these people had nothing to do with her, but she paused.

It would not be honourable to let an innocent man die.

Honourable? She blinked at the goblets, surprised. Since when did she give prayer to honour? Had she not fashioned a life from killing and stealing? How could she presume to be honourable?

The men had taken her silence as respect, that she waited for permission to speak, and the one for whom the poison was intended lowered his cards. “Antsun’alun friend.”

Tulascarri could see he was accustomed to all manner of people, but the mask unseated him and his regard did not stay long.

The woman in the shadows strode into the light on guilty feet, coming to stand next to the man.

“Antsun’alun,” she repeated, cordially, then looked down at the greying hair. “Allow *me* to help this person, uncle.”

The man’s tongue wet his lips and a lustful hand journeyed up the back of the woman’s leg and she turned red. The other men were studying their cards, lips clamped. “Very well, my pretty.”

“Forgive me, Khumo.” Tulascarri realised now who the real victim was. “But I have journeyed far, and I must seek the advice from the man of the establishment.”

The old man grunted. “Heard of Syrus, have you?”

“Your work is legendary.”

The man began to rise, and the woman assisted him. As he straightened he pretended to accidentally touch her breasts, and laughed as she blushed. “Come this way, I shall show you my *finest* work.”

Tulascarri followed the man into the store, which was large and deep, filled with shelves laden under the weight of weavings of all description. There were indeed many fine works, even a few which caught Tulascarri’s attention.

“So you are a woman, then? I thought so from the way you walked. You move like a cat, and I like... cats.” He led her through a maze of racks, through a door and down into a

basement choked of air and jammed with carpets. “What work is it you seek?”

“I must confess I know very little of such work, Khumo. My Insem requested I seek your advice.”

“Your Insem? And who is your father?”

“You would not know him, Khumo. I come from a small village far away and I have no family close by.”

“No family? Why do you wear the mask?”

“I am told I am very beautiful and my Insem would have no man save him touch me.”

The lecher paused. “Save... him?”

“Of course. I see you and your niece understand the love between family. Does she pleasure you as I pleasure my Insem? Does she offer you her flower as I offer my Insem mine?”

The man’s cheeks were red as his tongue again flicked over his lips. He seemed hesitant, but the delicate scent of pheromones from his *shikai*, the thud of his heart in his neck, and the growing bulge in his robe meant he would not be for long.

“You are... beautiful... you say...” He reached for her, but she dodged him deftly.

“Apologies, Khumo. I may not show my face. But if I have offended you, I shall gladly pleasure you here. It is right that I do so.” She cupped his erection, stroking the flesh as he groaned.

With a foot he pulled a stool closer and allowed this woman he had just met to remove his robe. He sat down, hissing as she continued to stroke him, slowly moving behind him, his hands trailing her body. She began to massage his shoulders, trailed her fingers through his hair, but as he began to slump she patterned several quick jabs to key pressure points on his

back. Each one was perfectly delivered with precise depth, and a little more pressure than cracking an egg.

“What in the name of... aah...” He had been startled and tried to stand, but his body flexed as the swift orgasm seized him, making him fall sideways, draining his stamen as his seed erupted in white ropes. He groaned loudly, trembling with pleasure.

Leaving the man still twitching, Tulascarri ascended to the shop above, where she met the woman once more.

“What did he do to you?” The woman was clutching a basket, her voice tight with worry and her lips thin with rage.

Tulascarri touched her shoulder. “You do not need the poison anymore. He will die in three days, at sunset on the third day. By then his life force will have left through all of his orifices. I would suggest rolling him in a carpet. It will be cleaner that way and his screams will not disturb you too much, especially because he is downstairs.”

“How did you know?”

“It matters not, but you can help *me* now.”

“I have never been with a woman but...”

If she did not look so terrified Tulascarri might have laughed. She touched the woman’s shoulder gently. “That is not what I mean, sister. You need have no more fear now.”

The woman did not know what punishment Tulascarri had dealt on her uncle, but she was grateful and even more relieved.

“I... do not know what to say...”

“Then... say you know where to find Adobas.”

Fifthday, Day 23, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

“I was told the legendary Tulascarri had returned, so I had to meet you for myself.”

This rogue was new, but then it had been a while since Tulascarri had been in Depthres.

Having left the carpet store she had resumed her walk, knowing the people who had been tailing her would be waiting.

The woman knew of Adobas. He was a major patron of the store. She had heard the rumours but assured Tulascarri he was just a merchant who traded in fine silk. Besides, the idea of a boat that could fly was impossible, anyway. Everybody knew boats could not fly.

In a quiet alley the thugs appeared, blocking both ends, and a stooping man in fine robes stepped out. She had expected it to be Adobas for he would certainly employ archers, but this man was much younger and yet he seemed familiar, somehow.

His hair was green, with streaks of red, cropped short, and his nose had been broken enough to be slightly skew. There was a scar on his jawline and dark rings under his eyes.

“I have no business in Depthres. Just passing through. Have we... met somewhere, perhaps?”

“What brings Tulascarri to a carpet store?”

Though she was unarmed, the man kept his distance, they all did, but the three archers were joined by two more and there were more men at both ends of the alley.

Tulascarri did not wish to waste time, but she was trying to remember where she had seen his face before. “I like tapestries, don’t you? They speak of wealth, a gentle lifestyle. Far from the world in which you and I live, khumo...?”

Sensing her need for an introduction, the man obliged only with a slight bow. “Yes, I would agree with you, of course. And carpets are wonderful means to transport a body. Absorbs the blood. Easy to burn. Very practical.”

“Indeed. You seem to know your carpets, though I did ask for your name.”

“I have many names, I suppose. And I have many interests in this city, carpets being one of them. I would not want any of them soiled without my knowledge. You understand, of course. Bad business.” He had a way of lingering on sibilants, a curious speech affectation, and he liked to roll his wrists, the rings on them flashing red, blue, green as the stones played with the light. “Are you here to... utilise any carpets, perhaps? It is rare that Tulascari goes anywhere without soiling one, I hear.”

Tulascari took a step forward and an arrow sank into a stone. It should have glanced off with a spark. Either the stone was unnaturally soft, or...

“Yes.” The man gestured at the ground. “The arrows are of Wretian steel. At least, the heads are. And we use a special kind of bowstring that delivers extra tension.”

“So you are assassins, not thieves?”

“Ah for the right price we will do almost anything, although the ladies up there for some reason do not appreciate the wealth between their legs.” He gestured at the silhouettes crouched on the ledges, dangerously close to the lip. Like the men they were all barefoot, except for one with blue eyes and long blonde hair. It was she who had loosed the arrow.

“Why is it that men think women are good only for cooking and pleasuring?”

“I do not question the order of things. I simply seek to profit from it.” He wore a fine Dniban gown around which was

tied a sash of bleached silk. “Now, you know I cannot allow you in my city, it would be bad business. People would come to you and not to me.”

Tulascarri snapped her fingers with a laugh. She knew who he reminded her of.

“You’re Basador, aren’t you? Adobas spoke often of you. I never knew you were so grown up.”

Taking advantage of his shattered resolve she slowly crouched and yanked the arrow from the stone, inspecting the tip, which seemed only slightly dulled. The shaft was of strong wood, and the fletching had been crafted with care and precision. It had no odour but slight scoring in the head meant it could be dipped in poison if desired.

“Allow your people to enjoy the light of the sun a little longer. Perhaps we can come to an arrangement, Basador.”

He had recovered his cool demeanour. “I doubt you could escape with your life from here, but one way or another, Tulascarri, we are all on a path to somewhere else, and if an arrangement will speed your departure then I am listening.”

“I have business with your father and a mission to complete, but also, I may be slowed down by Aghari and *Mirage* from Asde Fahd.” The ripple of tension through Basador and his underlings was almost tangible. “Yes, son of Adobas, I have assailants more dangerous and skilled than you. Whilst I understand why the Aghari may be hunting me, I do not know why the *Mirage* would.”

“You seem to think that I have knowledge of this. Why?”

A whorl of colours marked where Tulascarri had been. The arrow from her hand chunked into the wood just below the boot of its owner and moments later the Akiun reappeared on

the ledge, a few paces from the archer. “*You* don’t. But *she* might.”

Firstday, Day 25, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

Two days later, with nothing but their weapons and minimal items, they were galloping towards the first of the stations used by the pouch-riders; not because this was their ultimate choice, but because an arrangement with Basador had been made, and he had given precise instructions.

It turned out that when Basador gave precise instructions, the well-oiled machine of the underworld followed them explicitly.

For six days the party travelled south disguised as pouch-riders. Those who received them asked no questions, but gave them water, some food, and fresh horses, and they were sent on their way once more.

It was Sabal who complained first. “My rump feels like it has been beaten by Clopax himself, and we have been riding longer than it takes Tarek to tie his turban.”

“You walk like Clopax used his *other* staff on you.” Tarek was laughing but he stumbled as he dismounted.

“Please say this is the last station, Tulascari.” Ayr hobbled across, then dropped her voice. “Or I will soon have no blossom left for you to kiss.”

Blushing, Tulascari was glad it could not be seen and even she had to admit she did not know how pouch riders could keep up such a pace for so long. Fortunately, their wish was granted for this was indeed the last station; a small village in

the trees. Here they were to secure provisions and journey two days into the hills.

“Six of you, you say?” The innkeeper stood up from his seat, surprised. He did not usually receive so many guests at once. “Six rooms?”

“Five.” Ayr of Whispers deposited a small pouch on the counter, counting out three oblong gold chips.

“That is too much, my dear. The rooms are only four hundred sleet each. Three Tali’s is far too much and I do not have enough coin to return change.”

“Then take the rest for food, for we are hungry and could use your finest.”

The Innkeeper seemed overjoyed, but still troubled. “Thank you, but it is still too much.”

Ayr wiped her face. “Then the rest is yours, for your silence that we were here.” She leaned in closer, gesturing at Tulascarri who was staring out the window, pretending not to hear. “My lover has a jealous entwined.”

“Oh my...” The man loved a juicy tale. “Running away together?”

Ayr let her chin fall as the man took her hands. “How wonderful to have found somebody you can call your own. Of course, of course I will keep your secret.”

“I have a jealous entwined?” Tulascarri lay her sword under the pillows and removed her Swath. There was a leafbath in this room and she looked forward to being clean again and by the thrust of Ayr’s hips she was expecting a little more than that, beckoning from under the falling water.

“This is a most ingenious invention.” Fascinated, Ayr stared up at the perforated leaf above blinking as warm water

fell onto her head. “It allows you to stand and wash and the dirty water flows away while cleaning your feet.”

“Trefolk is full of such invention, *athelw*. We were a proud race once, a nation who knew what it was to be stewards of the forest. Now true Guardians are rare, Akiun is gone, except me. My people... I told you we once lived in much the same way as you do on the island? Clothing was seen as utilitarian. If there was no need for its protection from the elements, there was no need to wear it. Some say there are still small communities who still live like that. Then religion came, and with it, shame. There was a strong moral fibre in my people. Respect for each other, not opportunism.”

Ayr was swaying gently under the water as Tulascari soaped her back with an herbal paste. It contained tiny seeds that burst with fragrance as her hands moved.

“The Bandori insist their women be clothed because their men must not be tempted.”

Tulascari snorted derisively. “Trefolk suffers similar afflicted thinking... as if muzzling the prey prevents the predator’s bite. Men should be insulted that they are considered such animals.”

“You consider men animals?” She turned to face Tulascari, the paste making their breasts slide over each other.

“I consider anybody an animal that cannot control their urges. It requires a higher mind to see through the haze of lust, a noble mind. Akiun teaches that each person is on a journey, a spiritual journey, from this life to the next. On that journey we seek the path of higher mind.”

“Enlightenment?”

Ayr’s lips were full and red and begging to be kissed. Her skin pleaded to be touched, but her eyes yearned for answers.

“You could say that. Only it is the duty and trust of the Akiun to correct those who have strayed from that path.”

Ayr stiffened. “The Akiun sit in judgement over others?”

Tulascarri released her. “There is a difference between judgement and discernment. To be Akiun is to be steward of a sacred charge. And we will only act in such discernment when moved by the Sentience.”

“Were you moved by the Sentience when you killed the Aghari in the forest?”

Tulascarri felt as if she had been slapped. A darkness clutched her throat and she could not speak.

“Forgive me, *athelu*.” Ayr touched her cheek, recovering it when she turned it away. “It is wrong for me to say such words when in saying them I set myself in judgement over the very one who would never judge me. I am sorry.”

She kissed her. Sweet Seisha, she kissed her with all the passion that threatened to burst into flame. She could not face those dark monsters. Not now when she had been shown reprieve, been shown a path to redemption. She would hide her anguish in cries of pleasure, and with the water that lashed her face she would hide her tears.

Thir'day, Day 27, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

Adobas walked with a cane now, and his skin was gaunt and grey. He was helped to his seat by his other son, Bassalon. “You... recovered my mother's ring.”

Tulascarri sipped her tea. “It is a very pretty ring, Adobas. It should return to your family.”

The pirate coughed as he laughed, his son massaging his back. “I have hunted for this for many cycles. Thank you, for... finding it.”

With shaking hands he slipped the ring onto a finger that was too thin for it, raising it to the light of the torches on the walls. “As you can see... I am not the man you knew once before.”

“You have barely two hundred and fifty cycles, Adobas. What has cursed you so old so soon?”

“An affliction,” he rasped. “Too many days in the sun, perhaps, chasing the promises of a better life, only to see the one I have... slip slowly away. What do you want?”

Tulascari consulted the ether as he coughed again, waiting patiently. There were many armed men in this lavishly carpeted hall, more beyond it, and none of them could be trusted, or so she had been told.

Her arrangement with Basador was simple – discover and kill the person poisoning his father. He had tried to talk to his father about it, but Adobas was so convinced of his own strength and invincibility that he stubbornly denied anything more than ‘an affliction.’ Basador had been thrown out by his own Insem. He must have been a lot stronger at the time.

“How is young Hahn?” Adobas’ head wobbled as he turned to inspect him.

“I’ll be fine as long as you do not try to throw me over the sides of any boats.”

An unnatural rattle filled the hall as Adobas guffawed, then returned to coughing, spittle flying from his lips. “You still blame me for your fall, eh? I tried to catch you, remember?”

Hahn stared at the brazier between them, mumbling to himself.

“What do you want, Tulascarri?”

“We need passage to the Jiku Archipelago.”

A titter ran through the hall moments before another disturbing rattle and cough sprayed into the flames.

“You’re like these Bandori whose turbans are too tight. I should ask my Healer to inspect your ears to see if your brains are still in your head.”

“Please noble Adobas...” Ayr slipped from her chair to her knees.

“Noble?” Adobas wiped his chin, chuckling. “You have all come here to kill me by trying to make me laugh until my last meal joins you on the other side of the brazier. Get off your knees. I am not a god. Who are you, child? Have they wrapped your head too tightly somehow, as well?”

“I am Ayr of Whispers... khumo.” Slowly, self-consciously, Ayr lifted herself back onto her chair.

“An Asde Fahdian fugitive, an Akiun wanted preferably dead, a young boy with more brains than all of you put together, and three long-haired desert sycophants trying to restrain what little sense they may have left with tightly bound strips of cloth. You come to my boat to ask for my help to get to an Island guarded from the air by birds three times as big as a horse, and a lake monster more ferocious than a day with my ex-entwined. Did Basador put you up to this?”

“No. We need to get to the Island, khumo.” Ayr stood up. “If you cannot help us, we shall forge another way.”

“Oh I never said I *wouldn't* help you, priestess. Sit down. Tell me, though, is it true that you Asde Fahdian’s drink each other’s blood?”

Ayr of Whispers kept her face calm, but she sat down hard.

“Well, is it?”

Ayr glared at the pirate, his hands trembling on his cane. “No. We do not drink each other’s blood.”

“Ah...” He seemed disappointed. Signalling for help from his son, he began to rise. “We will talk again in the morning. Enjoy the evening here, deep in the forest.”

When he left the men in the hall left as well, taking the torches and leaving them with the dying flames in the brazier.

“Has he always been so bitter?” Ayr glanced back at the doorway. Thunder rolled in on a cool breeze, and the smell of imminent rain was strong.

“Has he always been so insulting?” Jamal wore that look of brooding again as thoughts of vengeance toyed with his mind, making his blood pulse at the temples.

“He seeks to goad you into rashness.” Tarek stood up, waving a hand and stretching his back. “Do not be lured by his bait, for then you prove you are but an animal. Take comfort that such men are often small of root, huh?”

Sabal also stood up, dragging his brother by the shoulder. “Tarek is right. We should not brood on this, but we *should* brood on his wine. Come, companions. Let us make blunt our fears and make sharp our voices.”

The three Bandori did not wait for the others. Their footfalls echoed beyond the door, then were lost as the storm broke.

“Is there anybody here?” Hahn leaned in to Tulascarri, joined by Ayr.

“No. I sensed out the room, and our voices will be muffled by the rain.”

“Do you think Basador was right?” Ayr glanced from brother to sister.

Hahn's forehead glinted with orange light. "No doubt. He has symptoms of small but gradual doses of *moonsong*."

"What is that?"

"A poison that is distilled in the light of a full moon and when the victim is nearing death they spend their last hours singing at the moons."

"Is there a cure?" Ayr took Hahn's hand.

"Yes, just stop taking it. The body cleanses itself naturally, that is why for the poison to be effective it must be administered on a daily basis. It would be easy to hide in food or drink, but *I* would put it in Adobas's medicine if he is taking any."

"How do you prove it, though?" Ayr rubbed her arms, the cold breeze uncomfortable.

Tulascarri placed a palm on her back, summoned the Circle, and allowed just enough heat to pass from her hand to Ayr's body, to feel it relax.

"So warm," she whispered.

"It is easy to prove." Hahn's white teeth were almost the only part of him that was visible. "I shall concoct a potion that will turn the poison blue. We put it in everything just to be sure."

"But it is meaningless if we have no evidence of who has done the poisoning. Adobas will dismiss the food as rotten or something, and call for more. It is really his own stubbornness that is killing him."

"Ayr is right." A plan was forming in Tulascarri's mind. "We have to get Adobas on the boat with us. Hahn, brew a potion of fortitude; something that will have him feeling as strong as a Bannator, despite the *moonsong*. Then he will feel he has been right all along about his affliction and will feel

compelled to set sail and prove it. This should force the poisoner's hand, and if we're all on the boat, which is when I think he or she will try, they will be easier to catch."

Hahn did not need to voice his agreement. The thump of his heels and his rapidly departing silhouette was statement enough.

Chapter 9

Thir'day, Day 27, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

They waited until the storm passed, watching the stormvine illuminate enormous trees, casting the splendour of the jungle into black and white, and when it was over they followed lanterns outside the hall to where they stopped, climbed a staircase brightened with moss, and were alone with only fireflies and dripping water when they landed on a wide branch fashioned for pedestrian use.

Wonders such as this 'bough road', Ayr had learned, were grown by Treeshapers – men and women who used the Sentience to coax trees into the shapes of roads or houses, just about anything one could imagine, and it was all accomplished with alacrity.

It was rare that Tulascarri took her hand when they walked and Ayr savoured the contact, the feeling of belonging. She savoured the pungent earthiness after the storm, the feeling of life at her feet and all around, but most of all she savoured how their passage wound deeper and deeper into darkness, for tonight she wished to entreat oblivion.

The night was filled with the shrill of crickets and ululations of birds all beyond her sight, and far below she could hear the calls of what she supposed was a herd of deer. Luminescent bugs drifted in plenty so that there was light for them to see by, though she knew Tulascarri did not need light to see in the dark.

At a point where a walkway intersected the bough road, she slipped her gown from her body and left it on a post. Though the night air prickled her skin she felt relieved of a burden, delighting in the texture of leaves and twigs moist from rain that kissed her wet soles with comfort.

Pausing for a moment they stared out through a break in the canopy, admiring the majesty of the three moons and the shapes that flitted across their silvery canvas.

"You seem pensive, *athelu*."

"A little tired, perhaps..." She hoped her sigh would convey it. She begged her heart would believe it. She prayed the night would conceal the sadness that came with her truth.

Precious gems of concern threatened to pull that truth from her.

"Do you think that Adobas will really take us to the Jiku Archipelago?"

Strong arms absorbed her, the warmth filling her, knowing she should store up as many of these memories as she could.

"Hahn's potion will work. Adobas is a proud pirate. He will set his ship to sail even if it is the last thing he does. He is not one to pass up an opportunity to fuel his legacy."

Tulascarri's lips were against her cheek, but still behind her mask, and Ayr wanted nothing between them. "He has given us generous accommodation, I believe?"

"There is a noble part to Adobas; he would not turn away a spiritual person, such as a priestess, in distress. He might have made a good warrior, were he not such a rogue."

Tulascarri had taken her hand once more, after retrieving and arranging the gown like a scarf on Ayr's shoulders with the gentlest care. It was a wonder, thought Ayr, how attentive she was, never missing the smallest detail. In the desert she had

seemed so powerful yet there was an element of awkwardness, like she did not know where to sit, or where to place her limbs; but now that they were in Trefolk, this was her home, and she was whole here; that fluidic grace would be missed on the Island.

Tulascarri parted a curtain of vines that creaked and protested, and higher up screeches of disturbed birds berated the intrusion. Ducking through the opening Ayr passed close to her lover, trailing fingers of promise across her belly. Here beyond the vines the night air was even cooler, but Ayr would not cover herself for she dare not trim the fire in those emeralds.

Arriving at the place where they would stay, a large cabin with a wooden veranda all around it, shrouded by the forest, the light of the moons was lost and they were in complete darkness, and it grew darker still as they entered and Ayr begged for absolution.

Following Tulascarri, she felt her knees touch the edge of a bed, and she lay down, coaxing Tulascarri with her.

“I shall fix a light.”

“No...” Ayr held onto her, practiced fingers beginning to unwrap the Swath that denied her access to her beloved, and she entreated the darkness to bring an anonymity in which they were not priestess and warrior paired by necessity, just two people in love. She needed to forget her duties and vows one more time, for in contemplation of the destiny before her, they brought implications she did not wish to hear.

“Make love to me, *athelu*, with the part of you that is still broken. Make love to me with your deepest and darkest fears.”

She lay back and felt her knees raised roughly to her ears so that her hips thrust up, her back curved like a bow and her

petals pleaded to the heavens. Tulascarri devoured her surrender and she groaned loudly, not just in pleasure, but in celebration, for the darkness had heard her, and it would devour her sorrow.

Fourth'day, Day 28, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

Creaking timber, the slow pat-pat-pat of water on wood, the wind rustling leaves and the song of birds were the welcome that awaited Tulascarri as the cosy dreams departed.

Her nose delighted in the earthy aroma of hearth ivy, and she willed her bladder to be quiet for just a few moments longer.

Though her lashes parted reluctantly, her vision was rewarded.

Hues of earth on leathered soles accentuated the indented lines of Ayr's athletic arches, the gracious curve of her heel, and there were tiny speckles of pollen between her toes. It was pleasing to follow the firm curve of her calf, up her thighs, to the succulent buttocks.

By now Tulascarri knew every freckle, the series of small scars on her hips, the five beauty spots under her right breast that paid homage to the elements, the smell of her hair; but pressure in her loins signalled that she had no more time to appreciate such beauty and with as little disturbance as possible, she slid from the contentment.

Their love-making the night before, after a full day of travel, had depleted them, and they had fallen asleep almost immediately. This was the first time Tulascarri had a chance to take in the cabin.

The bed was a princely mattress with covers made from the soft pelts of tree-sheep, and quilts of woollen patchwork.

Cured hide absorbed her footfalls as she stole out of the chamber onto the wet boards. There was no door, only a thick buckskin that flapped lazily back into place.

Colder air made her need even more insistent and at the edge of the platform, after a brief check to see if anybody was below, she spread her feet, thrust her hips forward and let her body commune with nature.

The light of the sun was a distant glow, and Ayr would sleep a while yet. Feeling invigorated Tulascarri allowed the Change to take her and leaping into open space, she tumbled towards the nearest branch. Her claws dug sure, and she vaulted forward, stretching, bunching with perfect timing and power.

A celebration was held in Carnath-Isia when a young Akiun completed their first successful Sai through the forest. It was not an easy challenge, though. It took a good while for the conscious mind to trust the subconscious, which was faster, more powerful, and knew where to go even before the conscious mind conceived of the possibility. This was something of a debate amongst the Masters – whether it was the subconscious mind, or the Sentience, that guided the warrior; but such debates were not the topic of Tulascarri's meditation.

Rather, it was her conversation with the Asde Fahdian archer who worked for Basador that occupied her thoughts. The archer had been in Basador's service for several cycles. She was an orphan, and she said it was not good to be an orphan in Asde Fahd below a certain age. While still below that age, whatever it was, she had learned to hide from the men in turbans who patrolled the streets of Asde Fahdian cities.

Without a future in Asde Fahd, she had stowed away in caravans until she reached Depthres where she had come to work for Basador and learned the art of the bow.

When Tulascarri had pressed her to say more, she said that was all she knew, but did recall hearing on her travels that an Asde Fahdian woman, somebody from one of the royal houses, had lost a child, and it had never been recovered.

Nimble, Tulascarri landed on a broad bough. Invisible, the troop of baboons did not see her, but they sensed her, and when they perceived her Radiant Sight they barked loudly in her direction. Sensing the presence of a Guardian, though, and after sniffing the air and chattering a while, they continued stripping the fruit from the tree they were in, making a royal mess.

Was Ayr's story one of a Royal Mess? Had she been taken somehow, by the turbaned men, and ended up on the Island of Athiera? Had the House of the Falcon recently been alerted to her presence off the island and sent the *Mirage* to reclaim her?

Tulascarri launched into the next tree, barely touched the branch, and drifted free for a few moments before catching the next, swinging herself forward, upwards. She caught a vine and fell in a gentle curve, brushed ferns with an outstretched hand and then spun in a ball before propelling herself again, up towards the sunlight that was breaking through the clouds.

Back on the boards she allowed the Change to recede, swept leaves and twigs from her skin, and spat out a small moth that she had not been able to avoid.

“*Athelu?*”

The call was like music, and she bounced into the room. “Was Morphas generous?”

Ayr stretched lithely on the bed, groaning with exertion, her fists balled and back arched.

Taking her grunts as affirmation, Tulascarri waited for her to sit up and then, sitting on the bed, she took Ayr's hand. "What do you remember of your childhood?"

Thir'day, Day 33, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

There was a lot of noise and running feet and shouting as Tulascarri, Ayr of Whispers, and Hahn stood out of the way on the deck of the ship called the *Stormhammer*.

From within the hollowed stump of an old iron oak the ship, fifty paces long and about fifteen paces wide, was borne skywards by an enormous oblong balloon, fired by a sturdy furnace on the upper deck.

With practiced rhythm and a grunted chorus, six teams of bare chested sailors cranked an equal number of winches, deploying horizontal beams as masts on either side of the ship, like the wings of some great bird.

"Impressive, is she not?"

Invigorated by Hahn's potion, secretly administered, Adobas was a new man. He wore fine robes and a gold sash, sporting two magnificent swords. His skin had returned to a healthy bronze, and his square chin jutted in pride under sparkling pools of purple. His pockmarked face was hugged by long billowing green hair streaked with red that shone like copper in the sun.

"Amazing..." Ayr could hardly contain her wonder. "How...?"

“She was designed by Tarsis of... well, I forget where he was from. Genius. Mad, though, quite mad, and addicted to the dice, but when that passion is adequately employed...” Adobas swept an arm out towards gleaming boards and shiny metal. Even the phalanx of harpoons seemed to glitter.

“This man... Tarsis. He designed and built this ship?”

“Oh yes. Not only the ship, but her weapons and camouflage too.”

“Camouflage?”

“You won’t see the *Stormhammer* coming until it’s too late.” He narrowed an eye as he leaned in closer. “The hull? It’s masterfully painted to blend with the sky. If you do see her, you won’t live to tell of it.”

Adobas was a legendary pirate of the seas, using the *Stormhammer* to plunder imperial vessels. He had grown rich, and prosperous, and now controlled an empire of pirate ships that were the scourge of the imperial shipping lanes.

“But then why does the *Stormhammer* berth so far inland?” Ayr of Whispers was holding onto the railing so tight her knuckles showed white, but her smile was rapturous.

“Because the *Stormhammer* has passed into legend, my dear. And I love the Mystic Lake more than the sea.”

“I ... do not understand...”

“The *Stormhammer* has never been seen by any living sailor. The very name carves fear and terror into the hearts of men, and it is considered bad luck on imperial ships to even have a hammer on deck when a storm rises. My ship no longer needs to fly the seaboards as she once did. Her name is enough.”

Striding forward Adobas barked at his men, and Hahn voiced his moment. “I have narrowed down to who I suspect is the poisoner.”

“Indeed?” Tulascarri leaned on the railing, watching the canopy growing smaller by the moment. Hahn refused to look, his jaw clamped tighter than his fingers on the rail.

“Yes. Please could we go below so I can tell you?”

Chuckling, Tulascarri took Hahn’s hand, and the three negotiated the narrow stairs to the galley.

When he was sure nobody could overhear, Hahn spoke again. “I think it is Bassalon, the younger son. He prepares his father’s food. He is weak in body, but strong in learning. I snooped into his chambers one night and discovered the things needed to distil *moonsong*.”

“How will we draw him out?”

“I have fixed it so the poison turns the food blue. Adobas refused his morning meals today because of it. The tricky thing about *moonsong* is it must be administered on an almost continuous basis or you have to start again. This means he will have to resort to something stronger, and I think he will try when his father goes to bed.”

Ayr slipped away from the table, silking into the galley with a tune on her lips, casting over her shoulder that she would fetch them wine.

For some days now Tulascarri had sensed something was bothering Hahn. At first she thought he was concerned Ayr would steal his sister away but he was not a jealous person, and such insecurity would have been discernible from the start. He was well nourished, and they were in no immediate danger, and now it bothered her that she had not been able to deduce his concern.

“Speak plain,” she said, nudging him with a foot under the table. “What dampens your smile so?”

“You cannot keep her, sis...”

The darkness again. The feeling inside her that moved beyond her grasp took her breath and made form. “How can you say this? You are wise but you do not see the future, Hahn.”

But she knew he was right; Tulascarri was only lying to herself.

“You are Akiun. She is a priestess. Yours the sword, hers the incense. Your feet in the forest, hers on the Island.”

“And who is to say we cannot put away the sword? We’ve spoken of this, before we met Ayr or knew of the Island.”

“And what of your dream to trace other Akiun? What of your dream to be tutored by the Sage?”

And what of Hahn? He did not say it, but it was written in sadness on his face. Perhaps he did see his sister slipping away. She would not betray him, yet the thought of not waking up with Ayr was too much to bear with dry eyes.

“And if you were to spend the rest of her days with her, forsaking all others as you would do, you would still be a young woman when she slips to the arms of her goddess.”

She wanted to strangle the truth from him, to rip it to pieces in the obscurity of the lie she so wished was true. Shutting out the green that luminesced over the table, her shoulders resigned and with the sound of claws raking wood she sat back in the shadows of her gloom, wishing she knew what to do.

She felt Hahn rise, felt his arms around her neck and his little lips pressed against her cheek.

“Just think about it sis. And if you still want to, I suppose I could learn to live in the desert.”

Sixthday, Day 36, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

It took three nights' sailing under the moons before Bassalon finally gathered his marrow and stole into his father's bedchamber.

He was dressed like Tulascarri, complete with sword on his back, and as she watched him silently approach the bed, she was both indignant that he would seek to cast doubt on her – for no doubt somebody on board had seen him – and impressed with his cunning.

He drew the sword and she saw its blade was in fact a thin rod. Now, with his back to the invisible warrior he unstopped a bottle, opened a hole in the handle and positioned the far end over his father's head.

She moved swiftly, striking the pressure points with staccato raps, producing puffs of dust from his clothing, like blue smoke in the moonlight.

Frozen in place he would remain there until somebody released him, or he died of thirst. Shutting the door behind her, Tulascarri knew it would not be thirst that killed him.

It was not long until dawn, but Tulascarri crept under the sheet next to Ayr, enfolding her sleeping form. Hahn's breathing in the bunk above was long and deep, one hand dangling over the edge. Physically it was relaxed, but her mind was gripped by it, by his words so true they turned her mouth dry with a bitterness that neither wine nor honey could dull.

It was unfair of Seisha to give her hope but then remove it so.

Shouts from above. The sound of a bell clanging. Had she drifted off?

“He did it, didn’t he?” Hahn’s face appeared. Sunlight insulted her, making her blink. How long had it been?

Rushing up to the dawn, they watched a number of men carrying Bassalon, catatonic, onto the deck. The rod and phial were at the foot of the furnace that fired the balloon above. Another work of expert craft, the furnace was as broad as three men abreast and slightly taller than a horse. A large circular door in the centre could be opened to throw in more fuel – special logs of compressed wood and alchemical potions that burned hotter than a normal fire and created no smoke.

“Set him down right there.” Adobas had not had time to don his finery. Wearing only his trousers he indicated a spot in front of the furnace, gesturing with his sword.

The sailors, all burly men, obeyed and stepped back as Adobas came to stand a nose away from his son. “Insufferable raisin, you dried out testicle!” His heels squeaked on the deck as he turned to Tulascarri. “You did this? You immobilised him so I could discover for myself what Basador has been trying to tell me all along?”

The pirate was waving his sword like a finger, but she did not think it was meant for her, and was more concerned with why Adobas seemed to hate raisins. “I did, Adobas. We had an arrangement.”

“So, my son... my one *true* son... the one I kicked out of my home... loved me enough to send you when he knew all else would fail?” Sadness and pride glistened on his cheeks.

“As I said, we...”

“Would you be so kind, Tulascarri, to release the runt? Just... just enough so he can try to explain when his mind took flight?” By the time Adobas finished, his face was red and his temples pulsed.

Tulascarri obliged, and released a torrent of sobs from Bassalon, which ended with “Please... forgive me Insem.”

“Forgive you? How can I forgive you when I cannot forgive myself? I should have strangled your mother when she said she carried you. I should have known when you were born above ground! I should have listened to my one true son...” Adobas ranted back and forth on the deck. His men looked terrified. Ayr looked horrified. Hahn looked fascinated.

Adobas called one of his deckhands. “Go tell my true son that all is forgiven and my empire is his from this day forward. Well, after I die.”

“Uh... now... my lord? We... are still flying...”

Adobas ran his sword through the man’s belly, dragged him to the railing and threw him overboard, yelling, “At your convenience, of course.”

“My lord!” A young man, sinewy of body and pretty of face, took a knee in front of the pirate, holding a messenger bird. “Lord Basador will appreciate your own hand. I have written the note for you.”

“Ahh.” Adobas lifted him by the chin, smearing it with blood from his hands and showing the face to his men as the bird took flight. “You see? Not just a comely countenance. This one thinks on his feet. He is half your size and twice your weight in gold.” Using the man’s tunic to wipe his hands, he returned to stand in front of Bassalon’s quivering, drooling lips.

He took a breath, and cleared his throat as if about to deliver an address, but then stepped back as if he had buried his nose in dung, upper lip curling. Turning away in disgust he threw a casual gesture. “Throw him in the furnace.”

“No! Father!”

“Feet first.”

“I am your best alchemist. Without me the *Stormhammer* will never sail again.”

The men were already lifting the squealing statue. One of them opened the furnace and a blast of hot air pushed them back.

The *Stormhammer* shuddered, making Hahn hold onto Tulascarri’s waist with a whimper.

Adobas paused his men, pivoting. “I will see the *Stormhammer* burn, and the name of Adobas no more than a footnote in History, before anybody plays to my vanity again. And I have Basador to thank for that. Goodbye, miserable spawn. Thank the gods you have no children.”

Ayr could scarcely watch and buried her face in Tulascarri’s shoulder as the son’s feet took flame and his shrieks pierced their ears. When his arms were hacked off because he was too wide to fit, she fainted.

Fifthday, Day 47, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

“Then... we’re going to come in low, and drop you down with a small boat, at night. The Ulutloys will not attack at night and I’m hoping the water is too shallow for the sea monster. You’re going to have to row yourselves to one of the Islands.” Adobas was pacing the galley, one of his swords held across his shoulders, his arms hooked over it. “Then we will retreat to the shore and wait for you. When you are ready, and such readiness shall not be longer than four days, you will light the biggest fire you can and we will come fetch you.”

The pirate was being shadowed by the young man who had sent the dove. There was a gold ring about his neck and he was

dressed in gaily coloured clothes that were too big for him, but what he lacked in musculature he made up with pride.

“I shall be going alone.”

Hahn and Ayr, who until now had been listening to memorise, erupted with cacophonous objection, and flailing hands, but Tulascarri hushed them with wilting green fire and a single raised finger.

“Ayr has said the stone is in a place where she cannot go; and I am not risking Hahn to the Ulutloys, or *any* beast for that matter. The archipelago was once the home to a civilisation that is now in ruins, and nobody has been there for a hundred cycles at least. Only the gods know what lurks among those stones.”

“I see the truth of it.” Adobas handed his sword to the young man, touching his cheek and taking the flagon of wine. “And so do your companions. Rest well. Boy, see to her provisions and the boat.”

Cirilius still slumbered when Tulascarri took the oars and began to pull on them, mist condensing on her Swath, once again freshly repaired, until it was soaked nearly through. The paddles broke the surface of the lake with unnecessarily loud crashes and creaks, and if there was anybody on the island even vaguely on watch they would have been alerted to her presence the moment she set wood to water.

With any hope of stealth thrown to the echoes, she called on the Circle of Five, the elements of earth and fire and metal, and threatened to snap the poles as the boat glided forward.

She had paid little heed to the presence of any sea monster, so reputed, but now her awareness was keen, and as her muscles strained against timber and fabric, the claws of her feet biting onto the next seat, she sensed the waters about and

below where at once she was awed by aquatic abundance – life so teeming it begged for space. So many hearts beating, so many spirits dancing to music only they could hear, and were it not for the rapidly approaching floor she may have been lost to such enchantment.

Setting the oars within the boat as quietly as she could, she marked the sound of reeds scraping the keel, then the grit of sand and, with something of a sticky lurch, the tiny vessel came to a halt, gargles of gas escaping from a watery chamber somewhere beneath.

Slimy mud swallowed her feet to the ankles, but her claws claimed purchase and she dragged the boat through the reeds further up the shore, took her sword and rucksack and slowly prowled up the steep beach to a plateau above.

Here there were flagstones, overgrown and covered in wind-blown debris. Cirilius had begun to part the mist but curtains of it still ghosted across her vision in scurrying shrouds as if desperate for a place to hide from the light.

Crouching behind the ruins of an ancient wall, once proud, she slid her sword into its scabbard and was about to sling the rucksack when she detected movement.

Through the veils of antiquity a figure approached. Without sound and distinct form it moved with definite purpose, but no rush, the stride of someone who had expected her. About twenty paces away it stopped, and a voice, deep of conviction, barrelled over the landscape.

“If you have come as it has been foretold, you have nothing to fear. *Antsun’akisū.*”

Foretold? Did this person, a man by measure of speech, know she would come?

His last word, in the Ancient Tongue, meant to greet with Honour, specifically. Was he Akiun, perhaps? Had she unwittingly stumbled onto one of the lost schools?

Leaving behind her rucksack she stepped through the moss covered remains of an archway, and into the morning sunlight. She touched her temple, her lips, and finished the triple-greeting with a downward arc of her hand. “*Antsun’akisu*. I am Tulascarri.”

The man was about the same height as her, broader in the shoulders and heavier in the legs. He wore trousers of brown cotton, tucked neatly into leather boots, a tunic of beige hemweed, and he carried a staff. Deeply soulful brown eyes beneath thick, rich, black curls of hair bored into her with a mixture of ferocity and compassion.

He bowed low, legs together. “I am Usil Belathazen Ulrika Fendoren Tuk-Lendenar; Keeper of the Watch; Guardian of Kendar; Master of Senoff-kendarin; Vizier of Wenfath; Knyte of the Grimoire, your humble servant.”

From the furthest reaches of her memory she evoked what she had been taught of the Knytes of the Grimoire.

Where others had gods and goddesses, the Knytes believed in the Divinity of a series of books known as the Grimoire. Said to possess magical powers and deep secrets, the Grimoire was preserved and protected by the Knytes. Originally they had been an off-shoot of priests who had sequestered themselves, somewhere, to live in seclusion and learning. It had been rumoured that the Jiku Archipelago was where they had went, but nobody had ever confirmed it.

“A noble Knyte stands before me, and I intrude upon his land uninvited. I seek forgiveness for my trespass, and request

passage, for I have a task I am bound to complete.” Tulascarri placed her palms together, dropping her chin just slightly.

“Your feet are bare, but there is no other sign of your people, masked one.” Usil did not move from his position, save to part his feet somewhat, and his legs bent just a fraction.

“I am Trefolkian, noble Knyte.”

“My thanks, but it matters little, for all beyond these Islands are lost to madness and lust. What is your purpose, this task you are bound to complete?”

“I wish to recover a sacred stone, lost to the priestesses of the Island of Athiera.”

“And how is it you believe it lies here?”

“The one who seeks the stone is drawn to it. It calls to her from these very islands; from a place where no man can go. Is there... such a place here?”

“There is such a place.”

“Would you guide me to it?”

“If you pass the test of honourable combat, then I shall guide you to this place.”

Honourable combat.

It simply meant a good fight, and did not necessarily preclude mutual death, though she was sure he would refrain from killing her as best he could. Yet, for her as an Akiun, it meant she should not utilise abilities that he did not possess.

He was a deluded fool.

Nothing would stop her from using the Circle of Five. She began to walk towards him, her feet sensing out the ground for instability; there was none, and she prepared to run.

Then she stopped.

Her heart was beating as if she had exhausted herself before she had begun. Had she been tricked somehow? She glanced

about for evidence of sorcery but there was none, and the Knyte had not moved.

She could feel the Circle within her, spinning, crackling like stormvine in every fibre of her body. Yet something was wrong. Like the *Stormhammer* shuddering to its timbers, she felt shaken to her soul.

How could she do this? How could she repay the kindness bestowed so lavishly upon her with treachery? It would be easy to disappear and reappear, impervious to his blows, and slice him from forehead to forearm, but it was not easy to deny the changes in her that the past months had wrought.

The trials she had endured had been a melting pot where her misdeeds had been reprieved. She had been stripped of the dross and restored with magnificence. Was she now to step out of that crucible sullied or sovereign?

This man did not deserve her vengeance. He was no more responsible for the massacre at Carnath-Isia than Ayr or Hahn, and did *they* not deserve her love?

“You have all the determination of the mist. It is proof of your insanity, visitor. Perhaps you should return from whence you came?”

Insanity.

The word turned in her mind. From a certain perspective he was right. The world beyond these islands had lost its mind. For a fleeting moment she had come close.

Recomposing herself she released the Circle, and in its place she felt a sense of pride. “You wish to share knowledge, noble Knyte?”

Usil allowed the skyward end of his staff to fall away from his head. “If this is your term.”

It had been some time since she had not called on the Circle of Five in combat, in some form, but in the earliest cycles of an Akiun's training they had no such knowledge, only martial technique and the myriad styles and animal systems were so ingrained that the very sinews of her being bore the teachings in blood.

Her feet sprung her forward and her arms flew, but the Knyte was ready and he swung the staff with practiced simplicity. Dodging, sweeping down onto a heel she sensed him jump and vault over her, and heard the staff connect the ground where she had been.

Now that she had his measure she knew what to do, and attacked again in a series of weaves, avoiding the staff deftly until she landed a kick in his chest.

But her foot found air and his staff found her, throwing her sideways. He fought with precision and composure, with elegance she could only admire.

Her arm was throbbing but she had had worse blows dealt and she attacked once more. This time, her mind was calmer, more removed, as it should be, and in the blurs that were his limbs she discerned an opening; and in that opening she planted a flat palm, lifting him into the air, and landing him on his back.

He was winded, but not finished. With an agile spin he was on his feet, and now it was his turn to strike, driving her backwards with a volley of blows that would have killed a lesser fighter.

With each strike she allowed him to close the distance between them and by the time he assessed his position he was over reached. The staff slid over her shoulder and she curled

under it like a snake, striking him hard on the lower ribs so that he staggered to the side, coughing.

Taking the stance of the Teegra, she afforded him a few moments of recovery. He was far from exhausted and she was pleased the Knytes had not grown soft.

“I thought Akiun was lost.” The Knyte straightened his tunic, and inspected a rip.

“There is but me, though it is my prayer to learn of a lost school, some day.”

The Knyte lay his staff on the ground, his feet together. He held his hands, palms open and overlaid, turned towards her, thumbs together so that they resembled a butterfly; then he withdrew them to his right shoulder, his right hand becoming a fist enveloped by the palm of the left; and finally, he presented both palms, open and upturned, but still overlaid, in a gesture of offering.

“Seek the metamorphosis of self; guided by the light eternal; that you may be granted your enlightenment.”

The knowledge thus shared, Tulascarri retrieved her rucksack and returned to the Knyte. In his face she saw no anger or bitterness, as is often the visage of the vanquished; only a mild curiosity.

“You knew I would come?”

They began to walk away from the overgrown platform towards a bridge that crossed to the next island.

He remained silent, considering his response. “In a vision, one fine morning, a beautiful lady of blue came to me.” He could not see her face, the frozen awe, but he paused at her expletive. “So you know of this apparition?”

“I shall gladly share the details another time, but suffice to say she is the reason I live.” The bridge seemed to glisten with

water and as her naked soles touched it, a shiver ran up her spine. "This bridge lives!"

"As surely as you or I." He gently pushed her forward. "Do not be afraid. He will not harm you."

"He?"

They reached the next island, stepping onto more flagstones where once a bridge had been. This one had no life force pulsing through it.

Usil whispered a few strange words in an unknown tongue towards the water and Tulascarri's awe turned to wonder. An indescribably large beast began to move away; the bridge they had crossed having been one of its enormous tentacles. Before the limb crashed down and sprayed them with water, she caught sight of suckers and something that resembled hundreds of mouths filled with tiny teeth.

"He is Senoff-kendarin, lord of the deep, and he is my friend."

"So the legend of a sea monster is true...?"

"Sea... monster?"

Until now Tulascarri thought it impossible for him to laugh, but he did, pausing to wipe his cheeks, then laughing again. "There is no sea here, and pray, do not call him a monster, for he is quite a sensitive creature."

"Of course..."

Tulascarri did not see any other Knytes, though she sensed their presence. It was only well after sunset when they sat around a fire that she saw the figure of another man approaching. He signalled for Usil who joined him and returned a short while later.

By his posture she knew what he would say. "You acted today beyond your authority, Vizier of Wenfath, did you not?"

“It is not the first time, nor is it the last. I enjoy some influence amongst the Knytes, but they grow restive at your presence.”

“Then we should recover the sacred stone tonight that I may leave with the sun.”

“Would that we could, for the place you seek is indeed where no man can go. It is the home of darkness and temptation to those who would be called men, and only Senoff-kendarin can take you there. Tonight he feeds, and we must wait for his return. Tell me, then, of your adventures?”

There was something about this man that made him easy to talk to. In some ways he was easier to talk to than Hahn, or Ayr, and she told him of how Carnath-Isia had been attacked, how she and Hahn had been the only ones to escape. She spoke of her quest for vengeance and when Usil could see the fire in the rivers on her cheeks he offered her wine. And when she spoke of her life as a mercenary and all the blood she had spilled he offered her bread.

“You honour me, my lady, to confide in me so.”

The hearty crackle of the fire had long since been replaced by gentle waves lapping the rocks nearby and the light of the moons was silver and blue in his curls, like a rare steel wrought of the fortitude he possessed.

His falcon-like gaze prompted her to confess many things, and in no moment did he judge her, except to say she was, quite clearly, insane. “But it is the path of all who are called to the Grimoire... to stumble in insanity until they see the light and come to Jiku.”

His words were reminiscent of something Rakha had said, and Tulascarri mused on how every religion seemed to believe theirs was the only True Path to the Divine.

Beyond the shore in the distance, beneath the three lines of densely packed stars, was a dull glow, like a great fire burned in the forest. She asked him about it.

"It is the city of Frethenia, sister city to Depthres in the north. A great home of learning, and a place of great hope. You know of the Prophecy of the new Queen of Trefolk?"

"And all the Blood Moons passed, unfulfilled?"

"Regardless, our scholars believe that Frethenia will be the place where it comes to pass. In all your travels you have never been there?"

"Someday, perhaps. I wish to journey one day to the Great Sage Orax, who will complete my training."

"You are not a Master Akiun?"

"But for the trials I remain an Adept."

Usil regarded the staff across his knees with solemnity. "Then you honoured me even more this day when we shared knowledge, for you met me on even terms. I did not even remove my boots."

Tulascarri slowly removed her sword from the scabbard and indicated the runes etched in the metal. On one side was a phrase, and on the other a single word; a name, and the carvings caught the red of ember and silver of moon.

"So you go by the name of your sword?"

"It is my Akiun clan name, *and* the name of my sword..."

"Your true name, the name of the woman you are, remains behind the veil."

"My true name remains behind the veil for a purpose. You must trust me to this, Usil."

"It shall be my honour, Tulascarri."

Sixthday, Day 48, of the Trefolkian Month of Peshian, 1626 ODT

The place where no man can go.

She had been enfolded by Senoff-kendarin, and one of his suckers had clamped over her mouth. Immobile, able only to breathe, they had descended into the depths. It was a short but unnerving ride, ending with her being ejected from a watery pool onto a rocky shelf. In total darkness she had found a tunnel that seemed to descend, slipped, and slid into nothingness, falling until her feet, unharmed, touched down on something indefinable.

Lights had begun to appear until a great expanse was revealed. It was lit with an orange and red glow, the colour of a hand covering a lantern, where the light shone through. It seemed to have no discernible floor, yet her footing was solid, and when she was deep within this mysterious expanse she could hear the sounds of people in ecstasy and in the throes of orgasm.

Images began to appear, men and women in coitus, an orgiastic carpet of limbs and bodies that writhed in sexual bliss, and her body responded to the allure. There were no mores here, no conventions, and the bodies knew no boundaries, only pleasure.

She felt her footsteps growing heavy, her hands reaching for her clothing as she became intoxicated by the scent, and the yearning for release almost overpowered her loins; and yet there was a thin strand, an iron filament of reserve, her love and loyalty towards Ayr, that pushed her through this delicious deception, taking her to a place where gold and riches gushed from chests and vaults, and the sparkle and glitter of jewels was

equalled only by the tinkling sound of riches untold. Here too was a golden unbreakable hair of hope, the knowledge that the riches she had stored up rivalled those here, and as these images faded she saw figures appearing, the faces of her friends and teachers from Carnath-Isia. They beckoned to her to join them, offered her wine and the temptation of comfort was almost too much to resist, but the memories of their blood, the indelible rivers of massacre that had seeped into her bones could not be erased, and when she could almost feel the touches of their fingers on her cheek, she threw herself forward with a lurch, a scream of torment, only to see a shimmering object before her.

Here it hovered, the sacred stone, defiant in its glory. Shaped like the pupil of a cat, its' ovoid surface was covered in symbols she had never seen, and she knew they were not of this world.

She took hold of it with reverence and as her hands clasped about it, felt a power surge through her that threatened to steal her mind. She quivered as the stone sought to destroy her, summoned the Circle of Five but did no harm, and when she looked again, the stone was cold and throbbing blue in her hands.

She felt a tingling in her Life Seed so powerful it was like a second one had been freshly quickened within her. The invigoration of life, a sense of joy and flutters just this side of orgasm burned through her, in her, over her, and her soles sang with a song of their own to the delicious ground under her innocent feet.

The vibrance of the universe and all that is Life welled over her lids and as the droplets fell to the floor, she knew the last of the blood on her hands was washed away.

Chapter 10

Fourthday, Day 46, of the Trefolkian Month of
Thena, 1626 ODT

“What do we do now?” Hahn was mesmerised by the artefact until Tulascarri covered it with a cloth.

She hugged him that he grunted boyishly. “Silly... it must return to the Island of Athiera.”

Hahn scratched his head. “You *know* it is worth more than all the gold and logdum in the world.”

“Worth more than your soul?” Ayr of Whispers emerged from the Leafbath, drying her hair.

Hahn diverted from her swaying hips and directed his feet toward the door. “Just checking to see that you both still have your minds. Tulascarri, you never said much about the Jiku Archipelago, and the places you went. Does anybody live there? Did you see the sea monster?”

She was grateful his back was to her, for she did not enjoy lying to his innocent, trusting face. Usil had sworn her to secrecy about the Knytes of the Grimoire and all she had seen, and she would uphold her oath. Additionally, upon her return from the mysterious underwater cavern, Usil had needed her help with another matter, and this too was a secret that would remain with Jiku.

“There is no *monster*... but one day I shall teach you about that which drives men mad.”

He was about to speak again but Ayr was already in Tulascarri’s embrace. There was no understanding why they had to spend so much time rubbing and licking and he

announced he would join the three Aghari instead. At least they had some sense.

And a kestrel.

"A kestrel?" Tulascarri's hands were lost to blonde locks and when she looked, Hahn was gone.

"It seems Jamal has always had a hunting bird, and it arrived while you were retrieving the stone. You do not mind that Hahn sees us in our love-making?" Ayr paused from tracing dainty circles with her tongue around the point of Tulascarri's nipple.

"If he grows up seeing that this is naturally an expression of love, he will be less likely to be given to perversion when his sap rises." It was difficult to remain coherent when her words were mostly breath.

With a dirty sole in each hand Ayr lifted Tulascarri's legs into the air, bending them back until her knees were close to her ears and her hips tilted up, and she locked them there as her tongue touched the little starfish of her ashenstar.

It flicked gently about the nerves, and slid up to where it pulled petals between slurping lips and darted within her until her panting was timed with each penetration.

And then it seized the tiny bud of pleasure and sucked and teased and coaxed until Tulascarri was begging for release.

When Ayr finally relented of her torture, the flat of her tongue raked the bud without delicacy. Her head spasmed in motion and her tongue writhed pleasure to words and Tulascarri began to speak from primal needs and demands.

Her feet gripped the head of the bed and her hips pumped with mewls and cries and... in that moment of supreme bliss, suspended between sky and earth, she could see the wave approach, but for a split moment could see it before it hit, and

then she was dashed to splinters of jubilation and pleasure and fiery sparks and jets of release and cries that would deafen the thunder itself.

Her belly was quivering, her legs were as jelly, but Ayr cared not and sank onto Tulascarri's mouth with instructions explicit and petals hungry; and she rode that mouth as if on a horse set to please her and when it was not enough she kneeled with her buttocks in the air and with Tulascarri's darting fingers deep in her yearning holes until her fountain burst and coated the sheets with blessings of the goddess.

Their lovemaking was unbridled, a beast intent on devouring anything it chose, and nothing was forbidden. After such passion there was always peace, and calm; the serenity of satiation, the nourishment of embrace.

"Adobas has agreed to fly us to Asde Fahd, and from there he will continue to the coast once more, for one last voyage of the *Stormhammer*." Ayr was tracing patterns on Tulascarri's belly with the fluids that had landed there, giggling at the gooseflesh, the thud of her heart.

"He has?" She had expected he might.

"It seems you have become like a daughter to him, and he so wishes you would take his 'one true son' as your entwined..." Ayr stifled a giggle in Tulascarri's breast. "But he respects the sanctity of our union, and as thanks to you for aiding his son, he feels honour-bound to deliver us there."

Adobas was a strange man, with a strange code, but Tulascarri was grateful. "He is a half-crazed pirate if ever there was one, but if his absence of sanity makes him mindful of our cause, then I thank him."

Indeed, that absence of sanity saw to it that the journey to Asde Fahd was swift, and mercifully uneventful. Through clear

skies and grey; through sun and fine spray they sailed high above the Mystic Lake of Souls. As wooden dice rolled they shared stories; as empty bottles rolled they shared song, and as their limbs rolled in their bed Ayr and Tulascarri shared love.

It was on a bright morning that the *Stormhammer* descended from the company of birds to the embrace of the forest close to the border between Trefolk and Asde Fahd and with high emotion they bade farewell to the pirates.

The six travellers stole horses from a farm and galloped until they located a small village where sand began to turn from brown to beige, and established camp in a small ravine.

“We are nearly home.” Ayr of Whispers curled her toes with excitement as she sat by the fire, staring at the horizon hued by orange and purple. “And my task is nearly ended.”

Tulascarri turned the skewered quellion birds on the fire.

Part of her was sad that the mission was nearly done. Though she knew she should be glad, there was a light in Ayr’s expression that she had seen first on the *Stormhammer* upon returning with the sacred stone. It was an undefinable light, a reservation, a distance, and it surrounded her heart with an unnamed fear. Still, she sighed, there was nothing she and Hahn and Ayr could not face together.

Things had gone well, and there was no reason to suspect they would not continue in the same vein.

Little did she know, this would change in the morning.

*Fifthday, Day 47, of the Trefolkian Month of
Thena, 1626 ODT*

“It’s gone!”

Ayr was shaking Tulascarri, her face wild.

She knew instantly what had happened. "Where are the men?"

"They're gone too. And the horses."

Hahn was sitting up in his bedroll, rubbing his eyes, but the shock would not leave.

"*Vama ferra!*" Tulascarri sent her senses out, searching for them. "Come, Tarek is in trouble."

Together they bolted towards the end of the gorge, Tulascarri leading, flying over the rocks as if they were there only to speed her.

She reached him, skidding to a halt over the stones, bending down to lift his head.

"Forgive me, Tulascarri. I tried to stop them." A sword was lodged in his stomach, deep enough to have severed his spine. Ironically it was now the only thing keeping him alive, preventing him from bleeding out too quickly.

"There is nothing to forgive, Tarek. You fought with honour. You will pass with honour."

She knew of three points on his skull that if tapped would remove his pain but as she went to remove his turban he stopped her.

"No. To die without my turban is to die without my name. Here, take this, you will need it." From a pocket he pulled a detailed map, the way to the Island of Athiera, and pressed it into Tulascarri's Swath. "I learned they will take the stone to somebody who has been looking for it for a very long time."

"Who?"

"I know not, but somehow they have been secretly communicating with him for some time. I first suspected when that bird kept coming and going."

"The kestrel?"

"Yes..."

Ayr and Hahn arrived and Ayr clutched Hahn as if to shield him, distress on her lips.

"You slept with your turban on?" Tulascarri took his hand. "You knew what they were planning?"

"Again, I suspected. I rose early and waited but they..."

"Why did you not wake us?"

"I am a fool for trying to act on my own, but they are Aghari, and deserve the wrath of the Aghari." His face contorted in pain.

Tulascarri knew his time was near and kneeled in front of him, feeling helpless. "Must I turn you to the east, so the Eye of Clopax may see you?"

Tarek laughed, though it hurt. "Not all Aghari worship Clopax..."

"Then tell me the direction for the goddess. Is it west?" Tulascarri would have engaged him in a debate on sand worms if it meant he would live a little longer.

"Silly superstitions..." Tarek was struggling to focus now. "But... would that I look upon *your* true... face?"

She removed the mask and head covering, hair cascading over her shoulders like blazing gold in the rising sun, and she gentled calloused fingers to her cheek.

"Now... there is no need to see the face of the goddess."

He wanted to say something more, but the words never formed. His body slumped, and air rushed from his lungs in a lonely wheeze.

With a kiss to his forehead and a whispered farewell, Tulascarri closed his lids and replaced her mask. Taking a few steps she put her back to Ayr and Hahn and her fingers to the handle of her weapon.

The walls of the ravine ended abruptly at this point, beyond it was a small garden of desert scrub and beyond that, the Desert of Broken Hopes.

A gentle but steady breeze into the canyon brought to her the delicate scent of tiny pink blooms, and the metallic taste of bladed intentions.

“You have been kind to wait,” she called, seeming to address the struggling plants. “But you may show yourselves now.”

She had sensed the *Mirage* before she reached Tarek, but upon locating him had halted her charge to battle. There were ten buried in the sand, another ten cleverly camouflaged by the shrubs, and slowly they revealed themselves.

Tulascarri was the only obstacle between them and the two people she loved. “I thank you for your courtesy, *Mirage*, you honour me. But my honour is to protect these people and you will all die here this morning.”

“We had heard you were no longer Akiun; that your goddess had cursed you.” One of the *Mirage* dropped the hood and removed the mask she wore. “You will not stop us.” Her blonde hair was short, spiked, and her deep blue orbs were keen as a blade. The only flaw to her pale skin was a dark jagged scar that rose from her cheek and tapered into her hair.

“Seisha has restored me, my lady. The poison was purged.”

There was the faintest flicker on her fair face, the slimmest waver of resolve. “It matters not, ultimately, for if our blood joins the sand we have fulfilled our purpose.”

“The Aghari tried to kill Ayr of Whispers, but I know you would bring her no harm. Why do you wish to take her?”

“Of our task, it is ours to know ‘What’. Not to know ‘Why’. We are to return with the princess, or not at all.”

The ten of the sand drew their swords while the rest tensed their bowstrings. Tulascarri had already summoned the Circle.

“Would you know why the Aghari would steal the sacred stone from us?”

The unmasked woman shook her head. “It is of no concern to us. But it is said the Aghari are loyal to the Venerable Elm of the Island, even to death. You should have asked them while you yet had time.”

Tulascarri touched her temple, her lips, and as her hand swept downwards she said, “Then it is my prayer that we may meet again, as friends.”

The arrows were the first to strike their mark, but this time they ricocheted off Metal; and by the time the daggers glanced off with whirring noises and the sound of splintering steel, Tulascarri had closed the distance.

She did not call on the Shades, for she felt she should allow the *Mirage* this much, and they fought bravely, without hesitation, and with a purity of focus and dedication that were worthy of legend.

The Akiun was swift, her strikes were clean and precise and she ensured none of them would suffer. None of the tricks the *Mirage* employed had any effect; no strategy, formation, or style offered advantage.

When there was only one who remained standing, Tulascarri heeded the whisper from the Sentience and held back the killing strike but drove her to her knees, bloodied and bruised. The point of her sword rested lightly on the woman’s shoulder, at the point where the neck began.

“You have fought superbly, noble Akiun.” The woman’s chest was heaving, but her words were steady. “Thank you for letting us see our foe.”

“As always, my lady, the *Mirage* fight with strength and grace. You are a credit to your Order, and your people.”

Though the *Mirage* was shaking, her sword was steady. She squared herself, a pinprick of blood appearing on her uniform. “Pray the wish of a woman already dead...? I do not wish to die on my knees.”

The Sentience had restrained her hand for a reason; and there could be but one. Tulascarri removed the blade and took a few steps in front of her.

“You have given life to a child, my lady. Of all these women here you alone are a mother.”

“The goddess has smiled upon my lineage. The child has five cycles.” Her hair whipped across her face. It did not hide the fondness curved on her lips, but she still held her weapon with both strong, confident hands.

“Would you not live to see many more?”

“The child will be raised by her birth mother.”

Tulascarri checked on Hahn and Ayr, satisfied they were untouched where they huddled on the ground. “It is told orphans do not fare well on the streets in Asde Fahd.”

The woman held up her hands for reprieve, spitting blood from her mouth, and lay her blade on the ground. Using her knees as support she returned to standing, tore a strip from her uniform and bound the gash on her brow. Then, she recovered her sword from the sand and steadied her stance.

“Her mother, like me, is *Mirage*, and she will be raised in safety. If you kill me here I meet the goddess with honour. To show me mercy is only to condemn me, and my kin.”

“Then I pray we may meet again as friends. You have made your Peace?”

“Have you made yours?”

Swords clashed. One shattered; and a grunt that ended abruptly rippled across the drifting sands.

*Fifthday, Day 47, of the Trefolkian Month of
Thena, 1626 ODT*

A search of the bodies revealed no more information than what they already knew.

Ayr and Tulascarri stripped three of the women of their outer garments and, disguised as *Mirage*, located their camp just beyond the closest hill. They were grateful it was watched over by a humble Bandori goat herder, who moved off after a brief exchange and did not seem to notice that Hahn was a lot shorter than any of the *Mirage* had been.

Returning to the body of Tarek a brief search soon revealed two steady lines of hoof prints going north. Though Cirilius was high, they could not afford to wait out the heat of the day and headed off slowly, six fresh horses with provisions in tow.

They slept little, or, while one steered the horse, the other slept strapped to the rider; and in this fashion their progress became steady interception so that on the evening of the fifth night, Tulascarri discerned their position.

“No fires tonight, ladies.” Hahn was laying out his bedroll. “And we should only whisper.”

“Will you attack them?” Ayr was feeding water to her horse from her palm.

Tulascarri lay down on her bedroll. “Today was their last sunset. Wake me, please, when the moons are high.”

“*Athelu?*” Ayr came to kneel next to Tulascarri. “Do you know what the Wrath of the Aghari is?”

“I thought Tarek was just talking.” She sought an answer from Ayr and, though she was tired, felt her spirits lifted just by her touch.

“When Sabal and Jamal tied you in the desert, as you said, that was the Wrath of the Aghari. They were cruel to cover you, dragging out your pain.”

“They saved my life. That, and the diet Maloud had me eat which gave my body the fortitude it needed. Do you wish me to spare them?”

The priestess rubbed her arms as she stared at the horizon.

Faced with a choice Ayr had never had to make before, Tulascarri reasoned it must be difficult for her; just some months ago she had had trouble deciding on whether to leave the Island, now she held the lives of two men in her hands. Perhaps it was unfair to place her in a position of judgement when she was not ready for it, but the priestess who had undertaken this adventure was no longer so naïve. There were hard decisions to be made in the days and weeks to come. She must know that sooner or later she would have to face the Venerable Elm.

“The Aghari are loyal to the Island, and always have been. They should not be punished for their obedience and I owe a great gratitude to them for indirectly they brought *you* to me, the greatest love of my life... so far. Make their deaths painless, as you did with the *Mirage*.”

Several hours later, as Tulascarri rapidly closed the distance between her and the thieving Aghari, there were three perceptions she was distinctly aware of.

The first was the parched and crinkly feel of the baked earth under her bare feet and how her soles adapted with ease and

grace to the changing terrain. Invisible, silent, her footfalls were little more than puffs of dust.

The second was the stark irony of Ayr's decision, for Tulascarri would have guessed the priestess to spare the Aghari. Though they were forgiven, they had lost their way, and their souls should return to the Void, to be cleansed that they may return and find a noble path. Such was the sacred charge of the Akiun. Maybe Ayr had, over this time, come to appreciate it in some way.

The third, however, was more complicated, but the most disturbing, and it eluded her sleep-deprived mind for a while. Fortunately the long walk afforded her some time to contemplate, and eventually she discerned that, though Ayr did not say directly so, she was not bound to Tulascarri as Tulascarri was bound to Ayr. Strangely this thought did not sting as it might have, several weeks ago. Ever since returning to the *Stormhammer* with the sacred stone, Ayr had been somewhat removed, somewhat distant, and Tulascarri was reminded of Hahn's warning that night in the galley.

It was not that her love had waned or faded by any means; rather, Tulascarri understood that her capacity for love could not be limited to flesh and bone. Ayr loved her goddess first and foremost and in celebrating that love she would embrace the arms of *many* lovers, for to Ayr, all lovers were but a momentary embodiment of her goddess, and *all* would receive her love in full... but *equal* measure.

Whilst it did not sting, this conclusion left her feeling hollow, and sad, and she was so involved in it that she almost lost the element of surprise.

Shaking free of the cobwebs, she estimated that she was within fifty paces of the encampment. With greater stealth she narrowed the gap, careful to stay on hard surfaces.

Who was this person they were taking the stone to? Who had been seeking it for a very long time?

Their fire had burned low, and the two Aghari were hunched forward, talking in low tones. Clearly they did not suspect they had been followed so soon and she caught their words on the wind.

“Where is he?” Jamal’s knee was bouncing nervously. “I do not like this, Sabal.”

“He said he would be here any time before daybreak. Be patient. The Venerable Elm wants the stone to be away from the Island and this man wants it. We are acting in accordance with her wishes.”

Jamal strode a few paces from the fire then came back. He seemed to be looking for signs or sounds of an approaching person. He checked to see he had not disturbed the kestrel, which was perched on a rock close by, apparently asleep. “But you know he will not use the stone for good. I have my reservations, Sabal. If this was a righteous path we should not have killed Tarek.”

“I killed him. His blood is on my hands. Sit down, brother.”

“And I did not stop you. It is on both our heads. He was a good man...”

“Our duty is to the Venerable Elm. She sent the bird and her message was clear...”

“Our duty is to do what is right, Sabal. Ayr of Whispers broke the codes of the Island when she left, but only to save it. You know she loves her goddess more than anything else. If

the Island were to die as she says, I am sure she would die with it."

Sabal seemed to brood on these words, looked about to speak, but Jamal continued, "I always thought that taking orphans from the streets was a good thing to do; to give them purpose and see them shine. Ayr of Whispers is a story of triumph. That was bad deeds for good purpose. Now we are doing the opposite."

Tulascarri was right behind them. From this position she could see the bag in which the sacred stone lay lying close to the fire, as if they thought it needed to be kept warm.

As they sat there, rubbing their hands together against the gathering cold, they appeared no different from simple, uncomplicated folk; men of the Aghari, no more than children playing at soldiers. It was hard to feel anger towards them. She even understood why Jamal had forced himself upon her comatose body; though it could never be excused.

She could kill them now, and it would be quick and painless, but who was this mysterious man? The sacred rune was, as Hahn had been so quick to point out, priceless; but its value as a gem was negligible when compared to its value as a magical artefact. And in the hands of the wrong person...

Her fine hearing detected the beat of approaching hooves and moments later the Aghari men heard it too. They drew their swords and made ready as the horse came to stop in swirls of ember fed dust. The rider was cloaked and Tulascarri could not see his face, but she recognised the build, and the voice.

"We have no fight, men of the Aghari, if you have brought what I seek."

As one who can see the key to a puzzle revealed only to them, Tulascarri pieced together the real reason why Kevorkai had invaded Asde Fahd.

Equipped with knowledge from his previous travels, Kevorkai had guided his army to a spring where his status as a god, in the minds of his followers, had been entrenched. The battle with the Bandori had followed just days after that. Having studied the map that Tarek had given to Tulascarri in his last moments, she now knew that the Bandori stronghold was in fact, manned by the Aghari; and that fortification was but one of many in a series that ultimately led to the Island of Athiera.

Kevorkai's campaign had failed but one man had survived. One man had escaped. Now the Dark Wyrder was here to claim the prize for which thousands had given their lives, and with the sacred rune in his control, there would be thousands more.

“Are you alone?”

Jamal and Sabal glanced at each other. The Wyrder was looking beyond them.

Tulascarri ducked behind a rock. Had he sensed her somehow?

“Yes.” Sabal picked up the bag containing the Southern Rune, but it would not lift from the ground. He bent his knees, locked his fingers under it and pulled until sweat stood on his face, but it was like trying to move a mountain. “I... do not understand...”

“Idiots.” The Wyrder dismounted. “The stone has locked itself to the ground, and you will not be able to move it.” Speaking a few words in the Ancient Tongue the Dark Wyrder scooped it up effortlessly.

“What is this strange stone?” Sabal peered closely at the glowing orb in the sorcerer’s hands.

Tulascarri was not listening to the exchange. She had touched the mind of the horse, was communicating with it, and while it gave no signs of recognition, she knew it had heard her, and from her hiding place she made a circuit into the desert until the sound of the men’s voices were no more than a murmur on the breeze.

There was an exchange. A large bag of coin for a priceless artefact, and Dumasarri mounted the horse once more. He urged the beast back the way he had come, but it veered off, heading towards Tulascarri.

Though the mage beat the animal, it began to gallop, gaining momentum, and Dumasarri had no option but to hold on, clutching the Southern Rune, bellowing.

With a skip, about ten paces before her, the steed dug its legs into the ground, neighing loudly. Dumasarri pitched forward and, with nothing to hold onto, flew over the horse’s head, landing in the soft sand, winded. The force was enough to throw the Southern Rune into the air, causing it to land some distance away from him.

Gasping, coughing out puffs of dust, the Wyrder scrambled towards it, shouting victoriously as his greedy fingers encircled it.

But his yelp of triumph became a cry of pain and anguish.

The sacred stone fell back to the desert, clutched by fingers that were no longer joined to their hands.

"You!"

The sorcerer seemed oblivious to his bloody stumps, fixated on the warrior who had materialised in front of him.

His mouth frothed and his face twisted with an evil madness, but the pain of his wounds supplanted it. Snarling, he tried to bind them.

"It was Kevorkai's plan, all along, to assault the Island of Athiera, wasn't it?"

The Dark Wyrder's eyes flashed.

"He wanted the stones for their power, didn't he? Only, what he thought was just a Bandori stronghold was actually manned by Aghari. And there are several such strongholds, who all rallied to battle..."

"Stupid king! He had us all believing he knew everything..."

"The Son of the All was just a man in the end."

"I had to finish what he started. One stone is better than none." Dumasarri tied off his bindings as best he could, struggled to his feet and took a step towards the sacred rune.

"The sacred stone does not belong to you. Nor will it ever."

"You think that cutting off my fingers will stop me?"

"No fingers, no spell-casting."

"You are a fool in your arrogance. You always were. Because of that you were easy to poison!" His crazed words were framed in spittle. Again, he yelled, "You think cutting off my fingers will stop me?"

Jamal and Sabal had almost arrived, charging as fast as the soft sand would allow.

Unperturbed, the horse had wandered off in search of grazing.

"Of course not. How could I be so foolish? *You* think you're going to *live*, don't you?"

The sword seemed to move like a whip in the moonlight, but there was no cracking sound; only the moist slurping of the two halves of a body as they fell away from each other.

With faces contorted in horror, the Aghari men reached her, but by the looks on their faces they already knew their fate.

They circled before they attacked.

“Come brother,” growled Jamal, “Let us show the world they are wrong when they say Tulascarri does not leave an enemy to live...”

Her blade cut as Ayr had asked. A slice, a pirouette, a slice, and the headless bodies teetered over, red fountains spurting high with a wet sticky hissing.

And for a few moments it sounded as if it had begun to rain.

Firstday, Day 1, of the Trefolkian Month of Ceesus, 1626 ODT

For nights unending they followed the map and the stars, trusting that their provisions would last. They spoke little, and ate even less, sleeping in the day and breaking camp at sunset. Though the map showed they were growing closer, it was not until several days later that they reached the edge of where the lake of the island *should* be.

“I do not understand.” Ayr’s voice cracked.

Their water was gone, they had lost the horses to a sand storm, and now, as they stared at the interminable desert there was still nothing but more sand, a flat and monotonous landscape of beige, punctuated only by courage.

“Now I know why this desert, known by many names, is often called the Desert of Broken Hopes...”

Hahn’s lips were blistered and his cheeks were red. Several times, Tulascarri had had to fetch him as he wandered away, mumbling about the water he could see.

“It should be *here!*” Ayr turned the map in all directions. Her hair was frizzy and her brow was wrinkled like that of an old woman. How long had it been since they made love?

Kneeling in the sand by her side, Tulascarri barely had the energy to take the map. They had followed it explicitly. After so many trials, after learning the sacred stone would not harm her for some reason, after coming so far and savouring the sweet wine of triumph as if divinely guided, how bitter it would be for them to perish so close to their goal.

“Fish.” Hahn was losing his young mind to the heat, digging his toes in the sand.

“I’m sorry, Hahn.” Tulascarri would have cried if she had any moisture left.

“No... look... fish!” He lifted something white from the ground. It was the pristine skeleton of a fish, not much bigger than his hand.

Tulascarri crawled across to the tiny bones dripping sand through his fingers. “By Seisha!”

“We’re sitting where the Lake was!” Ayr struggled but forced her wobbling limbs. “We have to go on. Just a little further.”

With massive effort they began to crawl, slowly, oblivious to the searing heat on their hands, unaware that somehow it had begun to grow cooler and the air seemed less harsh.

“There!” The haze seemed to part, to melt away, and they could see the start of the Lake beyond a stretch of clay baked into flakes the size of flagstones. Obviously it had been receding for a long while.

“Keep going...”

Geometrically shaped tiles of dark earth cracked and puffed but soon gave way to mud that sucked at their legs, but still

there was nothing to drink and, driven by the vision ahead, they pressed on to where the edge of the lake was real, and the water they could drink was real, and they rejoiced as, lying on their bellies, they took their fill.

They must have passed out right there, for when they recovered the stars winked at them and the moons were high.

Tulascarri rolled over on her belly, crawled forward, and slid into silvered darkness, her clothing drinking more than she did.

Ayr and Hahn followed with loud splashes and notes of joy. With some of her strength restored Tulascarri waded out of the shallows, traced the grooves they had left in the sand and mud, and located their belongings, including the bag with the sacred stone. Returning along the same route, she reached a point where the marks of their passage simply ended, and beyond this all she could see was more and more desert.

This then was the edge of the protective dome. Though it was insubstantial it was a powerful deception because here, deep in the sun-blasted dunes, anybody that had journeyed this far would be delirious and would die, forever unaware of how close they were to the Island.

Taking a step, the landscape changed and she could see the mud flat, the outline of her footprints, the drag marks from where they had crawled, the lake shining silver, and the silhouette of the Island.

It was not far to the beach, and by her reckoning they could easily wade across, or even swim if necessary. Driven by the promise of food waiting on the Island, Ayr and Hahn had no reservations and with new strength they soon reached the shore.

After locating a small sheltered alcove, they gathered fruit and nuts and some starchy tubers called Vergunny, and around a small fire they took their humble meal.

“*Adareth’el mithidie*. Hail to the last meal.” Hahn spoke with his mouth and fingers drenched in mango and he seemed to sparkle with mirth. He had ripped his trousers to barely a loin covering and seemed oblivious to the nudity of the ladies opposite him.

“And may it not be *our* last.” Ayr’s naked toes scrunched as she lifted her knees, belching.

Tulascarri reached into the fire and retrieved one of the Vergunny’s and peeled away the charred skin to reveal a white puffy inside that steamed out an earthy aroma she never thought could be so alluring. Blowing on it until it was cool enough for normal hands to hold, she divided it between the three of them and chewed slowly, thoughtfully.

This night was a quiet celebration and she would savour it more richly than the food in her hands, for she knew that the morning would bring not only a new day, but a new world.

Chapter 11

*Firstday, Day 1, of the Trefolkian Month of
Ceesus, 1626 ODT*

For long moments Ayr stared at the moons solemnly presiding over the night. She watched as the shadows changed length and listened to the plop of the lake and she felt as if she was on guard against something or someone.

The sacred rune no longer called to her, summoning her with a mesmerising obsession; instead it pushed her, drove her, towards its resting place, the place it yearned for as she had yearned for the Island, for her home, to deliver it whole again.

She could hear the murmurs of Hahn in his sleep, and could sense the beat of Tulascarri's heart in her thigh.

Though she wanted to take the Southern Rune and rush through the jungle, Tulascarri was right. In her haste she may very well injure herself and she needed to be rested to face the Venerable Elm.

Over and over she had sought to understand why the leader of her Order would betray the goddess, the Island, and all who lived here; but there was no answer, and it bothered her that the Venerable Elm was a powerful Wyrder against whom she had no defence. She wielded the Staff of Athiera, and it was a mighty weapon in the hands of one such as her. Could she or Tulascarri prevail against such magic?

She tried to sleep, creeping under the broad leaves with Tulascarri, but Morphas must have lost his way to her. She debated communion with the goddess, but she would wake the others and they, too, needed their rest, and it would only serve

to reinforce the need to replace the stone. Only when she was musing on what plants might ease her mind and apprehension did she sit upright, grateful for this insomnia.

Was she, Ayr of Whispers, not a priestess? Was she not *also* a Wyrder? After all, she had studied the arts, the runes, been diligent in their practice. She may not have the Staff of Athiera, but she would do what she could.

Slipping from the warm foliage that made their covers, she stole up the beach with a strip of material for a basket and with the light of the moons she began to gather the kindling for her spells.

“Can I help?”

Dropping the herbs in fright, Ayr watched Hahn form from the shadows. “You have an uncanny ability to move quietly, Hahn. Yes, please help me.” She listed the kindling she needed and together they scoured the ground.

“What I understand of Wyrding is not as much as you, priestess, but I do know that casting a spell can take time. Each rune has to be carved perfectly or it will fail. You cannot hope to defend yourself against the Venerable Elm if you first need to carve the rune and speak the incantation.”

Ayr had cast the Bellman’s Lantern, an enchantment that produced a ball of light, and it hovered above their heads, casting their faces in a cheery glow. Hahn was right, of course, but did he know of trigger-runes?

“Yes!” He was deftly picking up the carcasses of fireflies. “Simplified gestures to which a spell can be bound and stored so you can use them in a moment. But...” He deposited the bodies in the basket and stabbed his palm with a finger. “You need a Wyrding circle in which to do that.”

Something about his authoritarian manner reminded Ayr of the day the Venerable Elm had savaged her with the statement that she had much to learn about the living goddess and a flame of anger constricted her throat.

The Venerable Elm's trickery had to be exposed.

"Ever, you are astute, Hahn." In the radiance of the Bellman's Lantern she was reminded again of the vast intelligence he seemed to possess, as if he had access to lifetimes of knowledge, but not the lives themselves.

Both he and his sister were the simulacrums of realms of mystery that lay shrouded beyond even their own comprehension. Ayr felt privileged to have seen a glimpse of such magnificence when she had touched this essence in Tulascarri; but of Hahn she had a more definite notion, and one day she would research the intuitive perception she had about him, in the Temple library.

He was complimented and yet troubled, and it seemed to pain him that she was unperturbed when he emphasised that she did not have a magic circle.

Ayr chortled lightly, savouring his consternation for it was rare, and she extended it as long as possible while she inspected the generous store of gathered kindling. "It seems we have discovered something you do *not* yet know."

"What is it?" He peered into the sack, expectantly, making her laugh again.

"When the Southern Rune is restored, the whole *Island* becomes a Wyrding circle."

Secow'day, Day 2, of the Trefolkian Month of
Ceesus, 1626 ODT

Ayr was shaking her awake before the birds even knew it was time to rise.

She did not want to know the dawn. These leaves were the most comfortable bed she had ever had, but the shaking and calling were growing more insistent.

“We must replace the stone without delay, *athelu*. The island has suffered enough and I will not have another day scorch it further.”

They had purposed their approach from the south in order that they may be closer to the shrine where the sacred stone was to be placed. It would not be right to dawdle when they were almost at their goal.

Rousing Hahn, Tulascarri chomped on some nuts and then strapped her sword to her naked back. Instinctively she had reached for her Swath, but it was still wet, and the thought of restriction in this place of beauty appalled her, and there was no protection clothes could offer that the Circle of Five could not.

As she stood with the dripping garment in her hands she had the strange sensation she may never wear it again.

Leaving the alcove they followed the beach, knowing it would lead them to the shrine, and even in the dull light before dawn the damage the Island had suffered was apparent. Trees with leaves once full and proud had withered to brittle stalks. Shrubs had wasted and lolled on cracked earth, and there were hardly any birds to be heard.

Ayr was rushing, running in short bursts as she travelled up the beach then down again, searching from memory where the

shrine would be, and craning her neck to the crags above. Cirilius had begun his attack when she finally recognised the place and with a shriek disappeared into the bushes.

There was a cliff high above and she seemed to be making a path, leading them upwards through hostile scrub until they found a thin river, and crawled through a narrow rock-opening.

Tulascarri was awed and enchanted by the chamber of aquamarine, with its shimmering crystal pool, but Ayr did not allow them time to rest, dashing up the beautiful stairs.

When Tulascarri and Hahn caught up with her she was standing in front of the shrine, and the sacred stone was shining brilliantly in her reverential grasp.

A small stone pyramid with a flat top anticipated her approach. On the ground, all around, were shards and strips of metal that shone like oil on water. Three flat and curved lengths looked as if they had fallen outwards from the pyramid, which caused Tulascarri to surmise the debris was perhaps part of some mechanism or contrivance that had housed the stone.

“I do not know how to fix this machine, Ayr...”

But the priestess was in prayer and she stepped slowly to the pyramid, holding the stone above her head, the light from it almost blinding. As she rose on her toes to position it above the top of the monument the metallic pieces began to vibrate, and the sound of steely windybells accompanied them, and they began to float upwards.

Ayr retreated respectfully and the stone remained in place, only now it began to rotate on its own axis, and a low whirring caused more of the shards to ascend. One by one the pieces of debris formed into a complex lattice work that wove around the stone, and also began to rotate, and the whirring changed to throbbing, rising in pitch.

Further back they moved while undulating sinews of light began to ghost about the structure, forming a moving mass that seemed born of sound itself. The luminescent beams began to drift outward, extending like the tendrils of an ivy and began to encircle the three.

They felt their feet leave the ground, and were filled with an incredible sense of peace and joy. The strands wove about them, through them, dancing and romancing them like the arms of a lover, noble and strong; and when they were tenderly lowered once more, the cuts and bruises and scratches on their bodies were gone, their faces shone with radiance and they felt reborn, rejuvenated. The feeling of joy and contentment was sublime and no words could speak its essence save to say it was divine.

The stone seemed to have disappeared into a silent vortex of brilliant blue and a thin line of violet light ascended to the heavens where clouds had begun to form and billow with unnatural speed until a storm broke, and they watched the waters of the lake rise and stretch towards the horizon. All around them the trees and plants were alive with creaks and cracks of wood, and they saw before them how the forest, once blighted, returned to its former lush splendour.

And suddenly *She* stood before them, though they were not startled for somehow they had always known she was there with them. She was clothed by the light of the stone, and it seemed like a blue gown, regal and majestic. Though she barely moved, each gesture was poetry and elegance, and her eyes were the colour of compassion, deep as the sky, with long locks of polished gold the likes of which would shame any sunset.

But perhaps the most awe-inspiring aspect of her was that she was completely translucent, and they could see through her, as if peering through water.

She stopped them from kneeling, with upturned palms and a lilting voice. “Yes, I am the one you have called the blue lady, and I have come to thank you for your courage, your loyalty. You have restored the Island.”

“Are you Seisha herself?” asked Tulascarri.

“Are you the goddess?” asked Ayr.

Hahn could not speak and simply stared in adoration.

“I am none but a friend who was in need, and for this I give you my blessings and gratitude. But your work is not yet done, there is much left to do, for your suspicions of the Venerable Elm are true. Go now, dear ones; your paths await.”

The apparition began to fade but Hahn spoke now. “Will we ever see you again?”

“You will forget me for a time, but to see you again...” She smiled at Tulascarri. “Of this I am certain.”

Thir'day, Day 3, of the Trefolkian Month of Ceesus, 1626 ODT

Before first light of the following day the three left the shrine where they knew they would be protected, and began the hike to the Temple. With such abundant life around them, soft earth at their feet, warm fragrant air on their skin, and an azure sky above, it was easy to forget the hardships they had faced; and yet their march was grim because they knew this day would end in conflict.

For a long time the track through the woods was narrow and only wide enough for one, and only when Cirilius

approached his zenith did it open for them to walk abreast. They crossed giggling brooks, and passed groups of nubile priestesses tending fields. They might have been unnoticed, but the presence of a male and an armed woman caused alarm and soon Tulascarri and Ayr were being followed by a growing number of nude footfalls and curious murmurs.

From Ayr's descriptions of it, Tulascarri understood the central Temple could only be accessed by two routes, and the most direct was through the amphitheatre. She had suggested she use the Shades, capture the Venerable Elm, and slit her throat and did not understand when Ayr did not approve of this idea. They would be attempting to assail a powerful Wyrder and were trumpeting their approach with a burgeoning crowd, the exact opposite of what any strategist would advise. By now the Venerable Elm was on high alert and no doubt had had time to summon the Aghari.

Ayr, however, was resolute. With her spells locked in trigger-runes, and the vindication that her quest to recover the Southern Rune had not been mad delusion, her strides were confident and strong. Her wish to create a public display would be fulfilled and Tulascarri could only hope there would be minimal casualties. Above all, she prayed Ayr and Hahn would be safe.

The amphitheatre was empty, but began to fill with those who had been following them, a ponderous and beauteous crowd. Ensuring Hahn was hidden safely, Tulascarri took Ayr's hand and they walked to the centre of the grassy arena, standing in front of the fire pit. Thick blackened logs with bellies of embers, orange and red, smouldered from a fire the night before and aromatic smoke wafted over their legs.

There was no need to call out, they simply had to wait, and shortly they heard the sound of running feet on the stairs. Men of the Aghari took their positions in a line beginning at the bottom stair, weapons free and stances firm; and above them, on the edge of the ridge, appeared the Venerable Elm.

“You have disobeyed me, Ayr of Whispers.”

“Venerable Elm!” Ayr sank to one knee, her head bowed.

“And now you come to seek my forgiveness.”

“I have come to you, Venerable Elm, but I need not your forgiveness.” Ayr’s fingers slid into Tulascari’s once more. “It is you who should seek solace from the goddess, for you were the one to steal the sacred rune and send it away, that the Island might perish.”

Though the murmurs from the multitude behind them were muted, the tearing of their culture was deafening.

The Venerable Elm was an older woman of serpentine grace. On her forehead she wore a regal circlet, her sikrit was resplendent with tiny flakes of gilt; and from on high the golden cobra spat her venom. “You may have returned the stone, but I will send it away again...”

Intakes of breath and cries were common to the arena, but never before had they been in dismay, and they washed onto the stony ridge where they echoed in sadness.

“What will you do, Ayr of Whispers? The Island must die.”

“Why, Venerable Elm? Why do you seek to war with the goddess and destroy her garden where we have seen and felt her love, where we have lived her life?”

“Yours is the place of obedience, priestess!” The Venerable Elm bellowed, and a staff appeared in her hand. It was carved of white elm, and at the business end was the shape of a

crescent moon. Within the cusps, a fiery ball burned and crackled.

The sight of this magic angered Tulascarri and any hope of conciliation vaporised under the scowl of the wielder. She felt her Life Seed awaken and released Ayr's hand as Metal and Earth combined.

The discussions were at an end.

The staff lifted; Ayr saw it too, and threw up the defensive spell. By the time the splintered ray of energy crashed into the magical shield, Tulascarri had winked from view.

With such power from the Venerable Elm the defences of Ayr would not last long, and it was vital that she reach the Wyrder quickly. She slammed into the first of the Aghari, snapping his neck. The next man raised his sword but his arm was broken and his chest imploded; the third flew into the fourth with a crushed throat.

The pathway led upwards and with walls of rock on either side it became a death-trap. The Akiun Warrior moved with the grace of the wind, and with the purpose of a battering ram. Yet she was careful not to spill any blood for she did not think it was appropriate to sully sacred ground with such violence; and the battle yells of the men turned to shrieks and turned to silence until the last of them fell, broken but not burst.

Fireball after fireball erupted from the magic lance into the theatre below. Tulascarri could not see Ayr but knew she was in trouble. Yanking a fallen sword from a lifeless hand she threw the glittering steel with all her force, but the Wyrder intercepted it, and now directed her violence at the Akiun.

More malevolent magic scythed from the staff, but the Wyrder could not see her opponent and her volleys were lost to exploding architecture. Widely evading the crackling whips

of electricity that snapped out haphazardly, Tulascarri closed the distance, and with a double strike Tulascarri broke the lance from the hands that held them, causing it to fly away from her and clatter under the oak tree.

The Venerable Elm tried to speak but, planting a fist hard in the woman's belly, Tulascarri drove her power out through her knees and she buckled, striking the stones hard.

Clutching her bruised skin, she gasped for air.

Tulascarri made the edge of her sword felt on the Venerable Elm's neck, and waited.

It did not take long, but when Ayr of Whispers appeared it took all of Tulascarri's restraint not to slice the Venerable Elm's head from her neck.

The priestess' skin was black and red from where it had been burned, her entire right thigh was grazed, and her hair was matted with blood from a gash behind her ear. Hahn was helping her walk because one of her ankles was badly bruised.

"Dancing Cedar, you are retired of your duties as Venerable Elm." Ayr picked up the enchanted staff and used it to support herself, thanking Hahn.

"Do you not see...?" The Venerable Elm gripped her crown and spoke through gritted teeth. "What I have done, I have done for all. You and most of the priestesses here were taken against your will, when you were but children. For cycles immemorial, the Order has kidnapped orphans to bring here to serve the production of the elixir. There is no goddess, Ayr, only gold... only greed."

The revelation was stark, written in pain on Ayr's face; in her fingers as they clasped the staff, and for a moment she seemed pale, as if the blood was drained from her.

“This is where you are wrong, Dancing Cedar. The goddess *is* real. But she will elude you in statues or incense or ritual. She is in the earth, the rocks, the trees. She flies with the birds and dances as the rain; and she sighs with the wind and rages in the storm. She is everywhere, but mostly in the hearts and minds of those who delight in her love.”

“You are a romantic fool. I should have returned you to the royal house, but I hoped one day you would stand by my side as we righted the wrongs. We have no right to steal children and bend them to lies, and profit from it.”

Tulascarri sheathed her sword to receive the staff from Ayr of Whispers. With her hands now free, the priestess took the hand of the Venerable Elm, lifting her gently.

“I would have agreed with you many cycles ago, had you seen fit then to appoint me your disciple, but the divine uses our mistakes for good. Your heart is in the right place, but you have much to learn of the living goddess.”

Still slightly bowed, the Venerable Elm froze. Her face became a demonic mask and she hurled Ayr away, enraged. Her shriek took Tulascarri off guard and she was able to snatch away the staff, levelling it at Ayr.

Planting her stance, Dancing Cedar opened her mouth to speak and the sizzling spirit of the lance raged with hunger. The air seemed to contort and contract, rippling like distortions in glass, growing heavy; and a pungent odour stung the nose.

She jerked; and the incantation caught like the beginning of a vomit. Her face blanched and her lungs rattled.

The staff turned to ash and the blaze puffed into smoke.

Tulascarri had taken a knee, her sword had circled up, down, up and the tip had pierced with perfect precision. It slid between the ribs cleanly, punctured the heart, and as the lifeless

limbs fell limp like a discarded marionette, Tulascarri arrested it and cauterized the wound with a fire palm.

No blood would soak the island this day.

Fourth'day, Day 4, of the Trefolkian Month of Ceesus, 1626 ODT

At last she understood why the Venerable Elm had wanted to destroy the Island.

In the aftermath of her death the Yogini's readily confessed that the Aghari would seize orphaned children, never older than five cycles.

The children were raised on a part of the Island the priestesses never knew existed. They were educated and trained until they were of the right age to enter the Order and take the First Rite. On the celebration of their sixth cycle they were administered a special potion that made them forget their younger cycles.

The children were divided into encampments according to their age, and forbidden to venture beyond these bounds. Strict punishment for disobedience, high reward for compliance, and rigorous training programmes ensured they thought they were the only ones on the Island.

It was the first phase of a massive effort, carefully controlled by the Venerable Elm, and designed to culminate in Yogini's who would yield the highest quality nectar for the production of *Imana*.

Tulascarri had thought this may shake Ayr's faith and could lead to the disbanding of the Order of Athiera.

"No," said the priestess, contemplatively. Already the *Imana* that had been administered to her had worked wonders.

"Whilst the methods are immoral, let us not forget that even in arid places, plants will grow. Let us not forget the good that has been done; and above all, let us not forget that the goddess, in her wisdom, has brought about these events in order for the Island to enter into a new age of responsibility. And in this is perhaps the *greatest* lesson. For any true Spiritual pursuit rests on a deep sense of personal responsibility."

"You may be the only one who feels this way, *athelu*. And what of the Aghari?"

The Venerable Elm had tried to stop the practice of abducting children, but the Aghari saw this differently. To them, the abduction of orphans meant those orphans found a home, found a purpose, and to change this would be a slander to the goddess, and they would have none of it. At last the Venerable Elm had sought to end the corruption by trying to destroy the Island.

Her heart *had* been in the right place, and Ayr knew it was not the will of the goddess to gain followers through coercion of any means.

"The Aghari are our sworn protectors. They have believed in the goddess without ever having been on the Island. But if I am the only one who believes in the goddess, then so be it. I know what I know..."

Ayr had summoned the Yogini's and priestesses from across the Island, and though there was dissent among them, the presence of an Akiun Warrior by Ayr's side was sufficient deterrent for any overt hostility.

"My sisters, I thank you for coming to hear me this day and I hope you will listen with open hearts."

Speaking from the platform in front of the Temple, Ayr could see there were hundreds of people assembled below, and

for a moment her confidence wavered, but the warmth from the warrior beside her gave her strength.

"Our Order will continue. But there is no retribution for those who wish to leave. You should submit to the goddess of your own will and conviction, and not by any motivation of fear or damnation. The children will be raised until they are able to decide on their own, and we will teach them skills to take with them should they wish to leave. Peace I wish upon you; peace only I ask of you."

In her heart of hearts Ayr knew she had been heard. Some of them still seemed lost and there were many questions that would reach her in the next few days, but for now they began to disperse, trailing away slowly.

"Have I done the right thing?"

Tulascarri caressed the cascade of locks down her naked back. "I have spoken with the leaders of the Aghari tribes. They may have told the Venerable Elm that abductions were the will of the goddess, but they are really concerned about the production of *Imana*."

"So they are really loyal to the gold it brings them?"

Tulascarri chortled. "That's what I thought. But it's not that. They feel *Imana* is a gift bestowed by the goddess. Their real fear is that if the *Imana* stops, it could mean the goddess has abandoned them... Or so they led me to believe."

"I would like to believe this, of course..."

"But people are people..."

"And too often the Spirit is ravaged by the needs of the ego."

"Still, it's a start, Ayr."

"It is." Ayr was content with this. Though the Aghari seemed to be more mercenary than devotional, *Imana* was the

will of the goddess, and it served a noble purpose. Indeed, her own wounds were healed.

“You will be raised to Venerable Elm, *athelu*.”

It was no surprise, but it was not a mantle she wanted to wear. She wanted to wear nothing, to have no responsibility but her pursuit of the ways of the goddess, but she knew where the Order needed to grow. Like a newly sprouted sapling destined for great heights, she knew the form it should take and she alone could be the Treeshaper.

Amber of the Dawn, Leaf on the Wind, and Pollen of Lilies were fidgeting close by. She could see they were almost bursting with questions, but she did not wish for their company right now.

She longed only for fellowship with one, and she cast her plea into Tulascarri’s gaze. In that bewitching stare she could find reassurance and lose herself, she could forget, but... it would not be kind. It would be unfair to kindle flames of hope in her weakness just to watch them doused in her destiny; but she could not wrest herself from such depth of longing. So it was, at last, that Tulascarri lowered her chin, her hands, and in their place was... compassion.

Tulascarri kissed Ayr on the forehead, her body pressed in, warm and affirming. “Go, *athelu*,” she said. “Your people need you, and I must let you go.”

*Secow'day, Day 8, of the Trefolkian Month of
Ceesus, 1626 ODT*

A gentle caress off the lake toyed with the gossamer curtains, and danced in the smoke of fragrant spice as Cirilius,

lord of the day, charted his course into the heavens, applauded by wings that wove melody across the Island.

Ayr of Whispers was stirring, murmuring a prayer to the morning, and affection to her lover. She still wore the paint from the festival the night before. During the celebration of her induction she had been tended by her priestesses, those who chose to remain, and as they lavished their ministrations upon her, drinking her nectar, and crying in pleasure, Tulascarri had finally found peace in letting her go.

Athelu.

The warrior grew lost in the vision of sapphire haloed by tousled sunrise.

She would be safe here, on the Island, protected by the watchful Aghari, and this was a great comfort.

In the cabin of their host Adobas, Ayr had remembered playing as a child in the royal gardens, and her next memory was of the Island of Athiera, proof enough that her childhood memories had been erased. She had not been an orphan, so it could only be assumed that she was taken because the Venerable Elm had hoped to make her an ally in the destruction of the Island.

The Mirage would continue to search for the lost princess but they would not find her, and in time they would assume she could not be found. Ayr's reward for recovering the Southern Rune was protection by it; and Tulascarri's reward had been to be given absolution, hope, and life and a sense of purpose.

"Are you sure you will not stay...?" Her lilting voice was a song.

"Athiera may have chosen me, but Seisha will not let me go. Yours is the Island, *athelu*, mine is the forest. Our paths...

await.” She touched the youthful cheek with a shudder, for Ayr’s gentle fingers had slowly begun to fan the flames of her desire and she would not deny her lover one last communion. “But you have always known this, I sense. Though I did not wish to see it, it was there in your far-away gaze, the words you never spoke. You would never hurt me, and so it is I who must say what you cannot.”

Ayr slid on top of Tulascarri, her arms under hers, cold soles against warm thighs, a full-body embrace that squeezed the sorrow of her heart out through her eyes. Tulascarri kissed her lips softly, succulently, aware of the slow undulations of her hips, the slide of her legs, the swell of their breasts into one flesh. She was full of vigour and insatiable life and Tulascarri knew she would never strive to possess or control it; this was a gift that could not be hidden and had to return to the Island and the goddess to whom she had shown such devotion.

The sound of the shore and the smell of the lake; the aromatic waft of incense carried on a summer breeze; the refrain of forest birds and the cosy embrace of sheets that would soon need mending – these were memories she would treasure until someday her spirit became one with the Sentience. These were the echoes of a love that must be allowed to fly, and as they made love for the last time, Tulascarri knew these were the final strains of a symphony never to be played again.

Firstday, Day 13, of the Trefolkian Month of
Rorin, 1627 ODT

“You do *know* I would have adapted to life in the desert? The Island of Athiera is a wonderful and magical place.”

The horses nickered socially, sampling grass and leaves in an ambling appreciation of the forest clearing, snorting when they paused to drop dung.

Tulascarri dumped the armful of firewood on the ground, and touched his shoulder. "I know, Hahn."

He could hardly stop staring at her, as if seeing her for the first time, and enchanted by it.

In truth it *was* the first time he was seeing her like this. Wearing a Dniban gown, a common item of clothing worn by most Trefolkians, and with her hair, freshly braided, free to the wind she felt more naked than she had ever been and she too might pause if faced with her reflection.

The Swath had been burned. It was a symbolic gesture, and this gesture had been made as they welcomed the new cycle. They were far from the Island after months of travel and it seemed a fitting close to the last chapter of her life as Tulascarri.

"Do you regret anything?" Hahn had begun to stack the wood and seemed to have dinner in hand. Tulascarri sat down on a stump, pleasantly surprised that he had prepared a goblet of wine for her.

In saying farewell to the magical Island, and the princess who now ruled it, she had left a piece of herself there but did not feel incomplete. That circle had been completed, and the promise of a new life required sacrifice of the old.

"We have sworn this pact to put away the sword. Perhaps a new life will bring new love, but the heart must heal first and I shall no longer disrespect what I have been taught. You were right, of course. We could not stay on the Island. Our path lies ahead. New prospects in a new town where I think we should stay for a while."

Hahn snapped some twigs and pushed them under the larger pieces of wood. He handed one to Tulascarri for her to ignite. “Do you think we have escaped the prices on our heads?”

She placed a finger on the end of the twig and used the Circle of Five to turn it to an ember. “Only the passage of Cirilius will reveal this in time. For now, though, most of our enemies are dead, and I should like, I think, to put my knowledge to helpful use.”

“You think of an Apothecary, again?” Placing the smouldering twig amongst its peers, he blew on them until cheery crackles sent blue fragrance towards the sky.

It occurred to her she was smiling. “Yes. I should like that, I think...” She jabbed him by adding, “... *Or* we could journey north to study with the Great Sage Orax?”

“Ah... Frethenia is but a few days’ ride away.” Hahn stood up hastily, gesturing south. “I hear there is a *renowned* house of education in Frethenia; the House of Antiquities. When I was in the library in Maloud’s village I found many references to the Trefolkian Prophecy. I may find something to read, and I think ‘Tulascarri’s Herbs and Oils’ is a nice name for an apothecary, not so?”

He excused himself momentarily and scuttled off to rummage in the back of the wagon for pots and provisions, leaving Tulascarri enthralled by the fire. Therein, the mind of memory was cast back through the days of scars and the nights of blood and to relinquish this meant that ‘Tulascarri’s Herbs and Oils’ was not a suitable shingle.

A name carried essence, and she did not wish her former life to colour her new. Tulascarri had been a mercenary in a

mask; an avenging Akiun who knew nothing of compassion and mercy and honour, though she had learned it in the end.

No, that name would live on where it belonged, as her clan name, as the name of her sword, and not of her.

Hahn returned, laden, and began to prepare their meal, refilling her glass of wine.

“I think I shall use *another* name, Hahn. A name that I have not heard or spoken for many cycles, and one by which I was once known at my birth, and the name of whom I wish to be anew.”

The stopper halted before it reached the bottle. “Your... true name... finally revealed?”

She gave the triple greeting, placed a hand on her breast, and with a gracious smile she said, “I am... Jenna Aleantha.”

THE END

Characters:

Adobas - Pirate and Scoundrel, *Trefolkian*

Amber of the Dawn - Priestess of the Island of Athiera, *Asde Fabdian*

Ayr of Whispers - Priestess of the Island of Athiera, *Asde Fabdian*

Basador - Son of Adobas, *Trefolkian*

Bassalon - Son of Adobas, *Trefolkian*

Dancing Cedar - Venerable Elm of the Island of Athiera, *Asde Fabdian*

Hahn - Brother of Tulascarri, *Trefolkian*

Jamal - Aghari Warrior, *Bandori*

Kevorkai - Guinyenian Warlord, "Son of the All", *Guinyenian*

Leaf on the Wind - Priestess of the Island of Athiera, *Asde Fabdian*

Maloud Fed Ayed - Bannator Driver, *Bandori*

Nafeera - Third wife of Maloud Fed Ayed, *Bandori*

Paluk - Innkeeper, *Bandori*

Pollen of Lilies - Yogini of the Island of Athiera, *Asde Fabdian*

Rakha - Sixth wife of Maloud Fed Ayed, *Bandori*

Sabal - Aghari Warrior, *Bandori*

Sekhmet - Oldest son of Maloud, *Bandori*

Song in the Reeds - Priestess of the Island of Athiera, *Asde Fabdian*

Tarek – Aghari Warrior, *Bandori*

Tulascarri - Mercenary / Akiun Warrior, *Trefolkian*

Other Books by Mark P. Davies:

The Brotherhood of Sfarr:
Book 1 of the Weavers & Wyrders Saga



FREE BOOK ON MY WEBSITE

Tenfeather People: The Chronicles of Tulascarri



Website: www.markpdavies.com

E-mail: hello@markpdavies.com

Join me on Social Media!

