

FROM THE CHRONICLES OF TULASCARRI

THE TENFEATHER PEOPLE

A TALE IN THE
WEAVERS AND WYRDERS SAGA



MARK P DAVIES

THE TENFEATHER PEOPLE

Chronicles of Tulascarri

From the

Weavers & Wyrders Saga

By

Mark P. Davies

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For the Indomitable

*“Kind Seisha, sweet innocence of dawn’s early
light, guide my path this day ...”*

**- From “Children’s Prayers to the
Goddess, a collection.”**

*“The difference between forgiveness and
vengeance is that we exorcise our demons, not
exercise them ...”*

- Maigurn, of the Tenfeather People





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Chapter 1

*Fifthday, Day 5, of the Trefolkian Month of Theth, 1630
ODT*

Motion woke her, and the world took form: muted voices, the sound of cartwheels on gravel, the smell of burned hair, and then the dull ache in her head, the uneasy hollow in her stomach.

Above her, the slats of the next bunk were swirls of dark wood. Weak fingers curled around one of them as she slowly raised herself to sit upright.

Her muscles were tender - stiff - like the day after those nights when the tavern had been jammed with customers and she had carried countless heavy trays up the stairs. She never thought she would miss the smell of an ale-soaked rag.

“Seisha’s tears!” The pain in her head had moved into her neck, and as toes touched the floor she knew even they were sore. “What the Sfarr happened ...?”

“Here ... Drink some water.”

A cup floated in front of her. The wood was gripped by fingers that had not seen labour. A woman’s face, round, with hazel eyes and shoulder length hair materialised. She had a welt on her forehead and there was dirt on her pale cheek. A silver stud pierced the tip of one of her pointed ears.

“The caravan was attacked. Sabeen ... Don’t you remember?”

The pain in Sabeen’s neck intensified, moved downwards. With her free hand she pressed her shoulder, massaging the ache, but as her hand withdrew, holding black tresses, she

cried out.

“Colour changed overnight. It’s longer, too.” From above her a man dropped to the floor. His brown eyes were bright, his ruddy cheeks were bruised, his shirt was torn at the sleeve and she could see a cut on his knee where his pants were torn.

The water was welcome and the aching seemed to recede somewhat. The woman refilled the cup. Sabeen could not remember her name, and she was good at remembering names and small details. It made the customers in the tavern feel special. Why, after they had been travelling so long, could she not remember this woman’s name?

“It’s the strangest thing I have ever seen, and I’ve seen some strange things. I have a cousin who says he once saw a moth kill a yellow-belted hornet. Would you believe it? A humble moth? Killing a hornet? Likely story, by the Books.”

The man cocked an ear. Sabeen seemed to remember he was called ...

“You know ...with those buttery eyes of yours you remind me of one.”

“A moth? I remind you of a moth?”

Erik! By Seisha, his name was Erik!

“No!” Erik’s lip curled. “A yellow belted hornet.”

With the second cup of water her shoulders relaxed but the pain moved into her chest where it seemed to be stealing her breath. Sabeen found it hard to breathe, but just before she could panic it sank into her stomach. It was no longer just a pain. It seemed to have taken a life of its own, unnerving, almost like a living entity had entered her body and was

looking for a way out.

Erik was speaking but she could scarcely catch his words. The energy sank into her gut and now she needed to relieve herself. Like she had eaten too many dates, her bowels contracted. The pressure was intense and she clutched herself, clenching her buttocks, trying to stay the flood. There was a chamber pot, she remembered, at the exit of the sleeper wagon, and she was about to run to it for if she did not she would surely soil the mattress, but then the thing moved again, seizing her loins.

Instantly, her flower was tingling. Honey flowed from it like a river and this time she knew the mattress was soaked. She desperately tried to squash the sensation, but the pleasure was so intense that she ceased to care. She would explode in front of these people and nothing mattered but the ecstasy of her womanhood and the building scream that would come soon. Her throat clenched, her legs shuddered, but the orgasm was gone.

Bereft, she felt the power split, drain into her legs, thighs, knees, calves, feet. Her bare soles thrilled, unfurled and then there was nothing.

Drained, she sank back onto her bunk.

“You’ve had quite an ordeal,” said the water-cup lady, stroking Sabeen’s forehead, pushing Erik away as she covered Sabeen with a blanket. Sabeen was grateful for the discretion.

Though the pain was gone and it had left her exhausted, there was a lingering arousal that circled her loins. She was confused. Something had happened. Something deep inside

her had been changed beyond measure.

“Wait ...” Sabeen lifted her head. “Erik ... you said we were attacked? The last I remember we were two days from Sharelily point ...”

Erik kneeled next to her on the floor. Despite their apparent predicament, he seemed enchanted, as if this was all some great adventure. “That would be correct. We were outside, next to the wagon. You were telling us about Frethenia and your tavern and how you changed your name and how you decided to give it all up, and journey south to study with a sorcerer.”

“I said *that*?” Sabeen sat up. Her alarm brought memories of the bag she had stored under the floorboards below her bunk. That, in turn, summoned images of her last conversation before she had left the city, and her old life, behind.

“Oh yes.” Erik scratched a two-day old beard and looked at the water-cup lady. “Happala here was quite distraught.”

Happala! Thank Seisha for Erik.

“And rightly so.” Happala perched on the bunk opposite. “Study under a sorcerer? You know it is a sin? You know it is punishable by death? The attack proved *that*, by Gethras.”

Sabeen pulled wanton fingers from her breasts and sat up again. “What do you mean?”

Erik leaned back, crossed his legs. “We were on the road when men came out of the forest. They had weapons. We were surrounded. The guards and drivers were slow to react and there was a huge fight. Even the passengers fought. We picked up rocks and sticks. You-” Erik chuckled as a meaty

finger hovered in the air.

“You’re a blacksmith!”

“Yes.”

“And a carpenter.”

“Yes.”

Erik seemed deflated, but Sabeen was elated. Her mind seemed to be recovering. “Forgive me, Erik, please continue.”

“You bashed one of them on the head with a rock. You took his sword and then ran forwards.”

“That’s when the sorcerer caught you.”

“Happala!” Erik clicked. “I was getting to that.”

“Sorcerer? What sorcerer?” Sabeen’s flower was still serenading her hands. It would have been wonderful to fake the need for sleep, but this news was more enchanting and she planted her feet on the floor. “We were attacked by sorcerers? *Free ... sorcerers?*”

Long before Sabeen had made her decision to leave Frethenia she had made a friend. At first Sabeen had thought she was just another woman studying at the prestigious House of Antiquities. Sabeen did not care that Jenna was the niece of the Templari. She pitied her, in fact, for the niece of the head of one of the richest cities in Trefolk had duties to perform, obligations in politics and social conformance that might drive her to distraction. She knew that Jenna would never be free of those obligations and decided the least Sabeen could do was be a friend, and take her under her wing, so to speak.

That was before Sabeen had learned who Jenna really was.

Now Sabeen was grateful she and Jenna were friends. It

had been Jenna who had explained that the difference between Sages and Sorcerers was just a matter of Imperial license. Sages were merely sorcerers who served the Empire.

Sorcerers were free.

“As I was saying ...” Erik leaned into his tale. “You ran towards a man, one of the men attacking us. You were shouting something, gods know what. All I remember is he flicked his finger and a bright light hit you and you flew backwards ... and now your hair is black.”

It took a few moments to absorb what Erik said. Searching from Happala to Erik and back she tried to process, tried to remember. What, under the gaze of the gods, had happened?

Sabeen cradled her locks. “My name was Foranrian. Once, I was a tavern owner in Frethenia. When I left I changed my name as I changed my life. I decided I wanted to be free.”

“Yet, now we are prisoners.” Happala crossed thin arms. Her dejection turned towards the back of the rocking wagon where sharp beams of light passed through the wood.

“Where are we being taken?”

“Pray the Night Owl to tell us.”

A new voice - an older voice. Though it was shaky with age, it carried a certitude - a conviction - as if it knew more than it would say.

The sleeper wagon was three or four bunks long. When it had left Frethenia, Sabeen had been amazed to find she was the only lodger, but along the way to Sharelily point the caravan had collected new passengers. The first had been Erik, then Happala, and finally Totem Pel.

He had seen well over three hundred cycles, Sabeen recalled, and though he needed assistance sometimes, his mind flew with eagles, or perhaps owls in his case.

“In times of trouble, when we are vexed with the problems of life, we may turn to the Night Owl for guidance.” Using the bunks to steady himself, Totem Pel shuffled towards them. “Yes, you young folk do not give much credence to the old Totems, but they are your heritage. I would wager they would show you signs if you but took the time for prayer.”

Around his collar Totem Pel wore a long necklace of beads that were interspersed with various animal likenesses. At the bottom, just above his navel, was a bigger carving. Made from ebony, it was the image of the Black Ardakon; a fire-breathing winged creature of legend and lore, lord of all totems.

Lowering himself onto the bunk opposite, Totem Pel assessed the younger folk. “Has it occurred to you that we have been liberated, as opposed to taken captive?”

“Liberated?” Erik spat the word. “*Vama ferra!* You can see, but you are blind!” Stomping to the rear he sat down, peering between the boards.

Happala sighed and returned to her bunk, which was closest to the door.

“And you, my child?” Totem Pel turned blue waters of study to Sabeen.

“Seisha’s tears, Elder. We are young, and do not carry your cycles.”

“Oh, I have no need for apology, Sabeen. I know what I know. It is an ancient divide, this rift between youth and age,

between enthusiasm and experience or, if you prefer, between ignorance and wisdom.”

“I see the truth of it, Elder Pel.”

“Do you?” Totem Pel raised a grey brow. There were deep pock-marks on his hands and one finger was a stump. “I don’t think you do. I think there is much for you to learn. And you haven’t even begun asking questions yet.”

“Questions?”

“You were struck by a sorcerer who, I have no reason to believe otherwise, meant to kill or at least incapacitate you, and yet you survived. Your hair has changed colour and when you awoke, you were ravaged by something you can’t explain, and yet, even now, you wonder when I will leave so you can bring yourself to release.”

Shocked, Sabeen glanced at Happala curled on her bunk, at Erik fidgeting with the door, her voice a whisper. “How do you *know* this? What does this mean?”

Horses whinnied beyond the wooden walls and the lowing of several Bannators answered, the wagon slowed, bounced and stopped, rocking back and forth.

“My dear, Sabeen ...” Kind blue intention above a gnarled hand that cupped her cheek seemed almost to tease her. “If I knew *that* I would not suggest you ask the Night Owl.”

Voices were shouting, somebody was barking orders and then there was the cold scrape of a lock being opened.

“Everybody out.”

A large shirtless man stepped back. When nobody moved, he grabbed Erik by the shirt and pulled him to the ground.

Sabeen heard Erik grunt, then yelp as a kick drove the wind from him. Leaving him in a heap the man hopped up into the wagon.

“No!” Happala kicked at the hand that reached for her. “Leave me alone! Get away!”

But he had her by the foot and pulled her out, throwing her into the dirt.

The man turned back to the wagon, his face menacing. “Do I have to throw you all out?”

Totem Pel rose to his feet, straightening his beads. Taking him by the hand, Sabeen helped him forwards.

“Here!” The guard, or soldier, or bandit - whatever he was - held out his hand for Totem Pel and assisted him down the narrow stairs.

“Thank you, young man.”

Dropping her blanket, Sabeen turned her feet sideways to climb down the narrow steps, squinting against the bright sun.

“You.” The hand that had so gently helped the old man gripped her wrist in a vice. The pain brought her to the verge of tears.

He wore only leather breeches, his lean torso was deeply tanned and well-muscled, which only served to accentuate the scars on his abdomen. His dark face was harder than his hands and Sabeen could see his nose had been broken before. With his other hand he waved, disgusted, at Happala who was on her knees. “Take that pathetic heap and get some food in the forest. You can try to run away, but these woods are the hunting grounds of the Teegra.”

He released her. The indents of his fingers were still white as she helped Happala to her feet.

“What do they want with us?” Happala’s face was streaked with tears. “Why are they so cruel?”

Scared that Happala’s cries would bring wrath, Sabeen hushed her. “I don’t know, Happala, but we must do as he says and find food. Come with me.”

Happala wrenched free, indignant. “I am a servant of the gods! I do not go looking for-”

“Enough!”

Happala fell sideways, struck by the shirtless man. Then he swivelled, a mere smudge of movement, and planted a fist in Sabeen’s stomach.

She had fallen off a mala once. It was when she was still a little girl and was just learning to ride the bipeds so common to Frethenia. She had been riding fast to catch up with someone. She had been winded, bruised. She learned that day to seat herself properly, and that mossy ground was harder than rock.

Robbed of all but panic, her knees hit the dirt and she knew falling off a mala was a mercy. Strangled sounds struggled, but her lungs refused to fill.

“I will not tell you again, ladies.”

Through the tears, battling for air, Sabeen saw him stride to the side of the road where a small tree had begun to reach for the sun. He broke a branch, thinned the leaves, then brought the cane down on Sabeen’s leg.

She did not scream. Only when he lashed her back did her

voice find air, but this was nothing compared to what came next.

His foot slammed so hard between her legs she thought she would faint. The pain stripped her of reason. It split scream from air. Her brain was too big for her head and was pushing out through her ears.

Blinded by agony, her thoughts were in pieces and yet she was aware how calloused fingers grabbed, then ripped her gown. Just below her buttocks the silk was bunched, torn with little resistance. The grass under her cheek whirled and she watched, helpless, as it became sapphire blue.

Anguish made mud of the dirt on her lips and she tried to fight, but she was beaten. Any moment he would open his pants and sink into her and she was powerless, limp like a discarded doll.

She had seen men fight in her tavern. They had traded blows like mortal foes and afterwards, as she nursed their split knuckles, she had marvelled at how they could simply resume drinking like old friends.

She could understand brawlers now. They were simple, even reasonable from a certain view. Brawlers were mad in a flash, incited by an insult, something momentous. This man was no brawler. He was a bully and bullies were different. Their cruelty was deeper. It drew on past bitterness and hate.

A generous strip of green material dropped onto her, the bottom half of her gown. Cold air bit at her exposed thighs.

“There’s a sling. Use it like a basket. Your arms won’t carry enough to feed this lot.”

Blind anger, a mindless rage, leapt to her arms and somehow her fingers clutched a rock. Vengeance boiled inside.

Her cheek split. She felt it quite precisely; how the skin burst in a thin line against the bone. Her head bounced and acid spewed from somewhere hot.

Cruel fingers with freckles of mud took deep purchase in her hair, yanking so that her neck was tight and bruised.

“You can fight all you like, little witch, but I’ll have *all* your teeth before you even get off the ground. Are we going to continue to disagree or are you going to go into the forest and find food?”

Sabeen didn’t know if she nodded or if he moved her head for her, but he let go. A woman’s arms were helping her up.

“Please don’t fight him, sister Sabeen.”

Her legs wanted to fold again, but Happala was stronger than she looked and bolstered her towards an opening next to the road, helping her onto the animal track that curled into wooded seclusion.

When they were out of earshot, Happala eased Sabeen against a boulder.

“Water... please.”

It was curious, thought Sabeen, she had thought she would not be able to pee for weeks but in just these short steps she seemed to be fine. As she dabbed the torn material against her cheek, it did not even feel bruised.

“Where?” Happala expected to see a waterfall or a lake.

“There.”

About five paces from them was a shrub with leaves that

pointed straight up. Each one was funnelled like a trumpet. Sabeen bent one forward to drink the cool water that gurgled from it.

“Rainwater? You drink rainwater?”

Sabeen was emptying a second trumpet on her face, rubbing vomit from her skin. Somehow it had missed her gown. She spat out a bug “Where do you think water comes from, then?”

“A... a river... a waterfall. How do you know about these trumpet things?” Happala pulled a flute towards her, cautiously peering inside.

Sabeen lifted the hem of her torn dress to inspect her injury, amazed she had no pain, not even a mark or swelling on the smooth mound. She just knew that *vishuk's* toenail had sliced her flower, by the gods.

With a gasp Happala turned around, her face as red as her hair.

“Forgive me, Happala, but... I can only see so far. Would you ...?”

“It is a sin to look upon nudity. I... please... put your gown down. I hope you have a spare one.”

“But...” Sabeen stared at stoic scarlet. “I was assaulted, did you not see?”

“All that is womanhood saw that. How can you even walk so soon?”

“Fear? Anger perhaps? Gods know. Please, there is no pain and I’m concerned that...”

Happala scoffed. “You seem fine to me. If you hadn’t

provoked him...”

“Provoked? You think I asked for that? You were the one who -”

“I am a servant of the gods. The one god, Gethras. If he used me to measure out your punishment then you deserved it.”

Sabeen never knew a tongue could tingle when stunned. Still holding the gown at waist level, the scene was absurd, and a derisive laugh punched the air.

“You mock me?”

Sabeen was already striding along the animal track, the ‘basket’ slung around her neck. Rage, silenced by disbelief, mixed with salt and spilled onto her cheeks; it mingled with her blood and pumped her legs. Surely, the mud squishing between her toes would turn to glass...

Gods alone knew how long she stomped, or how many branches she pushed away in the hopes they would whip Happala, but there was a sprawling plant at her feet and she recognised the speckles of a Vergunny bush.

“I’m... sorry Sabeen. Forgive my foolishness.” Gentle fingers settled onto a steaming shoulder. “I say I am a servant of Gethras and you are in so much pain...”

With a breath that heaved a burden from her shoulders, Sabeen patted the cool, smooth skin. “You, too, are in shock...”

“We both are. I may seem brave but leaving my home, my life, was hard. It must have been a loss for you to leave Frethenia, to give up the life of a harlot and mend your ways.”

“Harlot?”

“*Mosh’na!* You’re hurting me.”

As if she’d picked up a snake, Sabeen let go. “Now you call me a harlot?”

“You say you were a tavern owner but since I joined the caravan I have heard the men talk of little else but you. They say you are the fire of Evenmeal, you make them laugh. ‘Sabeen is such a beauty; Sabeen is such a free spirit.’”

“You, too, are a beauty. Do these things make me a whore?”

The forest floor was littered with twigs and branches. Selecting one with a point she knew any of them would make a fine club to add to Happala’s bruises, but instead Sabeen kneeled and began to dig. The tubers were plentiful and would go well in a stew. She had always bought Vergunny from the grocer in the marketplace where they had been much smaller. She never thought they could grow so plump.

“The segurim teach that women should be quiet and mindful. Ours is the place of the hearth and home.”

Rebellious, Sabeen was tempted to remove her gown completely. If looking upon nudity was offensive, she wanted to wave it in Happala’s face simply to infuriate her.

“Where did *you* grow up? Your red hair is a sure sign that you are a pureblood from the tribe of Inicus. Were you raised only by priests? Have you ever lived in a city like Frethenia?”

“I never had need of such frivolity. My father is high segurat in our village. His decision to send me to the house of Gethras – we call it Truruch...”

“I know what the church is called.”

“After I took my vow, his...”

“Vow? What vow?”

Happala touched the silver stud at the tip of her left ear. Ever since Sabeen had seen it, she had wondered why somebody would willingly pierce such a sensual part of their body.

“Chastity.”

“Chastity?”

“Just until I entwine... or take a vow of celibacy, but... I was saying... my Insem’s decision to send me south to minister in Handorland was in emulation of Gethras’ divine decision to send his own divine daughter Peshian into the wilderness.”

“Peshian was in love with her brother. They went into the wilderness to *ferra*.”

“An obscene lie, of course, fomented by the heathen.”

Happala was packing the tubers into the sling. Leaning forward caused the front of her gown to drape and Sabeen had vision of freckled breasts nipped with succulent pink. Ignored and probably abhorred they called out, pleading for wet lips and a hot tongue.

“I think that’s enough.”

“Pray, what?”

Snapped back, Sabeen flushed. Her flower was wet, cooling on the light breeze.

“The tubers. These are Vergunny, aren’t they? So hard and long and filled with creamy goodness.”

“Seisha’s tears,” Sabeen whispered to herself. What had possessed her? Never before had arousal been so mind-numbingly powerful. Her throat was dry and her legs were shaking. Surely, she had been deeply injured when the bandit had kicked her and now her body was in shock.

“You pray to *Seisha*?” Happala held a hand for Sabeen, studying the forest. “My father says it is acceptable to pray to the goddess, for Seisha is the sister of Gethras, and sometimes women need the solace of a divine sister.”

“Does he now?”

Happala began a discourse on how learned and inspired her father was. Thankfully, Sabeen was saved by a bush to their right. It was laden with berries all creatures knew to avoid and for this reason, she knew that at the base of the plant she would find something all creatures found delicious.

“We should return to the caravan. The sky is yet blue but the forest darkens quickly so close to the ground.”

“Shortly.”

Sabeen crawled under the blisterberry bush, avoiding the raspberry-like fruit with all her care, sweeping the ground clean. Nestled between the sturdy roots was a clump of spalded mushrooms. When added to food they created a richness so flavourful that she could make soup with algae and it would be fit for an emperor.

“If you worship Seisha, then you could join me in Truruch. You could become a Segurai like I’m going to be. We can shave our *shikai* together in the ceremonies of obedience.”

The angular stick hovered in horrified disbelief.

Common to all her people, the *shikai* were tufts of hair that grew about as thick and long as a finger. From the base of the neck to the seat of the spine they formed two rows that marched proudly down the backbone, one on either side. Most Trefolkians just let them dangle, the Segurim shaved them off as a sign of devotion. In her mind's eye, though, Sabeen was not seeing the *shikai* of any ordinary Trefolkian. The niece of the Templari could do far *more* with *hers*. And Sabeen knew Jenna thought shaving the *shikai* was abhorrent.

Vergunny tubers pummelled Sabeen's legs in a careless shower. *Mosh'na!* Happala was not just ignorant but clumsy, too. Sabeen began squirming back, verbal lashings gathering on her tongue. This time she would...

"Oh Divines! What evil is this?"

Happala's toes were retreating. An awkward heel trapped her gown and she stumbled, whimpering.

Wriggling out quickly, Sabeen dumped the mushrooms on a clump of grass. "Let me see."

"I... I picked a raspberry. I was going to eat it."

Angry streaks from Happala's fingers had begun to swell, leading into her hand and along her wrist. Already her forefinger had enlarged and had begun to blister. Clutching her wrist she was rocking with pain.

"Did you notice the little green specks on the fruit?"

"Yes." She seemed to be battling for air.

"That tells you they're not raspberries."

"Oh Gethras, what do we do? It hurts, Sabeen!"

"Lie down and stretch out your hand."

“Why?” Happala’s panic cleared a little, but she did not move.

“Just lie down. Quickly now.”

“But- my gown. Oh!” The importance of Dniban silk gave way to unbending pain and she lay back, stretching out her arm. “Help me, please!”

Sabeen squatted over the swollen hand.

“What are you doing?” Happala scrambled away, knocked her head on a root but hardly seemed to care.

“The only cure is vinegar or urine. We have no vinegar.”

“You will not piss on a servant of Gethras!” She sprang to her feet. “There! Those trumpet flowers. Water!”

“No! Happala, water will-”

The scream tore birds from the trees.

*Fifthday, Day 5, of the Trefolkian Month of Theth, 1630
ODT*

“I fainted, didn’t I?”

“You were with Morphas for quite some time. It was quiet.” Sabeen angled her shoulders into small branches as she pushed forward, lugging the bursting sling.

“My hand stinks.”

“But you have no pain, and in a few notches it will be back to normal.”

“I hate you for your kindness. My gown is ruined. You rolled me in the mud, didn’t you?”

“Take it off then. Wash it in a stream.”

“I have another. Again you mock me. To mock *me* is to

mock”

“The fire of Evenmeal.”

“Pray. I did not hear?”

“You said the men called me the fire of Evenmeal?”

“Did I? Well, I would be lying if I didn’t say that the meals you have cooked are some of the best I have ever had.”

“And yet you would rather think I am a harlot?”

The shrubbery ended abruptly and they slid down an embankment, almost stumbling into the road. The caravan was nowhere in sight.

“Dear Gethras they have abandoned us. What will we do?” Happala’s face was red, hands trembling. “Night comes and the Teegras will”

“Happala, stop!”

“But”

“Pray Seisha, just... stop. For one moment, just breathe ...”

Whimpering turned to pacing and fidgeting.

Settling the basket on the ground, Sabeen rested with her hands on her knees, taking her own advice to breathe, assessing where they were, yet confronted by a strange sense of exposure. With no forest to shroud her and a gown that barely covered her dignity she felt vulnerable, naked, but unlike Happala, she was not afraid. Rather, she was fascinated, perhaps even invigorated at odds with how she thought somebody in her position *should* feel.

“How long will you stare at the ground?”

Dainty toes came into sight, demanded an answer. Sabeen

lifted her head.

“No salt.”

“Salt?” Happala stopped craning her neck long enough to inspect the track.

“I was hoping to find some for the pot, maybe a rock or two.”

“Salt on a *road*? Everybody knows salt comes from the sea.”

“Salt is used to keep the highways clear of growth. Clearly we have left the trade route.”

Sabeen was talking to the trees. Happala was flicking up pebbles, jogging to a crest.

Gravel prickled through the layer of clay on Sabeen’s naked soles. Her scalp, the hair itself, seemed to tickle and it was strangely energizing. The pain of her fight was gone and her body seemed to throb with vibrance and, despite everything, her spirit seemed to be soaring. How had she healed so quickly?

“I see them!”

Happala’s voice echoed eerily in the woods. From the top of the road, she pointed excitedly. Her formerly green Dniban gown, once so pristine, was brown and ripped. She would have been mortified to know her back and buttocks were partially exposed. Her hair was full of twigs and leaves and she looked like some awkwardly carved idol of autumn.

The walk to the caravan was short, but it gave rise to wonder. Crunching gravel was nothing to the Trefolkian sole, but each little prick was a spark of delight that shot up

Sabeen's legs, and glittered higher with every step.

The captors received the bounty and ordered them towards a fire where moss still smoked on freshly packed white rocks. A man and two women were already there, silent and doleful. He was some kind of trader, the women were ...

Sabeen did not care.

All her senses were high, like that time she had smoked too much hemweed, but without the dopiness. Colours, sounds, and smells were brighter, sharper, more exciting, even flavourful - the spice of wooden carriages polished and gleaming, the cream of lowing Bannators, the sweet violet of jungle blooms borne on a fruity breeze.

A sharp jab from behind stole her from this banquet. Its wine, so sweet, turned to gall. Captivity grabbed her from the heights and slammed her into gloom and all she could do was slump towards the huddled circle.

Some ten paces away, a group of armed men were gathered around a large cooking pot. Locked in conversation with Totem Pel, none of them seemed to care that the pot teetered precariously as they tossed food into what might be a stew. Why did they laugh with the old man like old friends? What was he to them? What kind of bandits respected their elders?

Raking fingers through muddy hair, Happala noted Erik was missing and she thanked Gethras that the cruel bully was also nowhere to be seen, but Sabeen was deaf to her.

Pressure seemed to be building at the base of her neck, blood was rushing in her ears. Twilight had called birds to roost and insects to chorus. Why were they so loud tonight?

Her buttocks were cold but the stony seat hummed on some level with a life force of its own. Her skin seemed to be conversing with the ground, while at the same time it raged against the gown on her back. Stifled, she needed to be free, to find a river and swim and lose herself in the bosom of Mother Forest. Tightness gripped her throat and her muscles began to ache, but she seemed pinned to the spot and her brain was on fire. The noise threatened to draw blood.

A crash from the cooking pot, followed by cursing.

Sabeen had been holding her breath, then she realised the insects had stopped, then realised it was almost dark.

Tassels tickled her ankles and a patchwork of materials, clasped by long knobbly fingers with brittle nails, curtained her. Through the sting of smoke, Totem Pel offered Sabeen what once might have been a tablecloth.

“*Mosh’na*... Take it, Sabeen,” whispered Happala. “Sit like a lady... pray the gods, I don’t have to keep looking at your shame.”

Until just now Sabeen had been oblivious to her... “shame.”

“Shame?” The old man draped the blanket on Sabeen. “You think her exposure is a *shame*?”

Weathered leather sandals strained as Totem Pel overturned a crate. Reaching upwards, Sabeen steadied him. Creaking knees lowered while the jaw above worked hard to silence a vituperative tongue.

“Do you know those men, old man?”

He was shaking his head, still peering at Happala, rubbing

his beard, possibly four days old and pure white. On his right cheek was a tear-shaped scar where no hair would grow. The skin was wrinkled from a wound that had pierced deep and healed badly.

“No, child. But I know their like. I know their heritage. It is your heritage, too.” The sigils around his neck clinked and blinked with the fire. “You healed fast, did you not?”

“How do you...?”

“Oh yes, I noticed.”

Once, as a young woman, just after her celebration of the Rising Sap, a man came to the tavern. It was late and she was locking up. He was handsome, lonely, a mysterious traveller from far away, but it was she who had been hungry. While her father slept soundly upstairs they had dined together in the kitchen, on the table and under the stairs. She had never spoken to anybody of this and yet now this old man, plucking a hair from his nose, seemed able to read her memories, as if her life was written in the trees along the road, the rocks around the fire, even the very moths that dived into the flames.

Through his thin Dniban gown, Sabeen could feel the bone of his thigh. “What happened to me, when the sorcerer tried to kill me?”

Totem Pel’s head was bobbing slightly, as if he was nodding; only he was not really aware of it. “I thought you’d have figured it out by now, given who you know.”

“Figured what out? Who am I given to know?”

“You spoke in your sleep, often, when you were... ‘dead’.”

“Dead?” Sabeen dropped her voice into the blanket. Deep within, something had begun to churn. It was like she was a pot and Totem Pel’s words were stirring it. Was it a memory? How could a memory move in a circle about her waist? “Who are you, old man?”

“I have three hundred and fifty cycles, my child, and proud to say I only took sandals last winter. I have spent my entire life trying to answer that question and you know what I have learned?”

“Tell me.”

“I am.”

“You are... who?”

Totem Pel laughed until he began to cough.

Feeling stupid, Sabeen kneeled forward to a bucket and ladled water into a cup for him.

Beyond the flames she could see the bandits were placing the pot again. Behind them was an archer who ridiculed them, an arrow nocked but not drawn. If she had had a chance it would have been easy to surprise them, but apparently all the guards who had accompanied the caravan had been killed. Only the Bannator drivers and passengers were left. Recovering the caravan was not an option. Escape was all that remained.

Totem Pel’s gaze followed hers. “There is no point, child. The forest is too dense to navigate so you would need to take the forest track. We are three days from the salted road, I think... when you get old time takes on something of a slippery nature. They would easily find you, or you would be

killed by Teegras, or worse.”

The tumult within her seemed to have settled, for now at least, and Sabeen’s mind was clear. She wanted to tell him she knew how to find food and fend for herself. She wanted to tell him she knew, and could find all the ingredients for, the spells that would aid her and keep her safe, but before she had marshalled her mind, he spoke a single word, and her thoughts were shattered once more.

Taking the cup from her he said, “*Thatbennu.*”

“You know the ancient tongue? You speak the Arkhanum?” Sabeen did not care for the gravel scraping her shins; did not notice the blanket slide off and fall too close to the fire so that Happala yanked it away. It was hard to keep her voice low. “Are you... a *Wylder*?”

Wonder mixed with incredulity flickered with the flames in orbs that were like dusky sapphires. In them, she could see a younger man, one filled with awe at the Universe, but the brilliance dulled as he sank closer to her, holding her in regret. “Once, I might have been, but...”

“*You!*”

Sabeen yelped, hands pulling away.

One of the men from beyond the light levelled a spoon at her. His thick brown curly hair and eyes that were too close together made him look like he would be more at home in a library, but his bulging arms and crooked fingers would have broken the books.

“Yes, you. You are the cook?”

Totem Pel’s whiskers swivelled haltingly. “She’s the one I

told you about, Barthon. She's a most excellent cook, I'd say."

The brute grunted and tossed the spoon at her. "Come with me."

*Firstday, Day 13, of the Trefolkian Month of Theth, 1630
ODT*

It was more than a week that Sabeen had to wait to have an opportunity to talk to Totem Pel without the presence of others. He was sitting against a rock in the afternoon sun, staring into space with a hand on one of the symbols around his neck.

Sabeen did not feel comfortable disturbing his meditation. Suspended between reluctance and her many questions, she halted. Unsure of herself, she sought reassurance from the forest.

Happala was delivering the latest harvest to their captors. The big cook called Barthon was shadowed by the archer Sabeen had seen the week before. Though the two bandits conversed and made jovial conversation, the archer surveyed Happala with a disturbing twist of his lips.

"Come closer, young one."

"Me?"

"I don't see anybody else who approaches me. You have something on your mind, it seems?"

"I was unsure about... I didn't want to impose while you were meditating."

"But you have questions. We did not finish our conversation from the last time, sometime last week, I

believe?”

“Yes.”

“I am, by most accounts, an old man. I have spent most of my cycles in pursuit of answers, as I suspect you will, too. What good is my wisdom if there are no ears to hear it? Besides, it is flattering to keep company with one as comely as you.”

“You are too kind, *kbumo*.” Sitting on a flat stone next to him, Sabeen attempted ordering her list of queries, but none of them flowed with any logic. When the silence had been filled by too much birdsong, she finally said, “Tell me what you know of Wyrding?”

“Have you ever wondered what it would be like to eat a Bannator?”

“Eat a Bannator? Shiver the thought, *kbumo*. Mother Forest would not be pleased if...”

“Imagine for a moment, Sabeen, that it was permitted to eat a Bannator, that all the correct rituals had been observed, that the necessary thanks had been given, and that Mother Forest had consented.”

“Very well...”

“Then would you tell me how you would eat a Bannator?”

“I’m not sure I understand. You would need a lot of people and...”

“It is simple, Sabeen. You can only eat a Bannator one bite at a time.”

Sabeen noticed a small beetle on her toe, watched its haphazard path along her foot until it tickled her shin, then

took flight. She could appreciate the humour but did not understand the relevance.

“You ask me about Wyrding, as if I could provide you with a bite-sized answer that will satisfy you. That is not an answer *anybody* can give. To study the way of Wyrding takes a long time, like eating a Bannator. Horrible metaphor, grossly inappropriate, but I think you can see the truth of it, yes?”

“That night at the fire, you said you might have been a Wyrder, once.”

“Indeed. I might have been. I began my studies as a much younger man, in secret. I collected books and studied the Arkhanum. It is the duty of anybody who studies the path of Wyrding to study the Arkhanum.”

“You seem to know the ancient tongue?”

“A moderate proficiency, perhaps, but only in the first level where the intonation of words has no effect.”

“Why did you not pursue this path?”

“Ah! A worthy question, my child. One I have asked myself for many cycles. I tell myself it is because I fell in love, that my duty to my family overcame my honour to myself. Once my entwined had joined her ancestors and our children had their own families to consider, I arrived at a cross-road of sorts. That was when I resolved to resume my old path; and here I am.”

“You left your family to embark on this journey?”

“It is true that they have their lives and I have mine.”

“And now we are captives.”

“Not so. We are only captives to what we believe, and I

believe this is but a part of my journey.”

“I wish I held your insight, *kbumo*.”

“I give it freely. All you have to do is accept it.”

“*Thathenu*.” The word rolled off her tongue easily, as if her mouth had been born to it.

“No thanks needed.”

“Are you of the tribe of Thailor, perhaps, *kbumo*?”

“This is a strange question?”

“Many great sages have come from the tribe of Thailor. Your hair is white, not blue, so I am unsure.”

Totem Pel mused on her words. “I see the truth of it. I am in fact, of the tribe of Oberon *and* Thailor; but even Inicus, Anacus, and Rosacron have blood in my lineage somewhere. All five tribes. My hair, in my youth, was a light brown, if you care to know.”

“Were you travelling south to further your studies in Wyrding?”

“I was travelling south to learn more about *Weaving*.”

Sabeen stretched out her legs, leaning back against the same rock. On the opposite side of the road a small deer was nibbling on some flowers, ears twitching. A second, then a third joined her, and soon the entire herd was cropping grass and chomping branches.

“I was taught that there are two paths to approach the Sentience. One is Wyrding, the other, is Weaving. I was also taught that Weavers are the fabric of legend. With the exception of certain... experiences... I might have believed that to be true.”

“Indeed, as did I, but one day, not too long ago, I was in a small village when a man appeared. A terrifying man. I had heard rumours of this... Warlock.”

“Warlock?”

“Oh... he was too powerful to be called a sorcerer. He was able to do things... And he drew the Sentience from his Life Seed as opposed to using spells. The pupils of his eyes were like three-pointed stars.”

“A true Weaver...”

“As real as you or me. That was the day I decided to take this journey.”

Touching her abdomen, just below her navel, Sabeen imagined her Life Seed, lying snuggled somewhere deep inside. Common to all, it was said this little organ was the conduit through which the power of the Sentience could be harnessed to one’s will.

“You see - I wish to live, Sabeen. I do not wish to walk with the Ancestors just yet. I have done my duty to my family. Now is the time to honour my very self. While there is life in me, I want to train my Life Seed like a Weaver and maybe... just maybe, gods and totems willing, I could extend my cycles to see the Trefolk of legend reborn to her former glory.”

“Of what former glory do you speak?” Footsteps neared and Happala’s voice broke the spell. “Forgive my interruption, pagan priest, but I must summon Sabeen.”

“*Summon?*” Sabeen snarled at Happala.

“Yes. Barthon has need of you for cooking, most gracious ‘Fire of Evenmeal’. You are summoned.”

Red hair swished and muddy heels flicked.

On her feet, Sabeen bowed at the old man, thanking him.

“Sabeen,” he called after she had taken a few paces.

“Yes, *kbumo*?”

“I have a feeling - a sense one might say - that you will find more than what you are looking for.”

*Sixthday, Day 24, of the Trefolkian Month of Theth,
1630 ODT*

A rhythm emerged. The caravan would travel, stop for a day or so, then move on. The prisoners were free to roam, caged by the prospect of being torn apart by wild animals, caged by the thought of being hunted down, caged... more so by their own minds.

When she wasn't collecting food or cleaning wagons, Sabeen assaulted her brain for a means of escape.

She had lost track of time, but what did it matter? Patience and ten cycles of education were her allies. Biding her time, she knew an opportunity would present itself. One day soon, it would all fall into place.

Today, however, was not that day.

Stars burst in front of her and she crumpled from the blow. Tears jetted, knees crashed and her forehead struck the ground hard. Sharp stone slit her jaw. For several moments of panic there was no breath. Her body twitched, convulsed, but then she rolled over and with the noise of rushing air her lungs filled again.

“*Vishuk*,” she cursed, but her voice was too faint to be

heard.

The bully called Dess stepped away. His hand drew back and struck the archer across the face with enough force to crumple, spittle on a bloodied chin.

Sabeen turned onto her side. The pain was already gone. Even the split in her lip was closing rapidly. Rising onto all fours, she was aware of Barthon helping the archer.

“I don’t need your help!”

The archer, Nerrikon was his name, clutched the dagger on his belt, swelling with hate. He spat at the heap against the tree that was Happala. “You filthy whore! I’ll get you.”

“Nerrikon...”

“Leave me alone, Barthon!”

Keeping low Sabeen watched the feet of Nerrikon stride past, then crawled to Happala, taking sobbing scarlet in her arms.

They had returned to the campsite with their ‘basket’ laden. Nerrikon had been there as usual, but Barthon was away. Sabeen had left Happala to clean the bounty while she went to find Barthon. When she returned, Happala was pinned to the table. Her face was covered in blood as he pounded her from behind.

Sabeen did not quite remember what happened next, whether she had attacked Nerrikon or if Dess had arrived, but the damage was done.

Happala kept trying to cover herself.

“I must clean. I must pray!” She tried to stand, but fell over. Sabeen cradled her again, trying to squeeze the pain from

her, but all that came was wailing.

“Here.”

Sabeen looked up at brown hair. “Is that all you think of? You think drinking will fix this?”

Barthon shook his head, unstopped the skin and handed it back. “It’s *chameelim* with blazing saffron. “

“Saffron blaise, you oaf.” Sabeen tilted some of the liquid to Happala’s lips. “Drink, Happala. This will help for the pain.”

Happala had stopped sobbing. Her body, however, was twitching. Waves of small convulsions ravaged her.

Broad bulk leaned in. “Let me help.”

“No!” Sabeen slapped at Barthon’s hand. “Fetch Totem Pel.” When Barthon didn’t move, his face a dark shadow, she added, “Please, by the gods. The old man might know what to do.”

They carried Happala into the sleeper wagon, laying her limp on her bunk.

Covering her with a blanket, Barthon stood up. His brow was troubled, and his broad flat nose was flaring. His usually gruff voice cracked a little when he said, “I’ll cook dinner.”

For an eternity, Sabeen stared up at the roof of the wagon, lost in the cross beams as if she could find something there that would purge this hollow revulsion and sadness from her. Since her night at the fire with Totem Pel she had been watching her body go through changes. She might have been wounded when Dess had assaulted her, but whatever had happened on that day the sorcerer had tried to kill her,

whatever he had awakened in her, had been more powerful. It defied her attempts to fathom it, rippling through her body, her very soul, with careless feet and deafening silence and it was having its way with her.

Sometimes she would collapse with cramps. Sometimes she would burn with a fever that would melt rock and she could not move from her bed, and then there were those spells when the experience was not at all unpleasant.

Many were the times she had been left alone to cook and the thick wooden spoon had stirred more than just dinner. By the gods, most nights she could not sleep until her nectar had jetted and soaked her sheets and she had lain there, staring into these rafters, drifting on wings of bliss, until Morphas blessed her with sleep.

Now, though, the rafters offered little more than pigeon dung, and thoughts of Nerrikon skewered through the head. Somehow, she would find a way to take a spear and push it into his ashenstar. He would scream when it tore through his bowels, ripping his guts; but his cry would be cut short. It would slash his throat, and he would die twitching, pissing himself as it came out the top of his head.

“We should... inspect her.”

Sabeen had forgotten Totem Pel was there. His quavering tone brought her down from the rafters and the weight of impotence bore upon her, as balled fists uncurled.

“I can do it, but...It has been many... many cycles since I... looked upon another.”

“That’s alright, old man. I’ll do it.”

“Have you... any knowledge as a Healer?”

Sabeen wanted to tell him the body would heal. She knew what it felt like to be taken when her flower was too dry, or her ashenstar unprepared. While she had been willing, it had still been sore but the body would heal. The mind, the soul, whatever those who knew of the spirits and the gods called it... that was a different matter, and so she merely whispered, “Thank the gods Happala is young enough not to have had her Second Rising.”

“I see the truth of it.” Totem Pel sighed. “At least there will be no bastard of this... tragedy.”

Sabeen touched the old man’s arm as he neared the door. “If you have any influence, Totem Pel, let no man enter here again.”

“I shall cast what little I can, my child, but know that any man who does will call upon them a wrath that will leave them broken, whimpering and praying for death.”

The door to the wagon closed, taking the light with it. In the dark she fumbled with lamps, lit them, tied her hair, and was about to begin when she was interrupted by soft knocking.

Barthon handed her a bucket of hot water, then another. He handed her towels, bandages and a case of herbs, a box of implements, and the wineskin from earlier. Finally, he turned and Sabeen saw Erik carrying a tray from whence came two bowls of steamy broth. Had so much time passed that Barthon had been able to make a broth?

Her question went unanswered. Realising she had been delaying what needed to be done she set the food aside,

prepared the herbs and potions, and kneeled next to Happala.

“I know you worship Seisha.”

Sabeen paused, the cloth in her hand dripping, steaming.
“Do I now?”

“Tell me you do... please. I need you to look upon my wounds.”

The blood on Happala’s face had turned to rust, and Sabeen worked slowly, carefully.

“And if I worship Seisha, it is the will of the gods to look upon another woman’s... dignity?”

“Seisha is Mother and Sister. She is the one who journey’s to the underworld every cycle to try to bring peace between Gethras and their brother Sfarr. She is courage... she is...”

“Shh...” Sabeen rinsed the cloth, staining the water with ruby.

“I know you worship Seisha!” Balled fists slammed the bunk. “I hear your moans at night. I hear your gasps. Tell me! Tell me you worship Seisha? Seisha is... hope.”

“She is.” Sabeen picked up the wineskin. “Do you have pain?”

“I have shame.”

“Do you have... pain?”

“Yes...” Happala grabbed the skin and drank.

Sabeen had turned to the other bucket where the herbs were infusing. With a gasp she stole the wineskin away. “Not too much, Happala. You are not ready to meet the gods.”

“Would that they call for me tonight.”

Happala’s gown was torn slightly at the edging. It was a

deep green, a fine garment that had witnessed a base deed. Sabeen lifted the hem. “May I...?”

Happala nodded, tears drowning her cheeks, but instead of lying back she turned onto her belly. Her voice was unnervingly steady. “I know what that man did. Perhaps he is a religious man. I have pain, but my vow is intact.”

With great care Sabeen cleaned her and applied the poultice, even after Happala had gone to Morphas. Finished with the soiled cloth in her hand, Sabeen sat at Happala’s feet, weeping for perfect little toes once kissed by a mother’s lips, her unblemished skin once prized by a proud father, her ignorant but innocent soul, all of which would be no more.

The world - that *Vishuk* - had scarred her, stolen from her, betrayed her.

“What should I *do* ...?”

Jenna knew the Old Ways. She knew what to do with her shikai. She would have dealt with the rapist in a fitting and graphic way, but there was no answer from her memories of that deadly friend, no answer from the guttering lamps, and her gaze fell with water to the floor. The boards were smooth, worn by countless feet. She followed the shiny grain, lost in knots and patterns, trying to find structure, meaning... hope.

When Foranrian had left Frethenia, Jenna had made her a gift. It was a fortuitous gift, for it contained lethal remedies for just this predicament. Before her departure from Frethenia, Foranrian had hidden the package below the boards upon which she now dwelled.

It was time, she thought, for Sabeen to disturb them again.

*Secon'day, Day 26, of the Trefolkian Month of Theth,
1630 ODT*

Somewhere up the road the sound of a horn echoed.

“Hold!”

The command, picked up by each Bannator driver, rippled to the back; wagons trundled, halted, creaked, and popped but Sabeen heard none of it.

She had fallen far behind. Strolling slowly, lulled into a daydream by the rhythm of stones that crunched and squeaked deliciously against her bare soles, she was lost in the textures of the road.

She needed to find a stone that was suitable enough to pry those wooden boards back, but there was no way to smuggle one into the wagon, at least not without causing harm to bodily orifices, and soon she was drawn into a mosaic that varied from fleshy tones to autumnal textures, glittering in the sun.

She forgot the humidity, heavy with forest mulch and blossoms; she was deaf to the din of beetles and riotous birds, and oblivious to the swathes of butterflies that swooped in looping streams of pinks and blues.

“In which temple do you dwell?”

Sabeen blinked, wiping at the sting of tears. “Temple?”

“It is said that when we become so lost in thought our spirits are carried far from this world and, depending on those thoughts or the totem upon which we meditate, we find ourselves walking in one of those distant temples, perhaps with the gods themselves.”

The grainy tap of Totem Pel's staff joined their footsteps.

"Cirilius rides high. Perhaps it was he who baked me into dreamland... Is it Sixthday already?"

"Sixthday?"

"The caravan seems to stop every five or six days. We usually set up camp for two and then move on. On the day we set up camp you perform some kind of ritual, and I've noticed that some of the bandits gather to hear you speak. Since Sixthday is the day of Laudlifting, I reasoned..."

"Ah." The wood began to tap again. "Bless you, child for honouring me with the assumption that I would be worthy to lead Laudlifting. No... I... perform the ritual of protection. It's symbolic, mainly. My use of magic is limited to the sanctioned spells, I'm afraid, and they won't afford more protection than burly... bandits, you call them, with swords."

"What would *you* call them?"

They were within a few paces of the last wagon, the one in which Sabeen had awakened, the one in which she had nursed Happala's shattered dignity, the one which they might call home. In a certain light it was enchanting, with its door, once painted yellow but now flaking. Its broad timbers glistened with oils and varnish, but it had been scarred during the ambush, the fresh gouges now dulled to black spots and streaks.

"Pray, child. We are all children of Mother Forest. We are all wards of the gods. You, me, the bandits, and... your friend over there."

Rather than sit on the stairs Happala had taken to studying

the ground. Sabeen had washed her hair and her robe, but she still looked dirty, dishevelled, like a piece of scarlet cloth discarded at the side of the road.

“Walk with me a while?”

Totem Pel hooked an arm into Sabeen’s. Under the laws of association such an act in her home town would have signified family, or impropriety. Here, in the middle of gods-knew-where, it meant no more than a young woman helping an old man.

In silence they passed the wagon, the enormous Bannator that pulled it, then the next wagon, the next three-horned beast, and on, until the curve of the road straightened and Sabeen could see ahead.

The caravan had been climbing into the mountains and had arrived at a narrow bridge. She could hear the drone of a waterfall, heavy and swift. Only now, though, with towering rock faces on her right and tree tops beyond the caravan to her left, did she realise why their passage had seemed slow.

Just as she thought Totem Pel was lost in his own temple, he spoke.

“She’s not eating, you know. Yes, she accepts a bowl of food, but does not finish even half. I walked with her for a while. I told her many stories, funny stories that would make even a deaf post laugh, but she laughed not once, nor even smiled.”

Sabeen could see the truth of it. It was difficult to rouse Happala in the mornings. Even though Sabeen had found miswak root, Happala was loathe to even brush her teeth.

“Happala asked me to pray to Seisha for her. That night, after...”

“And did you?”

“I never knew my mother and my Insem was not a religious man. I grew up trusting in my hands, my mind. I studied many things, even law. I once thought I might become a woman of High Letters, but then ... well... things changed. I had the fortune of meeting...”

“A lover?”

“No... though, maybe in another life, but... someone. An exceptional woman...”

“Ah, yes...” Totem Pel stopped next to the lead Bannator. Its hairy skin was mottled like the stones on the road. Almost as tall as two men, if one stood on the head of the other, it seemed content to stamp the ground occasionally while its flanks expanded and contracted with air, a rumbling coming from within.

“This is the one you spoke of in your fevered sleep.”

“It seems I laid my life bare in fevered sleep.”

“As Seisha is my witness, for two nights we watched as you lay there, twisting, turning. At times you would gasp, or sit up. At times, it was as if you were having a conversation with somebody. This very person of whom you speak. You never let slip any details – the sign of a strong mind. The others thought you were merely speaking nonsense but I knew better. I could discern the signs. It’s my gift, I think, to be able to discern signs, you know.”

“I see the Truth of it. What signs did you see?”

“This person, this woman you so revere... she is... Akiun?”

“Did I say that in my sleep?” Sabeen gripped Totem Pel’s arm.

“No.” He dropped his voice. “Not once. But... I pieced things together. I was fascinated, of course. Akiun was outlawed more than a thousand cycles ago. It was always rumoured that some schools had continued, but...”

“Her name is-” Sabeen bit her tongue. She would not betray her friend.

Lids, laden with sorrow, and a head that bobbed with knowing responded. “You are wise, Sabeen of Frethenia. I should not know her name, though it excites me that the forbidden secrets survive in at least... One.”

“It was she who gave me... faith... if you could call it that. She believed in Seisha, in Mother Forest, the Sentience.”

“The Sentience?” Totem Pel cradled his staff in the crook of an elbow. “Ah, the Sentience... the universal energy that flows through and binds all things. Your other friend... Happala? She would say it was from Sfarr, the Evil One, but we know better, do we not?”

“The things... Totem Pel... the *amazing* things I have seen...”

The Bannator shuddered, shaking insects from its flanks. From between its back legs a stamen as thick as a man’s leg stretched toward the ground and a pungent stream tossed mud and rocks, boring a hole.

Sabeen and Totem Pel hopped into the grassy verge,

backing up until they leaned against smooth rock.

“Oh *my!*” Totem Pel had a slight wheeze, but it skipped through the crows’ feet and crinkled cheeks of a man who loved to laugh.

Sabeen blushed a little as her belly bounced.

“You have never seen one so big, eh?”

“Elder!”

“Pray? *I* have never seen one so big!” He tapped her leg with his staff. “Does such potency frighten... or excite you?”

Under the abdomen of the Bannator, beyond the splashy spectacle, Sabeen could see a wide rocky shelf and, beyond this, the tops of trees. Massive flocks sailed across the canopy, like streaming strokes on a canvas of sapphire and cotton. Sabeen could not remember ever having seen such a view.

“Impressive,” she whispered.

“Oh, that it truly is.”

“I meant the view, Elder Pel.”

“Of course you did, my child. But please, ‘Totem Pel’ will suffice. I am not old, just older, and I find the title of Elder comes with certain... implications that I don’t believe in.”

Erik the carpenter strode into sight. It was like watching a theatre framed by Bannator legs. He carried two crates and set them down as chairs. Barthon, the burly cook, followed. On one shoulder he carried a long open box of tools. In the other he carried the wheel of a wagon.

“Now that is impressive.” Bushy grey brows raised in the direction of the two men who set the box and the wheel down.

Erik announced he would fetch the rest and left again.

“Strong men used to impress me. I thought they were better than me. All the women in my old tavern would have doted on Barthon, dreaming of laying their heads on that barrelled strength.”

“You learned that big men have small hearts? I see the Truth of it.”

“No, I met a small woman who could crush that heart. She... without hesitation, she could reach between ribs like that, like the bones were twigs, and remove the heart.”

“This... Akiun friend of yours... She sounds like she mastered the Circle of Five.”

“What do you know of the Akiun, Eld - I mean, Totem Pel?”

“Not much, in truth. They were outlawed by the first Emperor. There was a massive purge. Few schools survived, and those that did went into hiding. The matron deity of the Akiun is Seisha.”

Erik returned, struggling with two boxes. Barthon rushed to assist, taking them like they were toys. A large hand touched Erik’s shoulder as he asked if Erik was alright, and offered him water.

“If I pray to Seisha, will she help Happala?” Helpless Sabeen took Totem Pel’s hand, searching for answers on his necklace.

“Of course, my child. Seisha is *all* women; the Virgin, the Entwined, and the Widow. She is the Daughter, the Sister, the Mother, the Infant, the Crone, and even the Whore. We have the seasons because she journeys constantly between her

brothers Gethras in the heavens and Sfarr in the underworld, trying ceaselessly to broker peace. I have never known prayers to Seisha to go unanswered.”

“I... do not know all the rituals.”

“I can show you, though it has been many cycles since I touched my knees to the ground and opened my thighs.”

“Teach me. Tell me what to do and I shall do it.”

“You know... I never noticed before, but your eyes. Deep in the yellow are small notes of... blue, I think. Quite... beautiful.”

“You flatter me. My once pristine gown is a dress that barely covers my flower. I am dirty, I stink of Bannator piss, and you think...”

The tail of the Bannator lifted and great grassy globes of dung spattered on the ground, after which the creature’s flanks heaved. A great bellow, as if in triumph, echoed against the hill.

Erik and Barthon had sat down. Erik was wrestling the wagon wheel around to where two of the thick spokes had broken while Barthon complimented him on how he seemed to know exactly what to do.

“Beauty is not in what we wear, child, or the cleanliness of the body. Such things are meant to augment and honour the temple we call body wherein the gods have placed their divine fire.” The staff waved at the slumping pile that was already attracting beetles. “Creatures and animals, we say, produce dung, but we who are blessed with the divine fire, we... create ash.”

Barthon reached into the box of tools. He pulled out a metal rod and learning the ritual of Seisha was forgotten.

“Forgive me... Totem Pel.”

Leaving Totem Pel in mid-speech, Sabeen ducked and crossed carelessly under the Bannator. Metal was generally rare in Trefolk, except for certain occupations and locations, like a smithy, or on a Bannator caravan. Why had she been thinking about stones when the thing in Barthon’s hand was exactly what she needed? The pry bar was too big to smuggle in of course, but she would brave the pain if she could find something smaller.

“Hard at work, Erik? I have always wanted to see...”

Erik pointed at her passage, standing up in amazement. “How did you...?”

“Barthon... I... don’t know what Erik is talking about but...”

“How did you cross under... The Bannator should have pounded... How?” Erik gaped from Sabeen to the Bannator, then at Barthon.

Sloping muscular shoulders with bronzed skin and thick veins shrugged. “We have stopped to cross Crumble Gorge. The bridge needs vital repairs before we can cross. We will need to find food for...”

“Evenmeal?” The voice was gruff. Sabeen followed Erik and Barthon’s faces.

Dess approached. He swaggered with three buckets in one hand. He swung them at Sabeen, knocking her backwards. “Evenmeal sounds about right. Take the carpenter and that

half-wit red friend of yours and go down to the river. Fetch water, bring wood, bring food.” Sabeen’s cheek throbbed as he tapped it. “Simple enough for you?”

Clutching the buckets Sabeen seethed, but bowed, grinding a heel into the stony shelf.

Dess slapped her, harder this time. “I didn’t hear you?”

“Yes. Yes, Dess, my lord.” The words were acid in her mouth.

“Better. Barthon, stop playing with your rod and come with me.”

Happala resisted. She would not go. When Sabeen and Erik tried to lift her she squirmed to the ground, whimpering.

“Just... leave me... alone... please?”

“Look, I have some slit-moss.” Erik showed Happala a large clump of veiny sponge in his hand. “We can wash, get clean, even smell like freshly sliced lemons.”

“Doesn’t it sound good?” Sabeen touched a shoulder that was too cold. “I washed one of your gowns. I could wash your hair again and you could wear it. You’ll feel so much better... You’ll feel... kissed by the gods, even.”

“Your prayers and offerings to Seisha have not worked, Sabeen. I have no hope. Why should I be kissed by the gods?”

Guilt made Sabeen stare at the forest. She had said no prayers; the ‘offerings’ Happala referred to were no more than muffled orgasms every night. Just that thought caused her flower to fill with dew and she felt even worse.

“You and Erik go. Just leave me here.”

It was no use. Though they tried everything they could

think of, eventually, they had no option but to leave Happala in her misery.

“I’m sure, she will find her path again, Sabeen,” said Erik, throwing a final glance at the heap they had left behind. “I too, will pray for her.”

Leaving the stony platform, Erik led them to a rocky path which descended into the valley. At some time in the past, this route had been well travelled and tended. Somebody had even placed rough stairs at steeper sections, but now it was choked with overgrowth.

“I think there was a settlement here.”

Erik was nimble. His bare feet were strong and confident over the rocks and roots. Now that he wore a kilt of soft hide, Sabeen could see his sinewy body carried no fat and his tawny skin glistened with a healthy sheen.

Waiting for Sabeen where the stairs passed under a massive root Erik jabbed a thick finger upwards. “See there, in those boughs?”

“Yes. I see planks, maybe a platform?”

Erik disappeared into a short tunnel. “The wood is old, rotten, but I’ve seen a few like it. Might have been a farm or something long ago. Or a trading post, maybe. I’ve never seen trees so small, though. This root we’re going under is... maybe as thick as a man is long?”

“Yes?”

“In Harker’s Reach, the roots are three times as thick, and the trees three times taller. At least three times taller.”

The staircase ended in a small clearing. Here there were

banana shrubs, Vergunny runners, blue-berry bushes, and even some wild lettuce.

“You see?” Erik’s arms announced his triumph. “A farm.”

“You were right, I think.” Sabeen plucked a banana and strode past him. The ground had turned soft, beach-like, and she could hear water. Sabeen could not wait to rid herself of the last two – or perhaps it was three – weeks of filth. “Is that where you’re from?”

“Where are you going?”

“You brought the slit-moss for a reason and I think the river is close by. We can come back for the food.”

“I’m not from a farm. I’m from Harker’s Reach. It’s a small village about a day’s ride north of Berryton. Do you know where Berryton is?”

Sabeen threw the peel into the bushes, trying to recall the many maps she had studied over the cycles she had spent at the House of Antiquities, one of Trefolk’s most auspicious institutions of education, and realised she was staring at a small copse of silk-bushes. These cucumber-like vegetables were known for their silky, juicy pulp - famous for their rejuvenating cosmetic properties and for settling queasy bellies; infamous for their sexual applications. Though she did not need them, for by the gods her flower produced enough silk of its own, she plucked a number of them for... *medicinal* reasons.

“Yes, Berryton is on the Mystic Lake of Souls, isn’t it? About halfway across the lake on the eastern shore?”

“Harker’s Reach is a day’s ride north of that.”

“You are a long way from home, then, Erik of Harker’s

Reach.”

“Not far enough.”

The water was growing louder and Sabeen’s feet were sinking into sand. Setting the silk-fruit down, she slipped off her dress and waded into the water. When she turned back, Erik was sitting on a rock, his back to her.

With a mischievous spark she sloshed back until she was only knee deep. Though her skin screamed for a scrubbing, Erik’s bashfulness could not go unmolested.

“Could you pass me the slit-moss, Erik?”

“Can you catch it?”

“No. I’m not as agile as you. You’ll have to give it to me.”

“Here.” He placed it on his shoulder.

“I can’t leave the water now. I’m naked!”

“Oh!” Erik turned around, and instantly his face popped.

“Oh Erik.” Sabeen splashed through the shallows, broke off a piece of the moss. “You’re not very good at pretending, are you?”

“Pretending?”

“If I was to turn around and bend forward... If I was to stroke my flower with greedy fingers... What would happen under your kilt?”

“N... nothing?”

“Exactly.”

Taking her dress from the rock she washed it, hung it to dry, then washed the weeks from her skin. Her mind ruminated on her talk with Totem Pel, the ritual of Seisha, and how Happala continued to wallow.

“Do... Do you think he likes me?”

“Who?” But Sabeen already knew.

“Barthon, of course. Good gods, Sabeen, sometimes I swear you...”

“Have you ever even... *been* with a woman?”

“I had an aunt who believed the only way to keep me from evil was to swallow my seed.”

“And did you enjoy it?”

“Not nearly as much as with my uncle, who believed the only way to keep me from evil was to put his seed in my ashenstar.”

“That’s... quite a childhood. You ran away from Harker’s Reach?”

“I met a man. An inventor. Quite mad, some might say, but he had some revolutionary ideas. He taught me to read, and he told me I could find a new life. So I chose to go to Sharelily point. No reason, really. I just needed to get away. Would... would you like me to wash your *shikai*?”

“Yes. *Thathenu*...” In that moment, with the water swirling and gurgling between her breasts, pulling on them in ways that were more than pleasant, she realised that she was no longer the woman called Foranrian.

Foranrian would have been bashful, reserved, coquettish perhaps, but nothing more. Had changing her name to Sabeen changed her character? Had Totem Pel said something to influence her? Foranrian would never have allowed a man to wash her *shikai*, yet now there wasn’t even the hint of hesitation. Or had it been the magical blast from the sorcerer?

Had his Wyrding skills called forth a different person?

Gentle tugging on her back brought her focus to sun-dappled gurgles and sparkling spray. How bizarre it was to be naked with a man who had no interest in her at all.

“Barthon donated you the kilt?”

“He calls it a ‘Kren’an.’ It’s in the style of a warrior’s skirt, though I think the real warrior’s Kren’an is a lot different. In Harker’s Reach it is forbidden to wear anything less than a Dniban gown.”

“Frethenia, too.”

“Really? I heard they had sanctioned new colours or some such, some time ago.”

“They call it ‘Newgarb.’ A few small variations, new colours, but whether a Dniban gown is green or orange, it is still a Dniban gown.”

Erik’s fingers were a dreamy massage that Sabeen did not want an end to. The hands of this carpenter were so skilled she envied Barthon.

“It... is... strange to wear so little. Barthon says where we’re going I won’t have to wear anything.”

“He wants to take you to his chamber, and you wonder if he likes you? You’ll be needing the silk-fruit I imagine.”

“Silk-fruit?”

Trying not to be too graphic, Sabeen explained its uses.

“Oh... So that is what my uncle used when...”

Erik’s fingers departed. Water sucked and splashed. Disappointed, Sabeen watched rippling buttocks return to the shore. As he wrapped his kilt around his waist Sabeen envied

Barthon even more.

Taking her garment from the rock, Erik wrung the water out. "Do you only have this one gown?"

"Yes." With water draining in rivulets from the thin fabric Sabeen held her 'dress' in the air. "When the bandits attacked they stole all our belongings."

"And gave them back after a while..."

"After a thorough search, you mean."

"I suppose."

"Everybody else received their belongings back. I never did." She began to pull the wet material over her head.

"Leave it here, Sabeen. We can gather the food and return for it. I am sure it will be dry by then."

"What if someone..."

"I doubt anybody would come looking for us before nightfall, and that's not for a while still. Besides, if you wear it now, dust will stick and you'll be wearing lemony mud." Before she could object he snatched the dress from her and carefully laid it out on a flat rock in full sun. "You... you're not *ashamed*, or are you, Sabeen?"

Wind shuddered the trees and a shower of seeds and leaves pattered like rain into the river. A small rainbow lizard scuttled onto the rock, seemed to evaluate her dress, and scuttled off again.

"I might have been, once. Pray... Do you think... perhaps you could find out what happened to the rest of my things?"

Erik lifted the buckets without conviction. "How did you get that scar?"

“This?” Sabeen touched the line of dark flesh just below her left collar bone. Foranrian had been stabbed. What had happened to Sabeen?

“Looks like...”

“I fell off a horse. Maybe it was a mala.” She showed him another scar on her thigh. “I had just seven cycles.”

“Did you fall on a knife?”

“An... an axe. The edge... or corner... or whatever you call it.”

“Must have been quite an adventure.”

“It surely was.”

“Mala’s are gentle creatures. Usually quite obedient, although it takes a while to get used to something that looks a bit like an overgrown cluckbird. Must have been a horse. You had horses, so you know animals, then?” Erik was digging a hole in the beach with one foot.

“What are you trying to say, Erik?”

“How did you cross under the Bannator? One man, a few days’ ago, he tried a shortcut under the Bannator. The same Bannator. He got kicked so hard we nearly had to...”

“Just lucky, I suppose. Won’t do that again.” She tried to make light of it, but Erik was right. Impulse had made her cross without thinking of her safety. They were usually docile creatures but a Bannator was particularly protective of its underbelly. Many times the Healers in Frethenia had been called to tend the wounds of those who were ignorant of it and fell afoul of those massive feet or, even worse, their horns.

There was only one reason why she should be so trusted

by a Bannator but she had left Frethenia before the official ceremony. Was it possible that the House of Antiquities had conferred Guardianship upon her in absentia?

“Your hair turned darker when the sorcerer tried to kill you. Now you have streaks of blue in your hair, like your blood comes from the tribe of Thailor. You...” Erik pranced away. “You can talk to animals! You’re Thalorian!”

“Anacus, Erik. It’s people with green hair, from Anacus, who are good with animals. My hair is dark with these blue... I don’t know what you call them. I don’t know *what* I am.”

“Really?” He strode into the forest, unconvinced. “We’ll have to ask Totem Pel. He’ll know. Come, we have food to gather, and I want you to tell me more about silk-fruit!”

*Thir’d day, Day 27, of the Trefolkian Month of Theth, 1630
ODT*

Every night, Sabeen and Happala were locked inside the sleeper wagon. They were given water and a chamber pot was placed in a corner to the right of the door.

Outside, dawn was breaking and there were noises of men moving about. Happala slept soundly. She seemed to be sleeping more and more.

Squatting over the copper crucible, Sabeen studied the grain of the planks under her feet, still sleepy.

Erik had made good on his promise to find Sabeen’s belongings, only to report that they had been lost during the ambush and probably lay still at the side of the road so far away now. All she had left was her near see-through gown and

the obsessive package under the boards which were under her bunk.

It was a simple package, really, just a few things. Amongst others, it contained her father's signet ring, a letter Jenna had given her in case Sabeen had the fortune to meet a group of people who upheld the Old Ways, along with a mysterious pass-phrase she had committed to memory. Then there was some sandal lotion, three acorn-sized "Drellion balls", her money and, most importantly, a very special and deadly dagger.

Last night, Dess, Barthon, and most of the other bandits were away tending to final repairs on the bridge and the prisoners, although Totem Pel kept correcting her to call them 'The Liberated' were left to the glow of the fire, and even some wine.

A horse galloped past beyond the boards, startling her bladder to action. Hot spray on her feet meant she had missed the pot and she cursed the god of latrines, if there was one.

Studying the boards again as best she could in the dim light, she lifted to reposition and then stood up, the urge gone in an instant. What was this?

Even in the near darkness she could see the wood was rotting in places. Perhaps the nails were rusted?

She moved the chamber pot aside, careful not to spill any of the foul slop within. Tenderly, she ran her fingers over the grain until she touched a hole big enough, pushed in a digit and pulled.

Large, squishy splinters melted away leaving a larger hole.

She tried again, and, once more, until she could see the ground through the opening. Now her whole hand could fit. Within minutes she had worked several boards loose, stacking them against the wall.

“Thank Seisha.”

Poking her head through the opening she could see the ground, hued in dawn, but pulled back as she saw feet flash past.

The door of the caravan rattled.

“Get up! I can smell you’re awake!”

“Have you come for the chamber pot?” Sabeen leaned a cheek against a board, heard the man snort and walk away.

Hurriedly, she packed the boards back, wiped her hands on a rag and tried to rouse Happala.

“Wake up, Happala. I have news.”

The scarlet tousles did not move.

Sabeen shook her, harder this time.

“Go away. Let me sleep...”

“Happala...” Sabeen pushed her hair aside. “I think I found a way to escape.”

“Escape? What do you mean?”

Yes. It was possible, Sabeen explained. They would slip out when everybody slept, find a path to the river and follow it downstream until they found refuge.

“They will never let us leave... They will hunt us... The animals will...”

“No...” The side of the bunk was hard on Sabeen’s chest. “No... last night Totem Pel went on about totems and how I

could pass under the Bannator and... It's all nonsense! I think I have the Tenth Leaf from the House of Antiquities. I am a Guardian of the Forest. Animals will not..."

"You're mad..." Happala backed away. "I've been deserted by the gods! I've been hollowed out and left with a mad whore..."

"Keep your voice calm. Happala, please, I beg of you. I won't leave you behind. This is our chance."

But Happala was in the corner now, legs drawn up. "Get out!" Savagery snarled behind an angry curtain of red. "Leave me alone, demon!"

"What the Sfarr is going on?"

The lock on the door clacked, and sunlight flooded the wagon. By the frame and the voice, Sabeen recognised Dess.

"Please, Dess. Let her be." Sabeen backed away, hands upheld, begging, but he grabbed her by the hair, yanked her head sideways and threw her out.

Winded and bleeding from cuts on her arm there was nothing Sabeen could do. Even if she could she had landed at the feet of Nerrikon the archer. His bow was as slack as his tunic was not.

Dess dragged Happala by the foot until her dress wrinkled up and her back bounced on the stairs. The door banged shut but the sound was muted by Happala's wails.

"Why don't you bring your friend to the river and get her cleaned up, huh?" Dess squatted next to Sabeen. His voice was unusually gentle and she dared not move. "Here." At her hands Dess dropped Sabeen's dress and a fresh robe for

Happala. "I'll see you are undisturbed and I'll leave the wagon unlocked. Nerrikon, with me."

She expected the punch of toes, braced as she anticipated the blow, but nothing happened. With relief, she fell over.

Her wounds had sealed by the time she slid the dress over her head. If not for Happala's sensibilities there would really have been no purpose. Somehow the garment, if it could still be called that, had torn up the side and a pathetic strip flapped wantonly when she walked.

It was surprisingly easy to coax Happala from the ground. Using soothing tones, Sabeen guided her alongside the wagons, but there were occasions when she stood still and shivered uncontrollably, as if her whole body was frozen and she couldn't get warm. Sabeen rubbed her, debated if she should find a blanket, but as they walked, the shivering became less and part of her former self returned. At least the madness was gone, but it was replaced by something else.

Sabeen mistook it for hope.

The caravan was oddly deserted, as was the rocky shelf. There was nobody in sight.

Sabeen reached out to stop Happala. Perhaps the others were hiding, plotting some kind of ambush to terrorise them even more, but scarlet skipped ahead. Dumbfounded by such a radical change in demeanour, Sabeen caught up.

As Dess had promised, their passage was unmolested.

"I owe you an apology, Sabeen."

"For what?" They were nearing the place where the stairs dipped under the root.

Happala took Sabeen's hand. "You have shown me kindness when I only complain."

"It's..."

"It's not nothing. I owe you more than you know. I should make you a gift!" Happala's face beamed.

It was like seeing Cirilius after a week of rain. How Sabeen had missed the sun!

"A... gift?"

"Yes. I know just the thing." Not just the sun, but a springtime breeze. Happala began to hop up the stairs. "Oh... no... go to the river. I shall be quicker than a wink."

Open mouthed, Sabeen stared as the muddied gown billowed up the path. Could it be that she had unexpectedly snapped out of her despair?

Reaching the river, Sabeen began to disrobe, tutting at the new tear on her dress. Perhaps Happala's gift was a new robe? Cirilius and all the world could see this one could no longer be considered a dress. It was more patches of old table-cloth than anything else. As harsh as it sounded, and as guilty as it made her feel, Sabeen wondered if the bumping down the stairs had knocked the melancholy from her friend, or perhaps it had knocked something in...

Sabeen went cold.

Sand exploded as she burst forward, snagging her rags on a branch so that it ripped again, but she didn't notice.

The stairs were a blur of grey and black and mottled green. She pushed her legs until they screamed, begged her throat for more air. A jagged rock gouged her thigh, a branch scraped her

cheek, but she had no time for the searing pain. She could hardly breathe by the time she reached the shelf, but forced her body to give her more speed.

Barthon and Erik swam in front of her, rising from their crates. She didn't know if she called out to them or not - didn't care.

Skidding around the corner of the wagon, a closed door confounded her. The pain from banging her shin on the stairs drove expletives on her last breath, but she pulled on it, staggering back as it opened with a ghostly creak.

“Happala? Oh dear gods...”

*Thir'day, Day 27, of the Trefolkian Month of Theth, 1630
ODT*

Toes, dripping brown fluid, swayed back and forth.

She had used the sheets: tied them together, looped them through the rafters.

On Sabeen's bunk, neatly folded, were two of Happala's gowns.

Colours seemed to stream together; the failed portrait of a bright friendship on a dark canvas.

She didn't remember falling but Sabeen was in Erik's arms, trembling, bubbles on her lips.

There was liquid in her mouth... water, it might have been. She would never forget Barthon clasping Happala's waist, absurdly trying to lift her body to take the tension off the neck, when her spirit had already lifted beyond that.

Too much anguish was trying to get out and had no exit. It

tried her hands, bunching them to white, then her chest where it burned in sorrow, until finally it escaped up her throat.

The world was whirling, a storm of questions, a maelstrom of denial, pleas to the gods, a desperate search for meaning, some anchor in chaos, but she was a tiny boat on a tumultuous ocean of bitterness and grief and... anger.

By the gods there was anger, as never before. Like a lighthouse through the tempest, it radiated like a new sun: hot, bright, and resolute.

Everything seemed to clear. Everything came into sharp focus.

She knew who had done this.

Wrenching free from Erik, she was on fire. The wagon flew past, then the Bannator, and the next and the next. She barely touched the boards of the bridge as meteoric fury blazed over its timbers.

On the other side was a gathering. The bandits were talking to some men on horseback, but this meant nothing; if they had been riding Teegras it would only have given her flight.

Her target was at the far right.

Sabeen slammed into the archer, knocking him forwards, but before he could recover, she was on him, fists pumping.

There was too much rage for her arms and she began to bite. Even when arms far stronger than her wrath pulled her away, she continued to fight and kick.

Her body raged, convulsing serpentine, slick with sweat. One foot broke free and smashed something soft. Nails and teeth scraped, scratched, savaged, with every last drop of

venom.

Several buckets of water were needed to make her stop.

“Child! Sabeen... look at me.”

Heaving, gasping, the animal within was quieted, but still growled. Beyond a mat of plastered hair she could see Totem Pel.

His hands were clasped in placation. “Child... what has possessed you?”

A few paces away, Nerrickon was trying to stand. Half a finger oozed red. The sight of his blood enraged her again. With renewed rage she thrust at him, screaming. Something fleshy fell from between her lips and there was iron on her tongue. Her arms were locked. Her legs were pinned. Four men struggled to restrain her.

A new face materialised - a strange face - one that did not belong to the bandits and, for a moment, the animal was interrupted. He tapped her body lightly in a few places. She remembered seeing a bad scar on his face before the world turned black.

*Thir'day, Day 27, of the Trefolkian Month of Theth, 1630
ODT*

When Sabeen awoke, she was draped in a blanket. Her hands were free but her body ached and she could hardly move for fatigue. By the gods, she could scarcely raise her head!

“She awakens.”

Squinting upwards, Sabeen was aware Erik held a cup of

water for her. She was sitting on the ground, against a rock. To her right were the men who had been on horseback. To her left were Dess, the *Vishuk* Nerrikon, Barthon, and the rest.

“Barthon and Erik told us about your friend, Happala. We commend her to the arms of Seisha. May you find peace when you visit the cave of the departed.”

It was a strong, commanding voice. Sabeen appraised broad shoulders, a strong neck, a well-trimmed beard on a square jaw, and a regal nose between blazing purple eyes.

Beside this man was another, the man with the scar. Though shorter than the first, *his* legs, bare from the knees down, were twice as thick. His upper body resembled a V-shape with shoulders broader than Barthon’s. Just like his face, his skin was covered in scars. He wore a sword on his naked back but for all that obvious power he moved like silk in a breeze.

The man with the regal nose introduced himself as Vyktor. “The rigors of a long journey can be hard on some people. It is a shame that such a young woman should succumb to it.”

Sabeen scoffed. She swallowed, wiping her mouth. “Rigors? Your man archer... *Vishuk* ... over there... he raped her.”

“Pray?” Vyktor took a step. “Dess... Is this true?”

Unspoken venom churned in Dess’ throat.

“Dess.” Vyktor touched his shoulder. “Is this *true*?”

“Yes... Yes, Vyktor, it is true.”

Vyktor sighed, his head sagging. “I am... so very sorry, Sabeen.”

His voice was soft, sincere, perhaps the most moving condolence Sabeen had ever heard. In her heart she wanted justice and knew it would not come. Bandits watched over their own. Nerrikon would go on to rape other women and Sabeen would continue to search for a way to kill him, but those few words from Vyktor were enough comfort to extinguish her fire for now.

Cirilius flashed on her face as Vyktor stepped back. The way he walked made him seem as though he should be wearing a royal cape of luxurious furs. So fascinated was she that she did not notice the commotion at once.

Only now did it register that the burst of sunlight had come from a blade.

The man with the scar; in one fluid movement his sword had drawn. He sliced Nerrikon in half from balls to brains with such speed that his body still looked whole, but as the bandits sprang way, the two sides of his corpse slid apart, spattering to the ground with the same noise as fresh Bannator dung.

*Thir'day, Day 27, of the Trefolkian Month of Theth, 1630
ODT*

Four men were dragging the bloody remains away, smearing the rocks with crimson invitations to the crows. One of them broke away, heaved his last meal, chunks of spattering orange.

Though horrified, deeply shocked, Sabeen found the gall that stung the back of her throat was receding. Her body had

stopped trembling and there was a deep satisfaction, a sense that justice had prevailed, that asserted itself.

Vyktor was mounting his horse. “Maigurn and I will ride ahead to the Bannator station.”

“My lord.” Dess bowed curtly. “We were bringing these prisoners to the village for your assessment.”

“Prisoners? Or slaves?” The scarred man’s voice was deep and gravelly. He shed the stirrup and released the pommel, crossed the stone to stand in front of Dess. Notably shorter but visibly broader, his mere presence made Dess cower.

“Prisoners, Master Maigurn, I swear it. They were the survivors of the attack and...”

Dess buckled.

“You killed the others? What kind of half-breed, half-brained, simpleton possessed sufficient malice to bring you into the world?”

Dess was holding his stomach. His thighs were wet and a puddle soaked the ground.

“It was an accident. I swear it. We didn’t hurt them on purpose. Thane said...”

“Stay down, sapling. I don’t care what the sorcerer said. You had the responsibility of this raid and that means you adhere to our principles. Have you forgotten what we stand for?”

“No, my lord.”

“Your actions speak otherwise. They are the actions of a coward. You will see to it that these people are given food and provisions and horses if they wish to go. The Tenfeather

People do not take slaves.”

Sabeen heard her lungs fill with air. “By the... Stop!”

“Are you alright, child?” Totem Pel had the concerned face of a Healer who fears his patient has lost their faculties.

Master Maigurn hesitated at his horse. “Yes, sister?”

“You... you are the *Tenfeather People*?”

“Yes, child.” Totem Pel touched her arm gently. “I’ve tried so many times to tell you we have been liberated, not captured.”

Sabeen stepped forward, squaring her shoulders, finding her voice. “I call upon the ritual of the Guardbird; I request the feathers return to their owner.”

Maigurn’s bare feet crushed gravel. He had eyes like burning ice, as if he had been to the underworld and left it quaking, and his tone would have scared a Teegra. “How do you know this password?”

“Are you the leader of the *Tenfeather People*?” Sabeen’s blood was hammering her veins.

Maigurn threw a thumb towards Vyktor. “He is.”

“Then... I have a letter for you... from Tulascarri.”

Chapter 2

*Secon'day, Day 32, of the Trefolkian Month of Theth,
1630 ODT*

From the mountains, the road snaked into the Valley of the Hunter - a blasphemous name if ever there was one, for hunting was not something Mother Forest tolerated.

Intersecting with another, more-often travelled route, the caravan turned east, arriving some days later at the Bluebirch Bannator station.

It was the first little village Sabeen had seen for what seemed like ten cycles.

New people appeared: friendly faces, welcoming voices. Clean-smelling bodies unloaded cargo, untethered Bannators and Sabeen's tummy rumbled to the allure of food carried on smoke from chimneys, lingering on the dusky air.

"You are the one they call Sabeen, yes?"

A portly woman, old of eye and young of smile, fussed with a tousled green mop, shoving it back under the scarf on her rounded ruddy head.

"Yes, *khuma*, I am Sabeen."

"Culesonia. Most people just call me Sonia. Now see, you don't call me '*khuma*' and I don't have to call you 'lady', agreed?"

"Agreed... Sonia."

Sabeen was painfully aware of her tatters. In the warmth of just this brief exchange, civilisation had miraculously been restored, and she wore only rags.

"Oh... look how gaunt you are. Come with me at once.

Don't fret about the others. We have a room prepared just for you."

"A room? For me... alone?"

"Seisha's tears, dearie. I'm sure you don't want to sleep in the wagon, do you? My old man would not have it and I'd never hear the end of it. You'll be wanting a nice hot bath, a nice hot meal. Certainly a new robe. And... I think I have a bottle of Muollian red stashed away somewhere."

The tavern was a long rectangular structure of stone, thick wooden beams, and thick flattened leaves for a roof. Dozens of lanterns outside bade welcome to one and all. Sonia pressed on a rough wooden door and Sabeen was drawn into friendly comfort.

It was a wide building with a large fire in the hearth, oaken pillars polished to gleam, chunky tables set for a feast, and the aroma of slow-roasting tree sheep made her think she'd arrived in the afterlife. In the far corner, a man and a woman were tuning the strings of instruments. Surrounded by drums of various sizes, they were talking in hushed but animated voices, possibly preparing the songs they would play tonight.

Sonia bellowed for somebody to bring the sapling some food right now, then bellowed to make the bath ready, then bellowed at nobody in particular that people were here for Evenmeal and gods help anybody resting on their aprons. She ushered Sabeen into a chair, and before she could blink, handed her a spoon.

"Such a shame what happened to that youngsap on the road. *Such* a shame. How tragic to make her Transition without *Ikbaren*."

Sabeen was familiar with many words in the Arkhanum, but this was not one.

“*Ikbaren*? You don’t know the term ‘*ikbaren*?’”

“What does it mean?”

“It means ‘family’, my dear, and at the same time it means ‘fortress’. I find that comforting. It’s more than just a word, though. It’s a concept, a sense of belonging, like...”

“Kinship?”

Sonia beamed. “Yes. Exactly. But there’s a freedom that comes with it, a tolerance. Oh we could debate it for many flagons, but now you see? How sad your friend met her ancestors so far from her kin, her *ikbaren*. I might have done the same as her, you know? I am nothing without my family. Maigurn was right to do that. So right. I’d have done it myself if I knew how to wield that sword. It’s made of Martmetal you know, magical stuff. Entirely frictionless, and in Maigurn’s hands, totally unstoppable. Do you know how difficult it is to cleave meat in a single slice? I’ve tried, it’s not easy. I asked him if I could borrow it.” Sonia guffawed, then blew her nose. “Ah, my totems! Yes, well, *he* laughed louder. And Maigurn doesn’t laugh.”

The innkeeper continued. Sabeen’s mouth was too busy to reply and so, unchecked, Sonia brought information and details Sabeen would never remember, but she would never forget this meal, the glow in her middle that seemed to throb with satisfaction itself.

“Oh! Look at that.” Sonia glared at a tall pink crystalline structure set into the wall behind Sabeen. On its surface were thirty graded indentations and twenty of them had turned dark. “So late of the notch. I do chatter on, don’t I? Let me check if the bath is filled.”

Sabeen jumped as Sonia bellowed again for somebody to check the bathwater.

“Come, dearie. More food? No? Come, you’ll be wanting that bath now. Oh yes, by the time you cross the Birthright you’ll feel like a *new* woman. Fitting, don’t you think?”

The musicians had begun to play. From the hall, which by now had begun to fill with people, most of them from the caravan, Sonia’s swaying skirts led Sabeen down a corridor, arriving in a room thick with steam.

“Here we are, dearie. The tub is ready. Oh look! That new stable boy had the forethought to bring you some ale. Silly lad. Wine would have been far better. *Mosh’na!* The wine! I forgot the wine. Good Gethras, if I spent less time baking my head wouldn’t be so cooked. Now, hand me that old dress. I’ll see you have a new one by the time you’ve soaked the road away.”

Self-conscious and suddenly awkward, Sabeen was unsure about simply stripping off. Sonia, quite unlike most Trefolkians, seemed blissfully unaware of the Laws of Association.

“Oh, Sabeen, forgive me.” Sonia swivelled on her heels. “I forget. New-comers quickly find that though their bodies are free, their minds are not.”

Sabeen was at odds with herself. How come she had been able to spend months with bandits in a state of near permanent undress, yet now, back in ‘civilisation’ where this woman was so kind, she felt self-conscious? She had been naked with Erik, all the bandits had seen her dignity, but now...?

This did not make sense.

In that moment, Sonia turned around. Sabeen still stood with water at her knees. Her brain flashed a message to cover herself, but her body did not obey.

Pudgy fingers waved under an enormous smile. “Nothing I

haven't seen before, dearie. Once you cross the Birthright ...”

“What is this ‘birthright’ I must cross?” Hot water was melting dirt from Sabeen’s skin while the ale melted reservations from her mind.

Sonia’s confusion was visible in hands that slowly retrieved ragged remnants. “She never told you?”

“Who?”

“Tulascarri. You are a warrior, like Tulascarri, are you not?”

“No...” Sabeen gripped the side of the tub, water spilling onto the floor. “Who told you this?”

“Vyktor and Maigurn, when they passed through here...”

“They told you I am a warrior?”

“They said you were a friend of Tulascarri’s. I just assumed... Seisha’s tears. *Mosh’nal*! I’m such a fool!” Sonia gulped from Sabeen’s ale.

“No, Sonia, please, I...”

“Of course I had it wrong, silly me.” Sonia slapped a thigh, fetched the jug and filled the horn once more. “You are so pretty, such perky breasts, such a perfectly tucked flower. My flower looks like tobacco leaves hung out to dry. You were Tulascarri’s lover, weren’t you? Yes, I see it now. She has varied tastes, that one. Taught *my* boys a thing or two.”

Once again, Sabeen was gobsmacked. The entire horn went down in one swig. Taking Sonia’s hands, now lathered with soap and kneading her matted hair she explained who Sabeen was, that Tulascarri was a friend she had made, not a lover. Foranrian had become Sabeen on the road south, but had been brought here instead.

By the time her tale was done, the water in the tub was black but her skin shone, pink and tingling.

“So you see, Sonia. I’m nothing special. I’m just a woman who happens to know somebody the Tenfeather people revere. I don’t even know what this birthright is that you keep referring to?”

“Ah but you *are* special, dearie. You may not think it, of course, but the gods brought you here. One does not meet Tulascarri and come away unchanged. This I can assure you. Meeting her set you on the path that led you to Bluebirch. The Birthright is a bridge that leads to the village.” With tender care, she was wrapping Sabeen’s hair in a watersheet.

“You mean we are not in the village? I thought...”

“We are at the Bluebirch Bannator station. Most people who pass through here think that, unless they are worthy of claiming the Birthright, but you hold that right already.”

“Now I might have to call you khuma. Just like *my* old khuma, you speak in riddles.”

Sonia grabbed a stool in the corner and settled her bulk alongside the tub, with elbows on her knees. Sabeen’s fingers were wrinkled, but she dared not break this impromptu spell. It was unusual, though, that the water remained hot and steamy. The dirt even seemed to be collecting into a ball at the plug, the water cleaning itself. Was a spell at work?

“What did Tulascarri say about the Tenfeather people?”

“Not much, really. She gave me a letter, which I gave to Vyktor, and she made me memorise a pass-phrase.”

“Did she tell you the Tenfeather People answer only to the rightful ruler of Trefolk?”

“I... Don’t remember. You mean the Prophecy of the Queen?”

“Just so. It is foretold that the Queen will ascend the throne at the end of this very cycle, when the Blood Moons

rise.”

“You believe this?”

“With all my heart, dearie. You can’t be a Feather if you do not. And I believe Tulascarri does too. The Tenfeather people have been preparing, and when her majesty summons us, we will rally to her. Reports tell us the Emperor is ill, and dying. Our time will soon be at hand.”

“But the Dominum...”

“The Dominum is a steward of the throne, nothing more. He governs Trefolk well enough, but he has been seduced by the Emperor, clinging to false ideologies. He’s allowed those vipers of Truruch to corrupt our beliefs and twist them with fiction. Trefolk is a province under imperial rule, and he sees it perpetuated, but not for long. Do you know the meaning of the title, ‘Dominum’ - its origin in our culture?”

Foranrian had spent ten cycles studying at the House of Antiquities. She knew the Emperor was ill. Though she had not confessed it, she, too, believed in the prophecy. In fact, she thought she knew everything there was to know about the Prophecy but, as she scrunched a cloth in her hands, she could not say she did.

“The Dominum is the leader of all five tribes of Trefolk. It took a long time to unite the five, and it is his sacred trust to maintain that unity by maintaining our way of life – the so called ‘Old Ways’ which you will hear much about in the days to come. Spectacular has been his failure in this. He has allowed politicians and churchmen, all men of grey purpose, to steal from the Children of the Forest their very lives, their... birthright. He has stolen *ikharen* from many. That is why, when you cross the bridge, you cross into the old ways of Trefolk where the Laws of Association and all the other prisons of the

mind are no longer a concern. When you cross that bridge, you reclaim your birthright to be free; to be a true Trefolkian.”

Droplets clung to Sonia’s hair. She wiped her face with a watersheet, the stool creaking. “Now then, dearie. I have assailed your mind with so much I will be surprised if you sleep tonight!”

Sabeen smiled weakly, raising no objection as the horn refilled.

“Stay in the tub as long as you like, youngsap. I shall leave you for now, in case you have flowersong. I know a warm bath always makes *my* honey flow.”

With a wink, she scrunched Sabeen’s old rags and the door closed softly.

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“Frethenia? Yes of course I have heard of it. One day, I would like to go there and study at the Ancient House.”

Sabeen stifled a laugh, trying hard to sit as still as she could. “You mean the House of Antiquities.”

“Yes, this is the one.”

The man applying the ink-stain tattoo to her right arm, neck, and the right side of her face had seated her at a table so that her arm was laid out over it and she faced the forest, high among the trees. He had said that she was not permitted to even flinch.

Then he handed her a goblet.

“But you said I should not move?”

“I work on your right arm. Your left may move. Besides, drinking is not drinking when done with wine. It is poetry.”

Sitting cross-legged on the table, meticulously applying the

dye, stopping often to sip the rosy elixir, Ferson became even more talkative, but his hands remained as steady as the roots of the tree in which he had his home.

“I am the best artist, tailor, herbalist, and animal trainer to ever live in Bluebirch. You see this green hair? Pure Anacusian blood. Look, even my *shikai* are green.” He swivelled to show her the dark green tufts on his back.

Naked, like her, this man was a stranger, but it did not seem to bother him. In fact, nudity was so common in Bluebirch that Sabeen had to walk staring at the ground.

Who *were* these strange people?

Ferson dabbed a few dots, then rose so that he straddled her arm. With a foot on one side and a knee on the other he leaned in closer, extending the patterns on her neck up onto her cheek.

“Don’t worry, little feather. I have placed *thousands* of tattoos like this.” Then his hands spread. “Ah but Seisha’s tears! You are new to Bluebirch and the Old Ways. Of course you are not used to being so close to a naked stamen without...”

Grinning broadly, he looked down at himself. “You like it, huh?” Bellowing as he laughed, flashing teeth whiter than her face, he resumed his work. “Don’t worry, little feather. My polytwines would cut off my stamen and make me eat it. In time, you too will see it is just another body part. There!” Leaping off the table Ferson landed on sturdy wooden boards, inspecting his handiwork.

Sabeen drank deep. It was light and fruity and tasted like more.

“Ah! Ah! Ah! Be careful with this wine, little feather.” From the floor under the table, Ferson pulled a tall jar and

more was dispensed. “It kisses like a virgin but *ferra’s* like a whore.”

Sabeen’s cheeks warmed, as did her limbs.

The wind stirred and a gust buffeted the great oak, making the house creak in a way that was... happy. Yes, Sabeen reflected that was a good description. Almost all of the furnishings were part of the tree, having been grown into form by Treeshapers. With a gentle rocking, Ferson’s home seemed to squeal like a delighted child.

It had been a long time since she had had wine this good, perhaps longer since she had felt so free. Was this part of what Sonia had meant?

Hanging on a hook was her gown. Ferson had insisted she remove it. When she had taken it off, had she removed more than just material?

“I don’t think you will fit into Frethenia very well.”

“And why not, little feather? It is a big city, full of cosmopolitan ideas, great science, and art.”

“And the Old Ways are forbidden, and your Anacusian blood would make you a target of prejudice.”

“Dear Gethras and all his children! So it is true what the Feathers say? Has Trefolk fallen so far from the Great Mother? Ah! Listen to me. Would you like to see my work? We need to let the paste dry for at least a notch before we scrape off the excess. Would you like to see? Shall I fetch the glass of reflection? Yes of course you’d like to see.”

Lightly browned skin padded inside and returned with a mirror almost as long as Sabeen. The solid frame scuffed the floor with a slight whine and a stranger was revealed.

The ink-stain tattoo travelled in swirls from fingers to neck to temple. With her arm held out so straight she might have

looked about to start a dance, if not for the table.

The tattoo was perfect, masterfully applied, but this was not her fascination. The person staring back at her was not somebody she recognised.

The image was so alien she wanted to touch her cheek, unsure if it was really her own. Where once there had been padding there was tone; her body was lean, showing muscles she had only seen on the fittest athletes. There were veins on her hands and the tops of her high-arched feet where previously there had been none. Her hips were slender, her cheekbones were high, and her yellow eyes, like sunflower petals in bloom and kissed by Cirilius, had never seemed so alive.

“Stare too long and you will be lost in your previous lives...”

“Pray, whatever do you mean?” The inside of the goblet was a smooth golden colour.

“It’s something Griggor told me once, but he also said something about some candles and some chants or... hmm.” Ferson leaned on the mirror, absently staring at Sabeen’s hand.

“Who is Griggor?”

“Hmm? Oh! Griggor is the first sorcerer of Bluebirch. A little mad, I think, talks to himself a lot, but...”

“*First* sorcerer? How many do you have?”

“Three. There’s Griggor, Kinnor, and Thane. Sounds like names from a children’s tale, not so?”

The third name was familiar. She had heard it just some days ago when Maigurn had split the rapist from this world.

“No!” Ferson stopped her. “You cannot stand yet. Or no more wine, huh?”

“But this chair is hard...”

“And your buttocks are young. Sit. I will show you your dress while we wait. It is still a while before you are expected at Council, so we have plenty of time. Who did your hair? Marla?”

“Yes...”

“She likes to use the leaves and the wreath on the head. Me? I would have given you a crown.”

The mirror was returned and Ferson danced out with a flowing garment the colour of fluffy clouds.

“It is beautiful, Ferson! Truly you are the greatest artist, tailor, and breeder ...”

“Animal trainer...”

“Animal trainer in Bluebirch.”

“*Thathenu*, little feather. It is not often I have the chance to show my skill. Mostly it is ‘fix this’ or ‘stitch that, Ferson’, but today I have an honoured guest.”

“Honoured guest? Am I the only one who arrived that is being treated with such splendour?”

“Of course, my dear. Word has spread, and you will learn word spreads quickly in Bluebirch, that you are a friend of Tulascarri’s.”

“I am honoured because I know Tulascarri?”

“You met her – and lived!”

“Pray?”

“I jest, I jest.” The white sparkles again. “But Tulascarri does not have many friends. Some ghosts, maybe. Many ghosts...”

“I am not a ghost.”

“Clearly not, but... with this gown, which is called a *sikrit*, you will look like a goddess.”

Made from one long strip of material with an opening mid-

way for the head, the *sikrit* would fasten on the sides with delicate cords.

“Ah... Why you make this face? I see by gloomy face you don’t like...” Ferson flung the *sikrit* over a shoulder and pouted against a rail.

“It’s beautiful... but...”

“Ah... I know what it is, little feather. You are scared to show so much skin.” Squatting in front of her, Ferson touched her knees. “Did you not learn in Frethenia that we are all one with Mother Forest? We are *all* one with her. The body is a temple for the gods. It needs no fancies, but if we do adorn ourselves our clothes must compliment, not hide, the temple.”

“Except if it’s cold.”

“Cold? In Bluebirch? Some of the women at the market maybe...”

She laughed again. Drank more wine.

“Ah, look!” Ferson gestured out to the forest. “The cheeky Cirilius has moved. It is time to finish and send you to the Hightree.”

Ferson worked nimbly, the remains of the paste falling like tiny pieces of pottery leaving a dark, almost black, tint to her skin, and it tingled with pride. Dusting her off with a small watersheet, he fetched the mirror again.

A vision shimmered in glass. Sabeen could barely believe it. Only a *sikrit* had been added to the image, yet now it was regal, noble, poised, and elegant. This person appeared so much like a character from the stories she had read as a child. She looked like her imaginings of the Queen herself. Even the *sikrit* seemed like diaphanous wings enfolding her. Never in her life had she reasoned a simple wreath, a tailored garment, and an expertly crafted ink-stain could transform a humble,

tavern-keeper into such a glorious expression of beauty; and, though she searched long and hard and deep, she was hard-pressed to find even a shadow of her former self.

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From Ferson's home in the district of Poplar they ascended stairs, joined a boardwalk, then several bough roads. Cirilius was low and orange in the west as they crossed Poplar Bridge, which bounced lightly with the passage of people going in the opposite direction.

Here the air was notably cooler and the gorge below allowed an unobstructed view of the moons as they began their nocturnal traverse.

Magnificent guardians of the night, the three sister moons of Bursha, Geldor, and Sentia were already visible in their phases. Biggest of all three, Sentia was the most impressive, waxing steadily.

"Just less than one cycle, little feather. When Sentia is full next time, it will be the Blood Moon."

Ferson's reverence was whispered. She knew what he meant. The three silver orbs were only full at the same time every five cycles. The end of this cycle would see that phenomenon occur; but *this* time, it was auspicious and foretold. This time when calendars were turned to the next cycle, it would be under the Blood Moon, the moons of prophecy when the rightful Queen of Trefolk, it was said, would ascend her throne. Ferson's sense of purpose showed as he made the sign of Seisha.

"Thank you for showing me the way to the Hightree. I did not realise we would pass so many people."

“It is the notch of Upturned Eyes, the time when people make their way home from their labours. Behind us is the area we call ‘Poplar’, but you did not need an escort, little feather.”

“I don’t even know where the council chambers are. You are showing me.”

“It is the Hightree. With basic directions you would have found it. Look up, across the river at the cliff. You see that? That is Hightree.”

Climbing above scrub and small trees that gripped the crest of the cliff, five proud maples dominated the ridge. Though smaller than the average Trefolkian tree, they were forbidding on their own and between them they supported a large wooden structure that overlooked the canyon.

“No, I come with you because people will stare at you and when they stare at you, they will see me, and they will know that I made this *sikrit*.”

“I’ve never had so many people staring at me before.”

“You are wearing a garment that is not merely functional; it is a garment made by Ferson!”

Most of the people they passed were naked, or dressed in something utilitarian, farmer’s aprons mainly. Foranrian might never have dreamed that being clad would make her self-conscious but for Sabeen it made perfect sense. And yet, why was she so self-aware?

“Now, look down there, little feather. You see?”

“I see... a dam... a beaver dam!”

“*My* beaver dam.”

“You did say you were the best animal trainer in Bluebirch. I’m impressed. You trained the beavers to do what comes naturally.”

Ferson looked horrified. Briefly lost for words, only his lips

moved. Exasperated, his hands moved, too, from wide gestures to grasping his face.

“Little feather. I will forgive you,” he said after pacing back and forth. “You are just a *new* feather, soft and downy and light in the head.”

“Yes. I mean... yes?”

“You do not know that the rains will come and the water will wash away the dam. This...” He jabbed a finger at the dam, “Is an experiment in obedience. You think the beavers don’t know the rain will wash away the dam?”

“I... suppose...”

“In just a short time, the last of the rains will fall. Then I will take my beavers and we will build dams all along Nuvien’s Folly...”

“Nuvien’s Folly?”

“Silence, unbeliever!” He touched her lips. “I... me and my beavers... we will build dams along that river and I will stock the dams with fish and the Bannators from the village will go up the river and feed at the meadow.”

“Folly? Meadow?” Sabeen was not sure if her incredulity was misplaced, or if Ferson was amused or genuinely insulted. By his dramatic display, though, she chose to think he was amused. “Ferson, I truly think...”

“You will see, little feather.” He touched her shoulder with a tap that said she *would* see. “You will see, and you will proclaim, that Ferson is the greatest animal trainer you have *ever* known!”

Ferson left her at the entrance to another bridge from where two swordsmen met and escorted her up a long winding staircase. Like the table Ferson had used to paint her arm, the stairway was grown from the tree itself. Each of the maples

supporting the building boasted their own stairways, though the others saw less use and definitely needed tending.

“Sister Sabeen, friend of Tulascarri!” The swordsman stepped aside to allow her entrance onto a platform that was far wider and more ornate than she had imagined from the bridge. In the middle was a large fire-pit with lazy flames that drove smoke upwards through a circle in the thatched roof.

Thick railings made from branches enclosed the entire circumference in a lace-like lattice festooned with leaves and flowers.

“With the exception of the floorboards and the thatch, this whole structure is alive.” Seated on one of the many benches that rose from and fell back into the platform, Vykto waved her forward. “Bluebirch is home to some of the best Treeshapers I have ever seen. It’s a true testament to the Old Ways, the things they can do.”

Facing across the river stood the warrior Maigurn, arms folded, his short-cropped brunette head moving slowly from side to side, inspecting, surveying, analysing.

Nervous, still unsettled by the honour they afforded her just for being Tulascarri’s friend, yet buoyed by such exalted status, she speculated on what they were thinking. They had read the letter; Sabeen would never know what those pages told. What would they say? Would they, too, think she was a warrior as Sonia had? Or did they also think she was merely a former lover of the famed warrior?

Stealing herself from self-absorption, she set her resolution to the men in the room, but her vision was arrested and then, magically, none of it mattered. Apprehension evaporated, replaced by awe.

Perched on the leafy railing was the rarest and most

magnificent of all birds, and she could not pull her eyes from its brilliant cobalt plumage.

“Beautiful, is he not?”

Sabeen’s mouth was agape as Vyktor guided her hand.

Three times the size of a cluckbird, just bigger than an eagle, with a similarly hooked beak, which opened slightly now, the Guardbird cocked its head towards him, but did not move.

“We call him ‘Enura’. This is his sixth incarnation.”

“How do you know *that*?” Sabeen knew she should stay standing where she had been, painfully aware that this was not a social meeting, but excitement made all of it fade away.

Gently and with great respect, Vyktor stroked the soft crimson breast.

“You see these dark rings on his leg? Each time he is reborn, another is added, and I had the privilege of seeing him burst into flame the last time, and be reborn from his ashes. You too, are privileged, because he does not tolerate strangers to approach.”

“He is truly regal. It is no wonder the symbol of the Guardbird appeared on ancient royal banners.”

“He is more than just a sigil of royalty because of his splendour,” said Vyktor. His words were dipped in notes of devotion. “The Guardbird is sometimes referred to as the Totem of *Ikharen* and, subsequently, the Totem of those who have no family, no kin to whom they belong. The Guardbird takes all under its wings. This is the real reason why the Guardbird appears on so many royal banners. Ka-samun.”

“Ka-samun? I have heard this several times since I arrived. What does it mean?”

“It means, ‘I tell no lie’; an emphatic expression of truth.

You will learn many more of these expressions in the time to come, I imagine.”

The Guardbird seemed to be gazing into her soul, its piercing stare unwavering from hers. She could sense the presence of a great awareness in her mind, curiosity probing her, drifting liberally through her memories as if paging idly through a book. Nothing was hidden.

“The Tenfeather people take their name from the tail feathers of the Guardbird, where there are always a total of ten and, as you know, to kill a Guardbird is punishable by death, and so the expression ‘murderous plumage’ has come to signify a traitor of the worst possible kind.”

Sabeen knew the metaphor, had first-hand experience of traitors, had the scar on her shoulder to prove it; but hers was nothing compared to those of Maigurn, who joined them. Too numerous to count, there were even lines, jagged lines, broken lines, criss-cross lines, and pock-marks on almost every visible part of his body. The blemishes were strongly juxtaposed with the unharmed skin, sun-bronzed and youthful. Whatever battles of which they told, she could not conceive of their ferocity.

The Guardbird flared its wings and they backed away. Clearly Enura did not like crowds.

“My lord?”

A young woman stepped onto the platform from one of the other trees. With her arrival, the Guardbird dropped away from the railing, disappearing from view until he reappeared gliding away over beavers and dams.

Vyktor acknowledged the woman. Barefoot and bare breasted, she wore a proper Kren’an, a simple white skirt with a wide leather belt and was carrying a tray with a large

amphora and robust silver goblets. She set it down on a small table that needed a trim, and the gurgle and slosh of liquid wove into the chorus of roosting birds.

Slotted into the wide leather belt at the small of her back were two daggers, and Sabeen would later learn that almost everybody in Bluebirch had received some level of training from Maigurn and that weapons were never far from reach.

The nudity of the nubile female seemed a no-thing; she could have been dressed in a Reekma as far as their regard for her went, and Sabeen perceived that they only addressed her eyes, her face, her Being-ness with respect, enquiring after her family. This was a glaring difference to the norms of Frethenia where such a woman would be immediately considered a prostitute, or a witch, and probably prosecuted as both.

Vyktor thanked her as she left, his palms pressed together, then handed a goblet to Maigurn and one to Sabeen. “I trust you have received welcome in our humble village?”

Sabeen wanted to thank him for treating her so well; her circumstances had improved radically since he read Tulascarri’s letter and now, where once she had worn the tattered remains of a Dniban gown, she was adorned in gossamer that draped like silk, purring on her skin. Elevated, she was eager to embrace the promise of hope that pervaded the village, like the scent of the forest with its mix of earthy tones and misty blossoms, yet all she could manage was a humble, “Yes, thank you.”

Vyktor was holding the letter, having re-read it. “Sabeen, tell me, how is it that a tavern owner from Frethenia came to be the friend of the most feared warrior in all of Trefolk? And how is it that you were travelling when there is so much turbulence in our country?”

Most feared? Sabeen pursed her lips, hands wrapped around the textured surface of the goblet. She had never thought of her friend in terms of ‘most feared’, though she knew how it could be true. Here, in the Tenfeather village, the name Tulascarri was spoken softly.

His use of the term ‘country’ was not lost on her, either. It was more than just a subtle reminder that she was far from the ‘insidious ways of the false leaders of Trefolk,’ as Totem Pel put it, but a sign that the Tenfeather people were free of mind, like the young armed woman was free of body, free of *false* fears of materialism. This ‘humble village’ took great pride in that fact.

Would Sabeen ever cast off Foranrian? Could she be as they were?

At the thought of Totem Pel, she asked about her fellow liberated passengers.

“Totem Pel has accepted to work with Sorcerer Kinnor. Erik and Barthon have already left to help in fortifying the stronghold at Nuvien’s Neck. The ashes of your friend have been commended into the Glade of Ancestors. The others, I think, have agreed to positions at the market or on farms. You will see them again, I am sure; but come, tell us of your adventures.”

“Are we not waiting for the rest of the council?”

“Ah, yes... well... it would seem that this letter was enough for them. Few people would wish to incur the wrath of Tulascarri by contradicting a letter with her seal and in her own hand.”

“How do you know I did not forge it?”

“I know her hand.” Maigurn seemed to have the ability to move without being seen. His grumble echoed from the

western side now, where darkness shrouded him. She heard him whisper something in the ancient tongue and, moments later, torches around the perimeter flared into life.

“You *know* her? Master Maigurn, I must...”

“Another time, Sabeen.” He returned to sit next to Vyktor on the bench. “Continue, please, with your story.”

She told them about her life as the woman Foranrian and how that life had been saved by Tulascarri when she had destroyed the Brotherhood of Sfarr in Frethenia, but left out details on how Tulascarri had become Jenna, and of the kind person she really was. She told them she had always wanted to know what was beyond the city; and she told them how, even before she left Frethenia, she had been called to study with a sorcerer.

The men listened attentively, heads bobbing, smiling at details they knew to be familiar.

“There are no grey areas with Tulascarri. I could tell you some tales myself.” Drifting into reminiscence Vyktor paced, arms clasped behind his back. Over his Kren’an he wore what could be described as a sheer ankle-length waistcoat. Hanging loose, without any fasteners, the back was open for his *shikai* to hang loose, and the ends of the garment wafted around his calves.

Dressed in a similar fashion, Maigurn tossed a twig into the fire, taking a bowl of broth from one of three young men who brought in food.

“The sorcerer you were going to meet is not who he claims to be, Sabeen. He is part of a secret branch of Truruch, used to find those who would study the Sentience. By luring prospective students, like yourself, with the promise of magic and power, the church captures those who could become a

threat. And it is all legal, of course.”

Studying the Sentience, that Universal Power that Binds All Things, was forbidden throughout Trefolk and the rest of the Empire; punishable by death, according to Imperial Decree. The same was true for Akiun, the way of the warrior, which drew its power from the Sentience. Sabeen knew all of this too well. The restrictions against higher knowledge and the inspiration who was Tulascari were what had precipitated her journey.

“How do you know this? How do I know that you are not just saying this to keep me here?”

“You are free to go whenever you choose.” Vyktor’s impeccably clean hands gestured into the darkness beyond the railing. “Five days west, by hoof, and you will join a salted road called the Grewlan Highway. All you have to do is head north and you will be back in Frethenia in a few months. I’ll even give you a horse and provisions.”

Maigurn grunted. His bowl was empty and he lit a pipe that he had produced from somewhere. “But stay, and...” His words were interspersed with sucking puffs. “... And we can help each other. *We* have sorcerers to teach you, and *you* have the tenth leaf.”

The night noises were shrill. “How do you know *this*?”

“Do not fear, Sabeen. We will not make this known to the world if that is what you wish?”

“No... I mean, how can you be certain? There’s a group of Segurim at the House of Antiquities who perform the Guardianship Ceremony and then you get an official scroll with a seal, which I don’t have.”

“You don’t need papers to speak when deeds can shout. Only a Guardian of the Forest may touch the belly of a

Bannator.”

“Erik? Erik told you, didn’t he?”

“Barthon, in fact. It’s not only his body that is strong.”

Vyktor handed a spoon to Sabeen. “You’ve been holding that bowl so long I think the food is cold.”

The tender chunks of cluckbird, diced and spiced Vergunny, and crunchy vegetables dripping with creamy mushrooms could no longer be resisted. When the bowl was half done she tipped it to her mouth like the men had done and burped as Vyktor exchanged goblet for bowl.

“There are just short of a thousand people in Bluebirch, Sabeen,” said Maigurn. “The Tenfeather people would value one with your education and defiant spirit. I will start teaching you the warrior’s way...”

“Akiun...”

Maigurn savoured his weed but doubt crinkled his face. “You know the term but not its meaning.” He clapped his hands together twice and she could hear the tap of feet running up the stairs from below.

“You cannot be a friend of Tulascarri’s and *not* know the term. As to its meaning, I believe I know more than you think.”

“So you... will stay with us?” Vyktor’s robes bunched between crossed arms and chest. “It will not be easy, but you may find what you were looking for.”

The stairway echoed in staccato, then it stopped. A wiry man entered. Deeply tanned, he was well-proportioned in most areas and gifted in another. A wave of heat flushed her veins.

Had she not left Frethenia asking if there was more to life than running a tavern until she died? Surely her prayers, such

as they were, had been answered when she had been brought to Bluebirch? It seemed there was no longer a decision to be made. Besides, it would be a shame to leave when such delights were everywhere, like succulent fruit.

“Agreed.” Sabeen inclined her head, hoping the beat of her racing heart was not too visible. “But what will I do? How can I bring value to the Tenfeather People?”

Vyktor instructed the man to introduce Sabeen to Thane once she had started in the Kitchen.

If Sabeen’s *shikai* could have risen they would have. “The Kitchen? A fitting place for a woman?”

Vyktor laughed awkwardly, dismissed the fine young man. “No. Seisha’s tears! Apologies. While we have a tavern, we also have a central dining area where people eat and commune and it is associated with the Temple of the Hunter.”

“Now you would force *religion* upon me?”

“Defiant, indeed. No, again. The Temple is merely a sacred space; an area set aside where people may go to worship whatever god or goddess, or totem, they choose; except Sfarr, of course. It has many chambers, it’s next to a stream with beautiful banks and a garden and it’s also a place of education. It would be the most logical place for you to start learning our ways, which are the old ways of Trefolk.”

“Oh...” Misgivings melted away. “Why did you not say that to begin with?”

Chapter 3

*Sixthday, Day 60, of the Trefolkian Month of Theth,
1630 ODT*

“Ready?”

Three voices answered, “Yes.”

“Lift.”

With a chorus of grunts the four women lifted the pole. Suspended from it was a bubbling cauldron so large it had its own name and legend. Even when empty it required two strong bodies to move it.

All the people in the Kitchen stopped work and made way as bare feet, flecked with ash and flour, scuffled on stone. Sabeen grunted, for that was all she could manage, and the four spikey legs of the great pot settled.

Two of the women removed the pole and the Kitchen resounded.

The ‘Setting of Magoo’ was a small ritual etched into temple culture as deep as the four small depressions in which the pot now sat and it signified that the Kitchen was ready to serve.

It was quite fitting, really. The Temple existed to serve. Here they provided education for saplings, care for the elderly and infirm. Most of all, here the lonely received solace. It was a place where the body was fed before the spirit was lifted.

Women, men, and children sprang to life. In one corner, a young boy began to beat a drum in a slow rhythm. Each stroke meant another action. Broth was ladled, a bowl was filled, the bowl landed on a tray, bread was added, spoon was added, and

the tray was carried outside.

Today was Sixthday, but not just any end of the week. Today was special.

Sabeen greeted, but passed, high Segurai Analaya at one of the doors. Heading for an open area where numerous spits had been set up, she apologised for her haste, weaving between hundreds of people who had come to celebrate the start of the festival, held at the end of the month of Theth.

“You have done well, Sabeen. I have never seen such efficiency. Do you know the number of people who want to learn to cook from you has almost tripled?”

“You are too kind, high Segurai.”

The smell of roasting cluckbirds wafted on white fingers of steam and smoke. Lines of hungry people were snaking to receive their portion, alive with laughter and song. Several people greeted Sabeen, thanking her for their meal.

After only a week at the Kitchen, the high Segurai had placed Sabeen in charge. She was the obvious choice. After the second week, Sabeen had organised the assistants and made them rehearse their routines. The timing, it seemed, was perfect because, while the rest of Trefolk celebrated the Harvest, Bluebirch celebrated the Hunter.

“High Segurai...?”

“Yes, Sabeen?”

“Hunting is not something Mother Forest particularly approves of...”

“Indeed. And you wonder why we keep such a blasphemous name for the temple?”

“Quite so, and the festival today is to *honour* the hunter.”

Analaya listened, bemused by a small mantis on her left breast. Holding her hand for it to walk onto she lifted it to a

low-hanging vine.

“Did you know Seisha is a huntress?”

“Ka-samun?”

“As the goddess is my witness. While she may kill, she does not murder; and it is not the hunting of animals we celebrate at the Temple today. Rather, we hunt our demons. There’s a quote I rather like: *‘The difference between forgiveness and vengeance is that we exorcise our demons, not exercise them.’* Lovely, don’t you think?”

“Words to contemplate, High Segurai. Is it from the Writings?”

“It’s by Master Maigurn, himself.”

“Truly?”

“Ka-samun. I am sure that when you spend time with him you will learn many more. People call him the warrior who never laughs, but I have seen it. It does happen.”

“I shall miss the temple, High Segurai...”

“And I shall be sad to see you leave us. You have blessed me with many a rich exchange.”

Sabeen assessed the men tending the cluckbirds. She had told them that simply quartering the cluckbirds would lead to waste and had shown them how to portion the meat correctly, but she need not have been concerned for here, too, they were doing as they had been taught.

“I have spent the last four weeks learning much about the old ways. I’ve even grown used to seeing so many naked people.”

“You have taught us, too, but you still use your apron as a shield, lest people see who you really are.”

“But who am I?”

“You are a child of Mother Forest. You do not see

Bannators or Teegras dressed in gowns. Would you put dead skin under your feet?”

“No, shiver the thought.”

“Then why deny your heritage?” Analaya slipped an arm into Sabeen’s. She was quite a bit taller, with a high forehead, purple pools, a broad nose, and wide mouth that curled at the corners. Her long hair was shades of brown and red that reached almost to her knees and, though her lips were thin with authority, somehow she always seemed to be surrounded by playful saplings.

A little girl with blue hair plastered to her head offered a frog, freshly caught from the river. “How lovely his stripes are. Such wonderful shades.”

“Can I keep him?”

“Would you want somebody to steal you from your home simply because they like the colours of your skin?”

“No...”

“Then return him safely.”

“The saplings adore you, High Segurai. You are a second mother to them.”

Most of the children were orphans, Sabeen had learned. Some months ago one of the raiding parties had captured a whole caravan of them. Gaunt, scared, they were destined for some dark fate, and the men had brought them to Analaya.

“I think the saplings will miss you too, Sabeen. Come, I would have you meet somebody.”

The previously noisy crowd had begun to settle, finding patches of grass or shaded ground, bowls clacking with wooden spoons.

There were only a few tables, which were reserved for the elderly and one for those of station in the community. At the

end of one of these sat a man alone. His long hair and beard were white and he wore a brown tunic. In front of him was a bowl of broth, some cups, and flacons. He seemed to be in conversation, but there was nobody around him for a few paces at least.

“Sabeen, this is Griggor, first sorcerer of Bluebirch.”

“Antsun’alun, arch-mage. May your roots grow deep and your branches never stand in shadow.” Sabeen made the sign of the triple-greeting, touching her right temple, then her lips, then cupped her hand under her left breast, remarking that she had not offered the traditional greeting since she had left Frethenia.

“So ceremonial.” Griggor welcomed her, his chair falling over. He stepped around the table and drew her into a hug, stroking her head as if he had known her for many cycles.

The tunic was fresh and smelled of vetiver and something else that reminded Sabeen of her beloved father.

“Welcome to Bluebirch, Sabeen.” He kissed Analaya on both cheeks, then on the palms of each hand. “I have the tonic you need, my dear. Come to my home whenever you have time?”

Dimples appeared high on Analaya’s cheeks. “Nearly a hundred cycles I have known you, and you always know what I need before I know it myself.”

“Well that’s really thanks to him.” Griggor gestured to open air on his right.

“Be sure to thank Hatori for me.”

“You can thank him yourself. Only I can see and hear him, but he can see and hear all of us.”

Analaya bowed towards the open space. “Thank you, Hatori.”

“Ah... A fine woman indeed.” Griggor righted his chair, and stared as swaying tresses caressed buttocks that were high and firm. “But she still humours us. Hatori and I, that is. Not you and I. Not surprising, really, since I’m the only one who can hear him.”

“Him?”

“Hatori.”

“Who is Hatori, arch-mage?”

“Ah... I can see you think I am mad, too...”

“No... I have heard some people speak in ways...”

“And what do you mean by arch-mage?”

“You are First Sorcerer of Bluebirch?”

“Ha!” Griggor poured ale into two horns and handed one to Sabeen. “No, my sweet youngsap, I am the *first* sorcerer.”

“Yes, of course...”

“Meaning I was the first one here. Then came Kinnor, and then came Thane. It’s an order of arrival, not a hierarchy.”

“Oh... I see the truth of it.”

“Do not tear your breasts. It is a common mistake.”

The horn was smooth but parts of the rim were chipped. Sabeen turned it to where it was even and swigged a long draught of the ale. It was bitter, but cold and refreshing in the heat of the day. Aside from her thirst, she had learned that under the Old Ways, as part of the ideology of *Ikbaren*, the leading taste of a drink poured by another should be hearty, showing trust.

“Who is Hatori, Master Griggor?”

“That’s a first...” Griggor looked up and to his right.

Sabeen could see nothing but dangling vines. Was he talking to them?

“Yes, yes, I know what you said... Don’t be in such a rush!

I will inspect the tree shortly. Why don't you spy on Kinnor or Thane in the meantime?"

Sabeen quaffed another healthy swig.

"Ah, well. I might have offended him. But at least he won't keep interrupting. He does that, you know? All the time, sweet Seisha..."

"Hatori?"

"Yes. He's a... do you know of the Alexileil?"

"Yes!" Sabeen spilled cold ale onto her thigh. She had learned this in the cycle she had received the Seventh Leaf from the House of Antiquities. "The Alexileil are immortals, just lower than Elementals. They have pursued a path of the Sentience that makes them transparent, but..."

"Yes." Griggor slurped at his bowl, set it down, and devoured a piece of bread bristling with garlic. "It seems Hatori, in his zealous quest for the deeper secrets of the Alexileil, was busy with an experiment. It went wrong. Now, instead of being transparent, he's invisible, and if he doesn't tether to a mortal he will be absorbed by the Void."

"Oh..."

"*That* is, more or less, what I said. You can imagine what most others around here think. They are loyal to the queen but they know nothing of such things."

"They live close to the land."

"Meaning that *you* are an educated woman." Griggor pulled a hunk of meat from the roasted leg of cluckbird. It dripped with onions and a heavy brown sauce that was dotted with herbs. With deliberation and care he folded it into soft bread and popped it into his mouth. "Good gods, Sabeen. I have never tasted better. Lemon? Butter?"

"And some honey."

“Sweet Cirilius be praised for seeing your journey here.”

“I was going to study with a sorcerer in the south.”

“Hmm. I believe Master Maigurn spoke of this?”

“A trap, apparently. Today is my last day at the Kitchen. Soon I am to travel to the stronghold at Nuvien’s Neck to begin learning with Master Maigurn. Three weeks there, then three weeks with the sorcerer who tried to kill me.”

“The sorcerer who tried to kill you? Ka-samun?”

“When my caravan was attacked, Thane was the sorcerer involved. He says he was merely trying to overturn the wagon but hit me instead. He apologised to me, formally, last week and undertook to train me in the ways of Wyrding. So my wish to study under a sorcerer has come true, but...”

A flurry of white wings cut her short. In a cloud of swirling feathers a large dove skidded on the table, sending an empty plate to the ground.

“Ah!” Griggor scooped up the graceless bird, stroking its back while it cooed. “This is Sardagard the fourth. He is one of my most reliable messengers.”

Tied to its leg was a capsule which Griggor slipped off. After feeding the bird he whispered to it, removed it to an open area, and released it.

“Have you spent much time in the temple gardens at all?”

“The gardens? Yes, Master Griggor, though my duties have kept me mostly around the north of the temple, especially here in the kitchen.”

“Would you walk with me a while, Sabeen?”

With the Kitchen behind them, the noise of the crowd was no more than a murmur. Flagstones became tiles and to their left was a wide grassy square where lessons were often taught. Griggor only spoke when they entered the cool corridor at the

far end, turning right at the top of some stairs where stone became wood.

“I sometimes wonder what stories these hallways could tell if they could speak. Apparently this temple’s origins date back several hundred cycles, maybe a thousand, maybe more.”

The sorcerer turned left and they entered a long passage that led to the entrance of the temple. In the distance was a rectangle of light but they were otherwise in darkness.

With a fluid gesture and a spoken word, three balls of light flew from Griggor’s hand. The Bellman’s Lanterns spaced themselves high on the ceiling above and Sabeen’s feet began to tingle. Like lines of ants running up her calves, the prickles ascended. They moved into her loins, swirled lazily in the most pleasant way and she was grateful she had kept her apron on.

“Can you feel it?” Griggor stamped a foot on the ground as he led forwards. “Legend tells us this part of the temple was once the trunk of a massive Greatoak. Gods alone know what happened to the rest of it, but this section remained. The square, the Kitchen, the gardens were added later. But these corridors and rooms and the great hall of reverence are all still alive!”

Sabeen knew it. One of her duties after arriving had been to prune the young shoots and seal them. The living part of the temple was called Oldheart, and the inside was kept in darkness most of the time to discourage growth.

The points of Sabeen’s ears had grown warm by the time she caught up with Griggor in the entrance hall. Again he mouthed a spell and the lanterns went out. Sabeen was glad she stood behind him because her lids fluttered and tiny sparks of pleasure twinkled in her flower.

Sweet Seisha! Was Griggor secretly using the Sentience to

seduce her?

Striding deeper into the temple, he arrived at imposing double doors decorated with sigils and runes. An authoritative wave summoned her as he pushed on one, entering the hall of reverence.

Almost disappointed, Sabeen followed. The walking helped douse the flames in her body.

“There. Look up.”

In the middle of a large circle bounded by thick wooden pillars Griggor indicated the opening above. Roughly triangular, its edges were jagged and it was clear they stood within an old tree.

“This is your first time in the hall?”

“No... but... Oldheart’s Sight is still a wonder to me. Is that what your message was about?”

“Hmm? Message?”

“The one that came with Sarda...?”

“Sardagard.”

“Yes, Sardagard. The message that came with Sardagard?”

“Oh...” Griggor checked the tiny scroll. It looked almost white against the darkened skin of his palm.

“Did you take a tattoo for the festival?” Sabeen inspected the orange-brown stain. “The palm would not be the best place for it. It’s ruined.”

“Tattoo?” Bemusement curved Griggor’s beard. “You are a delight, young sapling. No, my palms are stained from over a hundred cycles’ worth of crushing kindling.”

“Spell ingredients? Your palms are stained from crushing kindling? But I have used the Three Sanctioned Spells since I was a young girl and my hands are clear. Look.”

Griggor grunted as she showed him. “I dislike the term

‘Sanctioned Spell.’ Under the old ways every spell is a sanctioned spell so none of them need to be ‘sanctioned.’ The Bellman’s Lantern gives us light, the Starry Shield protects us when we sleep in the open, and the Sleeping Thanks allows us to put a small animal to sleep so we can offer prayers of thanks before we kill it and eat it. Do you know what all of these spells have in common?”

“They make travelling easier, perhaps?”

Griggor jabbed her palm. “None of them use kindling that might leave a stain. There’s the reason why the church permits them. It allows them to use the Sentience while saying they don’t use the Sentience. Slippery *vishuks* they are. You will learn this and so much more when you study with Thane. Come, the gardens are this way.”

“Yes... Thane is...”

On the far side of the temple another double door led onto a wide stone shelf. Some paces later, a staircase descended gently into a lush lawn where tiny yellow and pink blossoms welcomed their naked feet.

About fifty paces wide by seventy paces long, the gardens were bordered by the temple behind them, verdant bushes and trees to the west and south, and the river Gemborne on the east. The gardens flourished with flowers and fruits, bees and birds, and a vibrance of life so intense it was almost palpable. Yet all of this was dull in comparison with the Stunted Elm.

Set farthest south in the gardens the tree, not much taller than the temple, was white like ash, contrasting starkly with the brilliant green of its leaves and the occasional blue flower.

“Thane is a good teacher, Sabeen. Blustery, headstrong, a hard task Master. After the rape ritual you will have nothing to fear.”

“The *rape* ritual?”

A flock of blue-breasted warblers had been grazing on the river bank. Griggor’s bellowing laughter sent them to flight.

“Oh, forgive me, Sabeen.” Griggor wiped a cheek. “Preposterous notion, of course. I suppose *some* sorcerers with more questionable ethics might use their spells to seduce their students, but it’s more a scare-tactic propagated by those same *vishuks* in Truruch, as a further means of preventing people from learning what is theirs by birth-right. They’ve been quite successful in making nearly every student of Wyrding petrified of being raped before they could study the ways of Wyrding. I can only admire the courage of those who come to study, not knowing any different but willing to make the sacrifice.”

“Seisha’s tears! I am certainly relieved.” Her shoulders relaxed and the sun was warm again on her back. With a deep breath to steady her mind she followed Griggor, falling in step as he approached the Stunted Elm. “Could I not study with you, or Kinnor, perhaps?”

“Kinnor is a fool. And I do not have time for students, my dear. Much of my time is spent overseeing the network of spies we have throughout Trefolk.”

“You are a Master of Shards? A spy-master? In the humble village of Bluebirch?”

“Shards are pieces of a whole. I interpret those pieces to see the whole. *Ka-samun!* I tell no lie.”

“That would suggest...”

“Oh, not suggest. It is a fact. Bluebirch is just *one* village that houses the Tenfeather People.”

“I did not know the Tenfeather People were so extensive.”

“Far have we reached. Every day our influence grows.”

“The message you received?”

“This?” Griggor handed her the scroll. “Just a message from Bargepoint.”

Sabeen read the untidy writing. “Bargepoint is just a short way up the Gemborne. The message says the latest supplies have nearly all been floated up river. It’s a special code, of course. I am honoured you would trust me with this secret, though I don’t know what it means.”

Again Griggor laughed. “Your innocence is uplifting, Sabeen. A special code, indeed. While I do, in fact, receive coded messages sometimes, this one means what it says. Bargepoint is where the river called Nuvien’s Folly joins the Gemborne. The rains have been good so we have used the barges at the point to ferry supplies up the Folly to the stronghold. I believe you will be going east in a few days’ to begin studying with Maigurn?”

“Yes.” She was excited to be learning the Way of the Warrior. Perhaps, Seisha be kind, she might gain an insight into what it was like to be Tulascarri.

“Majestic, is it not?”

“Akiun?”

“Well... yes, but I meant the Stunted Elm.”

They had stopped just short of the knee-high standing stones that ringed the tree, and Sabeen was grateful they had not ventured any further.

Griggor crossed the stones and stared up. When he turned back to see why she had not joined him, his blue orbs seemed brighter, on the verge of glowing.

“You hesitate?”

“It is a reverend and magical tree. I...”

“Ah...” Griggor grinned. “You touched him, didn’t you?”

During her first week at the Kitchen, Sabeen had touched

the bark. It had been her first time in the gardens. It was late of the day and nobody else was around. She had heard stories of the Stunted Elm, how it was revered. Enchanted by the stones she was drawn closer until her hand rested on hard, warm wood.

At once her feet had grown hot, then tingled, and satin streams oozed from her bloom until her whole body wanted to explode. In some ways she had. Climax upon climax had shaken her until she lay on the ground, half in and half out of the circle of stones, covered in sweat and leaves. She did not wish to repeat the experience with Grigger watching.

“Everybody touches the tree at some stage, Sabeen. There was a time when we had to forbid people from entering the gardens, in fact.”

“In the Oldheart, when you cast the Bellman’s Lanterns, I...”

“Speak child.”

“I felt...” Sabeen stared at the stones, embarrassed to discuss such intimate details.

“Your feet began to tingle. Then energy ascended into your legs and swirled about your hips and you had flowersong so strong that if I had not been there you might have ducked into one of the little rooms, not so?”

Sabeen fidgeted.

“Why are you ashamed at pleasuring yourself?”

“Not about pleasuring myself but... It happens when I heal, too. If I cut myself or bruise myself somehow, the tingling comes and...”

“And then so do you.”

Sabeen blushed.

“What you are experiencing is quite normal, Sabeen.”

Griggor began to walk around the tree. "Everybody feels it, but unlike most, you feel it more..."

"More? More how?"

Griggor had frozen in place. His brow had furrowed and he peered intently at something beyond her sight.

"More... intensely."

"Why? What do you mean?"

Griggor had begun striding towards the temple. "Hatori!"

Sabeen almost had to run to keep up with him. "What is it, Master? What did you see?"

"Ha... tori!"

"Master. What is wrong? What did you see?"

"A portent, my child. Ah... Hatori. You were right, it seems."

"Right about what? About me? What about me did you see in the tree?"

"Sabeen." Griggor braced her arms. "The portent is not about you. I know you have many questions but you will have answers in time. Engage Maigurn. He has much great knowledge. For now, I must leave you."

"Have I offended? Master, please tell me what I have done wrong?" Her chest had constricted. Close to tears, her mind was racing to find something to apologise for.

"You have done nothing wrong, Sabeen. I must call the council members together."

"Why? Is there something wrong with the Elm?"

Griggor hesitated on the bottom step. From her, he gazed at the noble tree with a troubled heart.

For the briefest of moments Sabeen could have sworn she felt a hand on her shoulder, ice cold but tender - comforting somehow - and her breath had puffed in vapour like on a cold

morning.

Then she was alone with nothing but the wind and the babble of the river.

*Thir'day, Day 3, of the Trefolkian Month of Enuuban,
1630 ODT*

Before dawn on the third day of the month of Enuuban, Sabeen left her small home in the southern district of Creaky Bough, travelled north along the narrow treetop roads, and descended to Rosey Road, which she followed until it joined Ulethan's Loop, then turned north, walking until she reached Bargepoint.

"You seek the Pineway?" The man wiped sweat from his brow with a cloth. "You're the mad woman, aren't you?"

"I am Sabeen. Why do you say I am mad?"

"He means no offence, my lady." Another man climbed the stairs. "It is just uncommon for anybody to wear a gown in this heat. You'll get fewer stares in Temp'east if you remove it."

Sabeen admitted he had a point. Already the humidity had plastered her gown to her body.

"Going to the stronghold? Follow the river until you reach the stairs. They climb up to the Pineway. It's been fully repaired so you should be safe."

"*Should* be safe?"

"Last storm was like my mother in a mood. Lightning zapped several places. We've replaced the boards but the railing's going to be a while. There's no wind today, so you should be fine."

Nervously, Sabeen climbed the hundred or more stairs to the Pineway. A wooden walkway, not more than two paces

wide; it was bolted into the side of the gorge, nearly as high as the ridge. Above her, the top of the cliff was choked with overgrowth but she still could not see why it had been easier to build the boardwalk into the rock rather than ask Mother Forest to clear a path on the ridge.

Far below her, the river called Nuvien's Folly rushed and sparkled. The man at Bargepoint had offered her a place on one of the barges but it would take too long to reach the stronghold this way. The force of the river was so strong that two teams of Bannators, one on each bank, were needed to haul the barge up-river. Aided by teams of men using poles to steer the cargo away from rocks, several days could pass before they reached Bargehome.

Cirilius was high when Sabeen left the Pineway and followed a lanetree bough road leading into the district called Temple East, or "Temp'east" as the man had called it.

Lanetrees had their name from the fact that their sturdy, far-spreading branches were wide and, unlike other trees where the boughs were circular, those of the lanetree were almost square and the thick bark could withstand the abrasion of bare feet, small wagons, and even horses.

Nearing two men who were tending the budding shoots that sprang up with regularity, Sabeen observed as, using simple spells, they coaxed the shoots to lie horizontally.

"Why are you doing that?"

"You see over there?" One of the men, on his knees, benevolence on his face as the little sprig gently bent north, gestured in the same direction, where there was nothing but open space between this tree and the next, about fifty paces.

"The next lanetree?"

"*Ka-samun*. This little 'un will grow out about ten paces,

barefoot. It will fatten up nice and plump, and then it will start sending down roots, and soon we will have a new lanetree, and a road to that one there.” Dusting his hands from the kindling, he helped an older man up. “Then the farmers can move in with their branch nets, and before Seisha returns from the underworld, we will be picking grapes and making wine.”

Still staring at where he had gestured, she pointed to the bushes below where a Bannator was foraging.

“I hope Bannators do not like fruit off the vine, or you will find the crop lost before you have your first harvest.”

The Bannator raised its head, uttered a rhythm of grunts and began to rub its horns against a tree.

“I think he heard you,” smiled the man. “You’re the new woman from the temple, aren’t you?”

“It’s the gown, isn’t it?”

“It wasn’t the gown that broadcast your novelty, though I would say you’d be cooler without it.” The man grinned as the older man made some remark about her sanity.

“No?” Sabeen frowned at the older man.

“No. Not even the dark hair, streaked with blue, or your yellow sight that sees more than it should.”

“Well, word does travel fast in Bluebirch.”

“Nor was it that. Even if you were in a crowd of people who had your countenance, I could pick you out.”

Sabeen had been inclined to dismiss the encounter. She did not care to be the subject of communal jokes, but now she was intrigued. There were nine blue dots stained on his freckled, friendly face. Beginning at the top of his nose, they designed a line to a short fringe of bark-brown hair, marking him as a ninth level Wyrder.

“Then you must surely talk with spirits.”

“*Drink* them is more like it.” The old man was chuckling again, and again Sabeen was not.

“Then tell me how it is I proclaim my newness to Bluebirch?”

“It’s simple,” said the Wyrder. “You are not free.”

A retort formed, then died. The wind of her words billowed only a sail of surprise and now she felt truly naked for he was right. Analaya had said she used her clothing as a shield, after all. Some part of her wanted to protest but how could she argue with such a disarming insight?

“You know he’s right, of course.” The older man groaned as he gathered his implements and stamped pins and needles from a foot. “Your body left the prison, but your mind is still there. You are like somebody looking for a rainbow, but who does not know they are searching. Antsun’alun and Gundseneday.” He touched temple, lips, and breast and limped away.

Sabeen sought inspiration from the younger man. Though fascinated by them, the small bindis only reminded her that she did not even have ten on her forehead, and was a long way from studying the Sentience.

“Some people say there are only *ten* levels of Wyrding because there is not enough space for more bindis on a forehead.”

“Forgive me...?” Then she laughed at his jest. “Are all tree-shapers Wyrders?”

“Of sorts.”

The young man bent down to retrieve a wooden box. Only now did Sabeen notice he was naked. Maybe she was, after such a short time, growing accustomed to the old ways of Trefolk, and the common ways of Bluebirch... but how long

until Sabeen was rid of Frethenia?

Innocently he cupped his balls, pulled them to comfort. “Most people, even those in the cities, know the three sanctioned spells, but knowing them does not make you a Wyrder. At least... not officially. Tree shapers are allowed to learn a set of spells specifically for tree shaping, and you are automatically a ninth level Wyrder when you learn anything more than the sanctioned spells.”

They had begun to drift in the direction Sabeen had been going, the din of cicadas and other beetles, underscored by frogs, deafening in the heights.

“Are you leaving the village?” The tree shaper gestured at the small pack on her back. “If so, you’re going the wrong way. The mountains are to the east. You would need to travel west.”

“No.” It occurred to Sabeen that the very thought of leaving Bluebirch was repugnant. Bluebirch had already become home, and though her part of that home was but a humble hovel in the trees, she savoured the warmth with which she had been received. Bluebirch was like a comforting blanket on a chilly, rainy day.

“To the farms, then? You could have left your clothes at home. Nobody wears anything outside the village anyways. No need... not even in winter, which, as you can see, is much like summer here...”

Preparing for this little trip, she had habitually donned a fresh Dniban gown, but wherever she went she was stared at, especially by little children. She could see the merits of clothing were limited to warmth and protection from spattering oil. Pockets were useful too.

The tree shaper broke off as a woman and a man, both in

sikerits approached. “Ah! My tri-twineds approach.”

“Try... what?”

“Tri-twineds.” The tree shaper greeted each one with a kiss to the cheek. “Antsun’alun. I would make introductions, but the young lady has not blessed me with her name.”

“Antsun’alun. I am Sabeen.” After the triple-greeting, she emulated Vyktor’s hands pressed together.

“These are my tri-twineds, Ella and Calven. I am Kaleb.” The tree-shaper handed his box of tools to the second man. “Do you not know of tri-twines?”

“I know of the term,” said Sabeen, though she had not heard it for many cycles. “But where I am from, Entwinements are usually only between two. It is rare for more.”

“You are the woman from Frethenia, are you not?” Ella cradled Sabeen’s hand with long, elegant fingers that were soft and warm. Her body swayed sensually and the *sikerit* clung to her like a lover. Below smouldering lavender eyes were wide lips made for kissing and a dimpled chin that told of hidden strengths.

“I... yes...” Sabeen stared at painted toes and a silver anklet. “I was once from Frethenia.”

“Why so awkward, Sabeen?”

“I... forgive me. I have never had a woman look at me like you do.”

Ella’s laugh was infectious, genuine, and musical. “I can see that you will find Bluebirch a welcome change, Sabeen. We should greatly enjoy your company for Evenmeal, if it please you?”

She glanced at the two men who had moved to the side of the bough road. Standing next to each other, they were

discussing what could be news from up north while they urinated into the jungle below.

Foranrian might have laughed, but to Sabeen it was normal.

Tri-twines, she had been taught, were a breeding place of promiscuity and low morals. She had been taught that one partner should be sufficient, that any more than one was a recipe for bitterness. She did not hold the same belief, but did not want to find that what she had learned was true.

“Do not be afraid, Sabeen.” Though Ella seemed sincere, it was difficult to see beyond her sultry appeal.

“It’s just... I...”

“Ah...” Patting the back of Sabeen’s hand, Ella let go. Reaching behind, she gathered hair as black as pitch, richly streaked with red. She began to tie it with a bleached ribbon. “I see what your reservation is.”

“You do?”

Ella hooked an arm into hers. “You think I want to take you to my bed.”

“Oh... no... I...”

“Would you *like* to share my bed?”

Sabeen gasped, stuttering, which only made Ella laugh. “It is not your fault that you were taught by the ignorant, and for us to be offended would be unfair, and very conflicting with the Trefolkian way. I can assure you that when three people tri-twine, or more people polytwine, it is not an event that is done lightly.”

“It isn’t?”

“Oh, Truruch teaches polytwines only perpetuate debauchery, of course. They would steal your soul and tell you it was the will of Gethras, and then ask you for a donation.

No, my dear, entwinements are a sacred contract, be it between two or more, and be it for a day or a lifetime. If you just want to *ferra*, find a brothel and get on with it. No entwinement in old Trefolk is recognised without the proper rituals.”

“But I thought entwinements of any nature were for a lifetime?”

Calven snorted. “Such narrow thought sets you up for sadness. Exactly what the church needs for more donations. I can tell you that the wealth of any church is a good measure of how troubled the congregation is.”

“They *can* be for life,” said Ella. “If the Totems will it.”

“The totems, Ella? Not the gods?”

“Did any of the gods entwine? Gethras? His children? Seisha? Sfarr?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Of course. They can do as they please. That’s why such matters were given to the totems to manage.”

“I see the truth of it.”

At an intersection, Ella ran affectionate fingers along a sign-post carved to depict the likenesses of some of those very totems. “I carved this, you know?”

“It is a work of art.”

It truly was, and must have taken a long time to make.

“It was just after I arrived at Bluebirch. I was in turmoil and this was the meditation that brought me peace.” Ella gestured down a thin boardwalk that led to a nearby tree where an enormous treehouse had been grown with opulent proportions. The men, who had marched ahead, were already climbing the stairs.

“Will you stay the night?” Ella leaned in. “I make the best

shepherd's pie in all of Bluebirch.”

“*Thathenu*, Ella. But by Seisha's tears, forgive me, for I have committed to join Master Maigurn for several weeks, and I would dishonour him by any delay.”

“Ah! Hence your journey. Master Maigurn is a *great* warrior. You do well to honour him.”

“You said you made the post after you arrived. You are not from Bluebirch, originally?”

“No, my dear. But I left the capital more than fifty cycles ago. My entwined and I lived a high life but, after he was murdered by Truruch, I fled. I vowed to Seisha that when the time came for me to bear saplings they would be raised in a wholesome place.”

“Then perhaps when I return three weeks, hence, we can share stories?”

“We will mark the date and await the notch. You will find Master Maigurn's school about two notches barefoot, east of here.”

“Two notches... *barefoot*?”

“Yes. Surely you know the pace of a horse is longer than the pace of our feet? So it would be half a notch by hoof, if you could find a horse willing to get up here.” Ella wrinkled her nose. “Seisha's tears! Do not tell me you are planning to run? Good Gethras! Well, if you did, then maybe just a notch, but still east of here. Do not fear, you will soon learn the names of all the districts.”

“*Thathenu*, Ella. I look forward to when we meet again. It is my prayer that by the notch of my return, I shall share with you tales of success.”

“*Thath' nachalie*, Sabeen.” With a smile, she explained, “It means ‘no thanks is required’, in the old tongue, but, if I may...

Tales are based on adventure. And *I* foresee that you shall have many.”

*Thir'day, Day 3, of the Trefolkian Month of Ennuban,
1630 ODT*

Shadows were long when Sabeen arrived at a small harbour where dozens of empty barges bumped against the pier, buffeted by the river. Here, Nuvien's Folly was deep. It slipped by almost quietly, belying a strength that would easily sweep away a Bannator.

A lone man, puffing on a pipe with a faraway stare, barely looked up.

“Antsun'alun. Is this the place called Bargehome?”

“Can't see what else it would be called.”

“I...”

“Going to work at the stronghold or to study with the Master?”

“To study... with Master Maigurn.”

His head lolled to the right. “Just follow the wagon road to Wounded Meadow. You can't miss it. The stronghold is just behind that.”

It was a short walk, but fireflies in their thousands were flitting across the road by the time Sabeen reached Wounded Meadow. While still on the wagon track, she had lost some time to watching a stag. Quietly grazing with a swarm of green twinkles in its antlers, such a wonder could not be dishonoured by simply passing by.

Fortunately, she had made haste earlier and there was still enough light to see that the grassy expanse of the meadow undulated gently until it arrived at a narrow brook.

It was possibly the largest open field she had ever seen. She

had heard tales about people who, having lived their entire lives in the forest, were afraid of such wide open spaces, but she could not understand why. Luxurious grass sponged the mud from her soles, beckoning to her with a promise of awe, making her question why such a place of beauty had such an inauspicious name.

A whirring sound broke into her awareness and in the twilight she saw him. On top of a high wooden pillar, balancing perfectly on one leg he twirled a pole twice as long as his body, moving it with such power and grace that it seemed like a solid circle, humming noisily.

Sensing her, he brought the pole to a stop, and dropped to the ground, landing light as a bird, and returned her greeting. Handing her the pole, which was far heavier than she anticipated, he gestured at the pillar. “Would you like to try?”

Few men were gifted with a voice like his. It rumbled with an essence both soothing and unsettling, and carried in its depths the hint of cures and curses alike. In her ears it was kind but as it reverberated in her chest she noted an authority that would not be questioned.

“How do I get up there?”

“Another time, then.” Maigurn stepped into his Kren’an, and beckoned her to a barrel. In it floated some acorn-sized spheres. Brown in colour and slightly knobbly, they clung to each other in the middle of the water. “Tulascarri gave you these?”

“I wondered where those went...”

“Do you know what they are?”

“Drellion balls, I think she called them. Each one of those things, when thrown, has enough power to take off the leg of a Bannator.”

Maigurn cupped one in his hand and tapped it.

Sabeen gasped, drew back.

“Peace, Sabeen.” Maigurn held it for her. “They only explode on impact. Did she tell you how she perfected them?”

“*Perfected* them? Good gods preserve those who used them before she did.”

“Drellion sap is produced by the Drellion tree. It is highly flammable. We only have a few Drellion trees in Bluebirch. Your caravan was attacked to capture its consignment of Drellion headed south. Many good things come from Frethenia.”

Sabeen rolled the little ball in her hand. It was hard to imagine how something so seed-like could be such a contradiction and cause so much destruction.

“You are sure she never told you how she perfected them?”

“Master Maigurn,” Sabeen handed the ball back to him. “If she *had* told me I would have forgotten because I know nothing of these things.”

Maigurn scooped up the other balls. “I see the Truth of it. Your friend, Tulascarri, is quite the genius. Come, I shall show you to your lodgings. I hope Frethenia has not corrupted you against sharing a dormitory with both men *and* women?”

With the aid of a Bellman’s Lantern, the Master oriented Sabeen to the various buildings at the back of the meadow. Most of them were nestled against an imposing wall of rock: a sheer cliff at least thirty paces high.

Returning to the dormitory, Maigurn stopped in the middle of the wagon road which travelled into a narrow opening in the cliff.

“Through there is the stronghold. Up there on the cliff, the

battlements. We could withstand a long siege, but I pray nobody need ever see the inside of those caves.”

“Now I am curious, Master Maigurn.”

Something that might have been a smile plucked at his lips. “Everybody is. There will be plenty time for it later. Tonight, though, I suggest you get some rest.”

Settling into her blanket on a lumpy mattress some time later, there was a strange comfort in hearing the breathing of sleeping students around her. Already she could hear Morphas calling, but she tried to recall the names Maigurn had used.

The school was called a Briary, the dormitories were called a Heath... and Sabeen was called from slumber far too soon the next morning.

They began with a run around the meadow, several times, then down to Bargehome and back. With heaving lungs they ascended a wooden platform and, as Cirilius poked over the mountains, they performed stretches and hops and all manner of exercises imaginable.

After a small breakfast, the group of students gathered in the meadow where a series of short poles stuck out of the ground, about ten paces apart. Each pole was wide enough for only one foot and, for a while, they were made to hop from one to the other. Then Master Maigurn handed each one a staff.

A shorter and lighter version of the one Master Maigurn had been using yesterday, it was made from a flexible wood as thick as Sabeen’s wrist, and perfectly straight. Despite its pliability, it had a firmness that Sabeen would come to know well.

“Your ankles and your wrists are keys to martial strength, and to learn the rattan staff is to learn the fundamental

principles of using the Sentience. This is a sacred practice.”

Master Maigurn continued, using terms like “Rooting” and “Standing Like A Tree”, but it was difficult for Sabeen to concentrate on the lecture while she constantly had to pick the stick from the ground. The spinning end kept catching on her gown. None of the other students, clad either in a Kren’an or naked, had this problem, but as she practiced the technique it became easier to fan the staff with ever increasing speed.

“Just like the pole, the Sentience can be your friend, or your enemy. Lose focus and -”

The rattan rapped her on the back of the head and she sprawled into the grass, her gown ripping... Several other students began to laugh, but more taps of pole striking bone followed and more students added grass to their diet.

“This is the concept of Kaharma,” announced Master Maigurn. “A farmer sows grain and he reaps wheat. What you do today will bear fruit tomorrow, or, as you have seen, sooner than that.”

Sabeen stepped up onto her stand again, ignoring the throb on her skull, knowing it would fade rapidly.

“You will learn that to raise the Sentience is like using the pole. It must be done with force of will until it is second in nature to breathing. It must be guided, not forced; led rather than pushed. If you wish water to flow in a certain direction, you create the channel for the water to flow. If you push it... then you have a flood.”

Several more stricken skulls sounded off.

They practiced until Cirilius was well above the trees, until Sabeen’s head was dizzy and her hands were sore. It was a mercy when Maigurn led them to the east of the meadow where a cool stream quenched their burning throats.

The brook, coming from the mountains and joining the Folly, was not much more than ankle deep and littered with rounded rocks, slimy with mud and algae. Here it was that Master Maigurn taught them the stepping of the Teegra.

It was not long before all the students had fallen in and were covered in mud.

Her gown was ruined. It only hindered her and she wondered what had been the gain in wearing it to begin with. Until now, fears and reserves had presented themselves in all guises and methods, and she had thought she would never be able to shed the last remnants of Frethenian trepidation. She had thought it would be months before she would reach the place of self-acceptance to be comfortable like the people of Bluebirch; but now, layered in mud like everybody else, she could see the only one she was afraid of was herself.

There was no great announcement, no ceremony. Like discarding an assumption shown to be false, she left the relic of her past self in a sloppy pile at the side of the river.

“The Teegra is only as high as your waist, one of the smaller cats that roam these forests. A solitary animal, he relies on his striped camouflage to hunt. But, like any cat, before he steps into the unknown his foot touches and tests before he transfers his weight.” Master Maigurn crossed the stones slowly as he spoke, as if walking on dry solid ground, one hand behind his v-shaped back, the other gently pressing on the individual beads of a prayer necklace. “In time, you will find this, too, becomes instinctive but, for now, it will entertain me.”

For a long time, Master Maigurn instructed them on their technique, but just when Sabeen thought he would tell them to stop he turned and strolled away.

“Master,” called one of the students. She was too covered in mud to distinguish her as anything more than female. “Until when shall we continue?”

“You may have your meal when you have crossed the river and back, completely, once for each of the sons and daughters of Gethras, and without falling once, and without any clever contrivances such as helping each other.”

Sabeen’s mouth was foul from more than just expletives by the time she managed to cross the river twelve times. She was ravenous, but her legs and arms were shaking so much that it was difficult to eat.

They spent the afternoon trying to hit each other with the poles, which surely had been filled with lead, and though Master Maigurn said they would only endure this for a notch, they learned that *his* concept of a notch was not theirs. It would also take several more days to learn that to ask “when?” or “how long?” was to beg the gods for an eternity of practice.

After a modest evenmeal, the students were permitted time for themselves, after which Master Maigurn instructed them in meditation. When heads fell to Morphas he whacked them sharply with a thin cane, but his efforts were soon overwhelmed.

“Sabeen, you are the only one awake.”

Opening her eyes she surveyed a room littered with dreamers. One woman was snoring, one man was murmuring in his sleep, still another, propped against a pillar, twitched - an impressive erection going wanting.

“It seems so, Master Maigurn.”

“The first night of meditation sees all students offered to Morphas. Why do *you* deny him?”

It wasn’t that she begrudged the god of sleep his due. She

could just as easily lie down now and willingly succumb to his charms but, at some stage, deep within herself, guided by the Master, she had felt something stir.

“Curious,” said Maigurn after she told him. “Stand up.”

One hand flattened just below her navel, and the other touched her back at equal height. His head turned like he was listening to something, then Maigurn stepped away, apparently pleased.

“What did you feel, Master?”

“You should sleep now, Sabeen.”

“But what did you feel?” Weaving over sprawled legs and arms, she followed him to the front of the room.

“You are in good health.” He shrugged. “But I want you to focus on that sensation while you train tomorrow, agreed?”

“Yes, naturally, but what does it mean?” She followed him to the door, but he would not let her through.

“Stay here tonight and sleep. The morning will call from you more than this day.”

“Master ... what does it *mean*?”

His face was expressionless, yet the faintest flicker flashed his brow. “I think...”

“Yes?”

“I think you need to rest.”

*Sixthday, Day 12, of the Trefolkian Month of Ennuban,
1630 ODT*

“Antsun'alun. May I join you, lady Sabeen?”

Sabeen had been alone, sitting on the bank of the little brook. It was Sixthday, or the Day of Ash as it had been known in Old Trefolk, and a day of rest or Laudlifting. She had borrowed books from the library, some wine and food

from the stores, and had spent the afternoon in research. Tomorrow the second week of training would begin at first light and there would be little time for reading.

“*Lady* Sabeen?” When she had sweated and bruised alongside this woman, why should she use such formal address?

“You are the lady Sabeen, are you not?”

“I am Sabeen. I am a woman but I am no more a lady than you, sister...?”

“I am Ten’ia’sha. It means ‘rainbow’ in the ancient tongue.”

“Antsun’alun... A lovely name...”

“Antsun’alun...”

“Well, Sister Ten’ia’sha, I would be honoured if you would...” Sabeen opened the book, scanned the page too quickly. “I would be honoured if you would sit on my colours.”

Ten’ia’sha’s navel bounced. “You mean you would be honoured to sit upon the *same* colours.”

Her skin was an intriguing patchwork of beiges and fawns. Her shoulder-length hair was mostly blue with hues of green and a single strip of black, and a portion of her left ear was missing. Sabeen remembered sparring with her during the days passed. For one whose hip bones were visible she was remarkably strong.

In her embrace, Ten’ia’sha held a bowl of fruit and a flagon of wine with a thin blanket draped over one arm. As she put down the food and spread the tartan on the grass Sabeen noticed that almost all of her *shikai* were green.

“Is it a book on Traditions you read? I hope I am not disturbing your study.”

Sabeen wiped her muddied feet on the grass before sitting on the blanket. With thick pasture under it, it was far more comfortable than the rock.

“No disturbance. I was looking for knowledge on the meditations, as well as more information that might tell me how some of these places came to be named. This meadow does not seem to be wounded in any way.”

“Oh, I could have told you that.”

“You have lived in Bluebirch all your life?”

“I come from a village about twenty barefoot days west of the salted highway. The Guardbird is my totem now. I was chased away as a young girl.”

“Seisha’s tears, why?”

Ten’ia’sha rose up on her knees, spreading her arms. “My skin.”

“But... you are beautiful.”

Though gratitude curved under wide ponds of sapphire, there were shades of sadness and regret as she arranged her hair over her ears.

“It seems having *shikai* alone does not make you Trefolkian. Because of my... blemished skin... the villagers thought I had more Guynenian blood than Trefolkian. I am sure you know there is no love lost between Trefolk and her northern neighbour?”

“Of Trefolk, her history and politics, I know much. You are right. Under the old Trefolkian Empire the people of Guynen were our subjects. So Bluebirch became your refuge?”

“I have been here for only ten cycles but that’s long enough to know how the names came to be. It seems there was once a hunter called Nuvien. He was a prominent man in

these parts and made something of a name for himself. He grew rich enough to conscript an army and defied the Emperor. There was a battle and Nuvien realised quickly he was losing. He pulled his forces back from Bluebirch and withdrew to the stronghold.”

“Sounds logical to me?”

“Yes, but the river was in flood, and he lost most of his men to it.”

“So that’s how it came to be known as Nuvien’s Folly...”

“Only a small band of men reached this meadow. An arrow wounded Nuvien...”

“Hence, ‘Wounded Meadow’...”

“He reached the narrow gorge leading to the stronghold, but no further. His throat was cut, some say by one of his own men. Now the gorge is called ‘Nuvien’s Neck.’ *Some* say, on a dark night, when the wind blows down from the mountain, you can still hear his dying gasps.”

Ten’ia’sha uncorked the flagon. Pouring a small amount onto the grass she whispered, “*Thathendra*, great Mother, for your bounty.”

“I did not consider you for a religious person.” Sabeen took the wine from Ten’ia’sha, exchanging it for her own.

“Seisha’s laugh! Have you not heard? I am a whore.”

The wine was pleasant, fruity - but not when inhaled. Ten’ia’sha’s hand was hard on her back as she coughed.

“Surely you joke, Ten’ia’sha?”

“No.” Ten’ia’sha shrugged casually. She lay back on the blanket, almost purring, staring up at the clouds as fingers trailed lines of muscle. “I like to *ferra*. More than most, apparently, which is quite a lot when you think there is not really that much to do in Bluebirch. I’m also a seamstress, you

know. I learned from Ferson. Do you know him?"

"He's very good."

"I'm better." Ten'ia'sha sat up, crossed her legs in front of Sabeen. "You know you need to make your own Kren'an, don't you?"

"No... I did not."

"I shall help you, if you like?"

"*Thathendra*. You are most generous, but... I have no means of paying you."

A warm sole, leathery but smooth, brushed the inside of Sabeen's thigh. It was so unexpected, so brazen, that she was spellbound.

"There are other ways we might... exchange favour?"

Sabeen's mouth wanted to move, to speak, but she could find nothing to say. Her mind was full of replies to the proposition: polite declinations, plausible deferrals - but Ten'ia'sha's feet were pushing Sabeen's knees apart with little resistance. Her flower was blooming in the promise of a divine dawn, kissed with the sacred dew of possibility and revelation that melted her mind into the serenity of bliss, and she realised her body had already given an answer.

*Sixthday, Day 24, of the Trefolkian Month of Ennuuban,
1630 ODT*

The three weeks with Maigurn were filled from dawn with exercise and martial technique and meditation. It was gruelling. He drove them relentlessly, with little reprieve, urging them in a way that they felt their best efforts were merely the start. Every night they collapsed into their beds only to be roused again well ahead of Cirilius.

Yet, climbing to the bough road again, Sabeen reflected the

time had passed in less than the blink of an eye.

Master Maigurn had been right when he said that they would hate the days, but love the weeks. More than this, though, she marvelled at the fact that he trained *with* them, every step an example for them to follow.

“It is not enough to practice,” he said. “Your forms are a meditation. Every movement you make must be not just with power, but grace.”

The branch of the lanetree was wet with raindrops. In the past, her hasty feet might have led to a bruise but, because of Master Maigurn’s tutelage, her footing was solid and she could sense the tree, warm with life. The pack on her naked back tugged playfully at her *shikai*, her tailored Kren’an delighted over burgeoning strength in her thighs. Ten’ia’sha was a skilled seamstress; so skilled that Sabeen now owned four of them.

Her old gowns would be recycled for other uses, or modified to be more practical, or even burned as a symbol of her old life.

She had found freedom in Wounded Meadow, but more than this she had found *Ikbaren*. There were still questions, of course, but they were *Sabeen’s* questions, *Sabeen’s* fascination, *Sabeen’s* absorption in mystery.

Nudity, or ‘forest-clad’ as Maigurn taught her, was not simply a practicality in the heat. It did not only teach acceptance and confidence; far more than these, it levelled one and all so that such kinship became an ethereal sword of truth piercing the ephemeral, the mundane, the mediocrity of the world she had left on a muddy river bank.

Remembering her arrangement, she rapped on the door of the home of Ella, Kaleb, and Calven.

They welcomed her with great excitement and introduced

her to Ella's nephew, Dunnac. In anticipation of her arrival, they had spared no effort to provide the finest Muollian wine, Kalgarian honey, and even Lintanorian devil-water.

Together, the five prepared a feast fit for a queen while listening attentively to Sabeen's stories. She did not know she had so many to tell, and they dined sitting on broad, comfortable cushions instead of hard wood or stone.

Having lived off only the most basic of meals, Sabeen's senses delighted with creamy garlic mushrooms, drenched with melted cheese, roasted tree sheep, and leafy greens drizzled with herb-infused oils, and sweet, dark vinegar; but while her body dined on food, her vision feasted on her newest acquaintance.

Like his aunt Ella, Dunnac had pitch black hair with rosy strips that hung low on his shoulders, just longer than the stamen that hung between his legs and Sabeen was both grateful and dismayed that the table between them hid this enticement.

One of the dishes prepared was a large fish, pink of flesh and slightly smoky in flavour. When Sabeen asked what it was, Ella handed her a freshly sliced lemon.

"This..." Ella gestured along the fish, which was as long as Sabeen's forearm, "Is a southern Trefolkian trout."

"But... we are too far from the sea to..."

"No, no, no..." Ella squeezed lemon onto her portion of fish, smothered it with butter and sprinkled herbs. "Have you met Ferson? He is the best -"

"Animal trainer in Bluebirch."

"I would say in all of Trefolk."

"Ka-samun?"

"Ka... samun." Ella shifted onto her knees leaning

forward for the salt. “Ferson, would you believe, has trained beavers... yes, beavers... to build approximately ten... no fewer than ten dams... along Nuvien’s Folly.”

“But the rains...”

“The rains in winter are less severe than in summer. So Nuvien’s Folly is but a trickle while the dams are wide and full of water and *full*... of fish!”

“So he really did it?”

“Did what?”

“Build dams and fill them with fish. When I met Ferson for the first time he told me he would do this. I didn’t believe him.”

“Oh, yes.” Ella popped another morsel into her mouth and moaned with delight. “When it comes to animals and tailoring and... growing certain herbs, you can believe he knows what he’s doing. Even better, the Bannators that have been captured from the raids... There must be about twenty in total now... No longer need to feed *only* at the Bannator station. They can graze in the Wounded Meadow. Maigurn won’t be too happy, but...”

“Has Master Maigurn taught you to raise the *shikai*?” Calven did not seem to be eating, choosing to rather enjoy his wine whilst he caressed Kaleb’s arm.

“Not yet, I’m afraid, but in time, I hope...”

“I have seen him with his *shikai* at full spine.” Calven leaned forward. “They were hard and sharp, spikes that could penetrate the hardest of wood, even bone.”

Kaleb butted him with an elbow. “Made you all excited, did it?”

Calven’s cheeks were quite rosy. Shameless fingers fondled Kaleb’s manhood. “I, too, am a Wyrder. I can make hard what

is soft. I can make wet what is dry. Neither you nor Ella have ever complained. But listen now, Sabeen, listen, listen..." Calven reached for a different sliver of meat, speaking between mouthfuls. "Is it true that the Segurim of Truruch shave their *shikai*?"

"No!" Now Kaleb leaned forward. "*Abomination!* What is this you say? Sabeen? Is this true?"

"Sadly, yes, my friends. For most Trefolkians the *shikai* are simply extra hair that can be used to anchor ponytails, or to hang jewellery; priests see their magical properties as a sign of sin and shave them flat."

"No..."

"Ka-samun."

"Ka-samun?"

"I tell no lie."

Ella was agreeing. "It is true. Even in my days in the capital, Truruch promoted shaving the *shikai* as a sign of devotion."

"And where do you go from here?" Creamy gravy was running down Dunnac's wrist as he sank his teeth into a hunk of succulent flesh. Cooked to such perfection the centre was still pink.

"I go to study under Thane for three weeks, then back to Master Maigurn, then back to Thane, and so on." Dipping a soft wedge of seeded bread into gravy thick with onion, layering it with meat and a scoop of mustard, she savoured the symphony of flavours.

"So you are studying to become a mage, then?"

"Is a mage not the same as a sorcerer?"

"Under old Trefolk, the term is used to describe one who is both a warrior *and* proficient with the Sentience."

“I would say Thane is neither warrior nor sorcerer.” Ella’s back was perfectly straight, a long necklace twinkling between small, pert breasts. Her gaze roamed easily over her two men. “Thane is only a seventh level Wyrder and has a long, *long* way to go if he ever wants to aspire to sixth. Oh, I am sure he uses skulls in all his decorating, but why do you not study with Griggor? He is first sorcerer, a fifth level Wyrder, and also a *much* nicer man altogether.”

Sabeen did not wish to delve into detail, or prompt her own misgivings about the arrangement. Instead she shrugged, hoping to seem casual. “Vyktor’s orders, I suppose.”

Unconvinced, Ella’s high forehead wrinkled. “Vyktor is not familiar with the fact that a woman should be treated with respect.”

“He is a good leader.” Calven was rubbing Ella’s thigh, but raised a finger to make his point.

Ella pretended to bite at it. “He is. I offer no argument. But he is a man, and unschooled in feminine nuance. Still, Sabeen, you will learn well from Thane.”

With rain pattering on leaves beyond the open window, the balmy notches grew on the crystal marker, and the conversation was rich with humour. Sometime later, as the dishes were being cleared away by the men, Sabeen wanted to help, but elegant bejewelled fingers touched her knee to stay.

Bubbles from a gheela pipe gurgled like a giggling brook and Ella spoke through strawberry scented smoke, offering her a blanket. “I see how you look at my nephew...”

“He is a handsome man, Ella, but I would never...”

“To Dranaga with false modesty, Sabeen.” Ella winked, holding out the pipe for her. “Your petals are soaked. The men can’t see around the table, but I can.”

Blushing into her hands Sabeen pulled pastels over shyness. “I have only just recently grown accustomed to nudity. How do I deal with such...”

“Honesty?”

“I was going to say something like ‘fires’ or ‘uncontrollable urges’ but, yes... honesty.”

“It takes most people many cycles around the sun for their bodily urges to reconcile with the maturity of their minds, Sabeen, especially in as free a culture as ours. The key is to take responsibility...”

“I try to push these thoughts from my mind. I try to keep them suppressed.”

“Have you ever tried to contain a boiling pot? No, of course not, for the vessel would be ruined. Being responsible means knowing when is the time for this, and when is the time for that. Your body is telling you it is time for pleasure, but instead of acknowledging it you only deny it, and it will consume you if you do not recognise that passion and lust are as natural as breathing. Attend my words. A tired adage claims that in you live two beasts; one light, one dark and each one vies for supremacy. Which one do you think will win?”

“The one that I feed.” Sabeen recalled Master Maigurn’s lesson, remembered that it had resonated strongly with her.

“Perhaps, but... have you ever *tried* to feed two wild beasts in one cage? It’s a nice metaphor but in reality those two beasts will *fight* over the food, and if one is starving *that* one is fighting for survival. Who will win then?”

“So I should feed both of them? But...”

“I do not discount the veracity of Master Maigurn’s lesson, but when it comes to your own being it’s not that simple, and that’s the point. You have a body, not a cage, and more than

one beast seeks attention. You have to give expression to all your dreams and desires, not just a select few. You cannot approach enlightenment with only your mind, or only your body. It must be with both.”

Shifting onto a thigh so that she could lean closer, Sabeen’s legs rubbed together like silk. Her lids drooped just longer than a blink. “Are you a Sage, Ella?”

Crow’s feet crinkled and dimples danced in firelight but a mischievous grin drew Sabeen’s gaze down to where she mashed her flower against a naked heel.

“I am just as wanton as you. I have such flowersong that you will hear us tonight. Even the Hightree will hear us tonight.”

It was not long before the men returned to their seats around the table again. Only the drinks were left, and Sabeen stared at the assortment of vessels, contemplating Ella’s words - another layer of Frethenian conditioning peeling away - and now, instead of trying to suppress her drives by squeezing her legs, she surrendered to the satin serenade seeping onto the cushion, not caring about the mess it may leave, save to declare she had been liberated, even if it was only a little.

The blanket slipped off her lap as she kneeled slowly and reached for the clear glass bottle in the centre of the table. In it was a liquid the colour of a sunrise. It was odourless when uncorked and glugged pleasantly into the small earthen vessel handed her by Ella’s nephew who surveyed her, dubiously.

“You have never *had* Lintanorian devil-water *before*, have you?” Dunnac stole the bottle and the vessel from her. He had to rise onto his knees to reach and her *shikai* tingled as the pores around them opened, releasing subtle pheromones and she was glad for the heavy smokiness of the four fire pits that

surrounded them.

“No... I have never even heard of it...”

Dunnac poured the liquid back, stoppered the bottle, and shook it vigorously. When he refilled the vessel the sunrise had become fired ember and it effervesced with a gentle hissing. He gestured for her to wait as she raised her cup, then held his aloft.

“The province of Lintanor, far south, has many folktales of devils and demons. It is said that when you drink the devil water you must knock the cup on the table, or against a cup in the hands of a companion. The noise of the knocking drives the devils from the room, and the liquor drives them from your mind.”

He slammed the cup hard, and the liquid fizzed wildly. His showmanship made Sabeen giggle and she copied him with a riotous burst of joy, the depths of which astounded her.

“But be warned ...” He lowered his words with showman’s mischief and added, “Once the cup is struck you *must* drink, for not to do so is to invite peril. It’s also rude.” Still holding his drink high, he looked around. “To what shall we give hail.”

Sabeen raised her cup. “*Ikhaben!*”

Kinship chorused around the table.

With her vision locked in his, the first drink of tingling passion ignited her heart, and the second fired her veins. By the time she had her third, sitting alone with Dunnac, sobriety was losing to lava, barely concealed by the blanket.

Dunnac spoke about the journey that he was taking, heading south because Griggor was sending him; but, though Sabeen thought it fascinating, all she heard was the lament of untended desire. Underneath the covers her hand was stroking

a coal; enflamed petals threatened to eat her fingers from the bone.

She was unaware when the conversation stopped, unaware when their lips first touched or how it began, but she was *very* aware of him inside her. With hips raised, she clawed the polished wood and grunted like a Bannator.

He pulled her head back by the hair, hammering into her. If there was any trace of Frethenian reservation left, he drove it from her in wails, like a spirit cast out and banished.

When she had climaxed more times than she could remember and her flower was galloped raw and rivulets drained from her satisfaction, Dunnac kissed her cheek, folded her into the blanket, lifted her gently and, as he laid her in the warm comfort of a luxurious bed, the pitter-patter of the rain still gentle in the pre-dawn light, she fell into the arms of Morphas, grateful to all the gods and all the totems that they had brought her to Bluebirch.

*Fifthday, Day 41, of the Trefolkian Month of Ennuban,
1630 ODT*

Some three weeks later, Analaya was overjoyed to welcome Sabeen in the Temple, as were the other Segurai and Segurim and, of course, the saplings. After warm greetings had been exchanged, Analaya led Sabeen on a tour, showing her the new murals the saplings had drawn in the square.

“They are... beautiful,” smiled Sabeen as a collection of short little legs giggled away to play at the river.

Analaya was dubious. “We thank our patrons for their donations of art supplies and we thank the totems those supplies are chalk and not paint.”

From the square, they entered the Kitchen which bustled

with preparations for the next day.

“I am pleased to note you have exchanged your apron for a Kren’an, Sabeen. I understand you have found *Ikbaren*. But why so gloomy?”

Tears were on Sabeen’s cheeks. Her hands were questions, raised at the ceiling, her throat too tight for words. She tried to calm herself, but the rapid arrival of multiple arms in comfort caused her shoulders to shudder and the dam to break.

Today she had completed her first three weeks with Thane. Griggor had said Thane was a hard task master, but it was a lie. Thane was brutal.

In a state of near-constant bewilderment and shock, she had endured insults and tantrums that made her stagger sometimes as if struck. Her own home was close to Thane’s but he insisted she sleep close to her desk. He wanted to leave her studying and find her studying again in the morning.

“Dear Sabeen, sweet child.” Analaya’s comforts only made her weep more.

Sabeen felt ashamed at her weakness, but the High Segurai would not hear of it, holding her tight.

Kneading dough was the act that brought quiet back to her mind and body, confessing all her pain to the High Segurai until at last, her burden was lifted.

“Why do you persist with such a tutor, then? Would it not be better to study under Kinnor? I know Griggor does not think much of him, but...”

“I cannot give up, High Segurai. Thane would only have proof of his accusations and in truth, I must confess, he is very knowledgeable.”

Analaya made a soothing noise, shaking her head in sympathy. “You will always find solace here at the temple,

child, if you need it. Griggor was right when he said there was strength in you. In fact, I believe you would benefit from talking to him.”

Sabeen put the dough aside to rise. “Ka-samun? But I don’t even know where he lives?”

“No need. He’s here. Outside. He and I usually share a glass or two of wine on Fifthday. Come, I shall take you to him.”

Sabeen held back. “I would not wish to deprive you of...”

“Oh *ferra* that, dear one. Come.”

Griggor beamed at Sabeen, welcoming her with his crushing hug. Analaya poured wine and they joined him at the table under jasmine-scented vines.

Griggor lavished praise on her. He knew she had been instrumental in turning the Kitchen into a marvel. He savoured a recent memory of roasted boar, the hams slathered with mustard and herbs, the creamed slices of Vergunny baked with garlic and smothered in melted cheese.

After food arrived and they had dined on almost equally fine fare he changed topic, regaling them with tales of his adventures throughout Trefolk and beyond, making them laugh until her sides ached, and Sabeen’s fist was bruised from banging the table. The ale and wine certainly made the evening fly.

“It has been too long since our last meeting, Sabeen.”

By this time only the frogs and crickets remained for background conversation. Analaya was seeing children to their beds. Thick mist blanketed the river in grey beyond the lanterns Griggor had set.

“You saw a portent on the Elm, and ran to the council.”

“I did?” Griggor looked to his left, then nodded. “Perhaps

I did. You know... some time ago, not too long, Thane had two students that just went missing. Overnight. One day here, the next day – gone. He said he had sent them away, dismissed them for impudence or some such trumpet. And because they were not from Bluebirch nobody questioned it. Did he ever mention them to you?”

“No. Not that I can remember, but I have been so focussed on learning spells and kindling and researching the Arkhanum that he could have told me the Blood Moon had come and I would not have heard.”

Griggor dimmed the Bellman’s Lantern above their heads, moving it away a little so that fewer bugs fell on the table. “Hmm. I see the truth of it. He’s never been easy to please, that one. He was very critical of Maigurn when the warrior arrived, but I think Maigurn has battled sorcerers before. Let me tell you I would never dare take on Maigurn. Sweet Seisha, he is...”

“Incredible.”

“A good description.”

There was no denying Maigurn’s proficiency. He deserved his accolades, but if Maigurn was ‘incredible’, Jenna was ‘phenomenal’. The realisation of the level of dedication it would take to even touch such skill was heavy on her shoulders.

“Ah now, Sabeen. I saw that face when you came out here. I thought my stories drove it away.”

“Forgive me, Master Griggor. I am quite... exhausted.”

“I see the truth of it, Sapling. Then the notch has arrived for Hatori to stop playing with moths, and for me to take a potion that will ease my stomach.” Griggor gave the triple-greeting and with a kiss to the top of her head, melted into the

temple.

Strolling home along Ulethan's Loop, Sabeen did not need a lantern. The light from the moons was sufficient to guide her footsteps, even when her soles tapped a sip-sap rhythm along the bough road.

She told herself the next time she was with Thane she would have a better perspective. *Things will be better*, she sighed, dropping her Kren'an on the floor next to her bed. How could they possibly be worse?

Chapter 4

*Fourthday, Day 4, of the Trefolkian Month of Atmose,
1630 ODT*

The three weeks at the stronghold flew by in a blur of aching muscles and a whirlwind of new knowledge. Sitting at dinner with Ella, Kaleb, and Calven on her way home, Sabeen shared how amazing it was that in such a short time she had learned so much.

She learned the ways of the Tenfeather People quickly, discovering that letting go of Frethenia had been the best thing she could have done. Here in the tree tops just south of the border between Trefolk and Feyle Grewla there was no sungreeting, no Laudlifting at Truruch, no laws of association.

Though she dreaded returning to Thane, she resolved to absorb his teachings, though it came at a cost.

She also learned why Wyrders were not as common as she had once thought.

Kindling ingredients were recited until she dreamed of nothing else. Frequently, Thane would wake her up in the dead of night and ask her to recite some obscure combination for a specific spell, and only when he was satisfied that she had learned these well enough did he consider teaching her the runes.

“Maigurn has turned your wrist to stone!” Thane looked about to shove her into a wall, but balled his fists instead. “Are those tears? You want to learn the ways of Wyrding? Then take two days and stretch those wrists.”

She slammed the door to his home and stomped north along Ulethan’s Loop, fuming, kicking pebbles, imagining

various painful deaths for the man, but by the time she reached the Temple of the Hunter she had to admit Thane was right. And she hated him for it.

Wyrding was an exacting science; an unforgiving art. Precision was the foundation. Just one word of the Ancient Tongue intoned incorrectly, or one careless carve of the rune because of tired fingers, or just one imperfect kindling ingredient could mean disaster. And to speak the Words of Power without focus... She did not dare contemplate what could happen.

Hoping to find solace in the Temple, Sabeen descended the stairs, stood in the warm lobby, and watched dust motes dance. They were oblivious to her plight, teased her with their ignorance.

Some comfort lay in her last rotation with Maigurn. Where she bungled with Thane, she excelled with the Master. She had badgered him ruthlessly and had finally cornered him on what he had seen that night of first meditation. Yet for all her begging all he would say was, "Seisha has seen you."

Instinctively she had doubled her efforts, her focus, though she was confused why a goddess she barely spared a thought for would even notice, let alone 'see', her.

Maigurn would say nothing else.

None of the books she devoured, even from Thane's library, could throw any light on Master Maigurn's enigmatic revelation. She debated asking Devon, her fellow apprentice, but he was devoted to Thane and would only belittle her. It was damnable that Devon was so carelessly handsome, too. Clearly, the gods had brought her to Bluebirch to torture her.

Wyrding was glamorous with its enchantments, the promise of abilities beyond that of common people; she

watched in awe as Devon, considerably more advanced than her, used the Sentience through Wyrding to light candles or to boil water with just the simplest of gestures. Her own access to the magic circle where spells were bound to those simple gestures, known as trigger-runes, was a long way off, and she never imagined it would require her to work so hard.

She grumbled into the hall of reverence, stood in the centre circle, imploring the sky above Oldheart's Sight to give her strength.

Today was the first day she thought about praying. Would Seisha simply, freely, give strength to one who had ignored her for all her life? Griggor had said the Stunted Elm would help. Perhaps if she prayed at the stones...

Bare soles squeaked on gleaming timber, the doors to the garden sighed with fresh oil. Nearing the bottom of the stairs, totally absorbed in contemplation, a groan arrested her ears.

Was somebody injured, in pain?

She tiptoed forward, acutely aware of the swish of her Kren'an, wishing it to silence. With ears pricked she listened, noticing that the Elm seemed to be sheened in pale blue; even the stones were aglow.

Again she heard it, but it was not from somebody in pain. Her heart skipped, petals and cheeks warming and with each step down into the gardens butterflies danced in her tummy.

Peering around the pillar at the bottom of the stairs, she had no idea what she would see.

A group of men and women occupied the river bank. One woman lifted her head, her hair cascading, her mouth open, as she straddled a man. She had long cocoa locks and her lips were ruby, her rosy nipples hard, and her thighs bunched and flexed.

Disbelief passed between them as she noticed Sabeen, but she made no attempt to hide or cover up. Instead, she raised a hand, bidding Sabeen closer.

Unsure of herself, Sabeen glanced at the Stunted Elm, but she was unable to remember why she had come here save to honour the goddess, drawn to the river as if in a spell.

On her knees, a second woman pleased a man while yet another slowly slid in and out of her. Groans lifted like praise and as Sabeen stood in front of the first woman, faintly aware that her Kren'an was gone she was turned and her legs bent and she lowered her humid flower onto a waiting tongue.

A guttural expulsion leapt from her throat as he touched the little bud of pleasure, his tongue trilling, lapping. Her head was spinning as the woman behind her mewled in short, rapid breaths. Sabeen's flower gushed with nectar, her body bucking with this offering to Seisha, an ecstasy so mind-blowing that her lips were drooling and her legs were shaking like leaves in a storm.

Hands pulled her backwards, onto a shaft hot and hard and her hips pressed down as if to absorb him, worship controlling her body, making her ascend and drive down with an insistent pounding that she thought she would be ripped apart by pleasure, speared again and again and again.

Now her head was being tilted back and there were hands on her sacred breasts, lips on her neck, her shoulders, fingers playing her supplicating loins and she swallowed his flesh deep, until she gagged, but she did not care. She wanted more, needed more, craved more for the goddess, and somehow managed to cry out with delight as a finger massaged her ashenstar.

The pressure deepened, the incense of nectar and honey

heavy in her nose, her *shikai* silkier than the wings of a moth.

The man under her sang out, garbling the name of the goddess who bore witness to his offering, intensifying his thrusting to a frenzy as Sabeen, too, crashed over the edge; whimpering, crying, lifting laud.

Shadows were longer when Sabeen returned from the heavens. The first woman was smiling at her, helping her to her feet. Laying a finger to her lips she led her to the river where all of them bathed and she hummed along with their songs of thanks, melodic and soothing.

Taking Sabeen's hand, she led her back up the stairs and into the hall of reverence. The glow from the magical tree had faded. With a smile and a kiss on Sabeen's cheek she turned to go.

"Wait..." Sabeen dared a whisper. "Who are you, what is this? How...?"

The dark haired woman with the red lips smiled sweetly, her wet hair plastered to her shoulders in glistening strands. "Laudlifting does not need a Sixthday and it does not matter who I am or who you are. All that matters is that we have celebrated the love of the gods. Gundseneday, sweet sister."

*Firstday, Day 7, of the Trefolkian Month of Atmose,
1630 ODT*

"No!" Thane gripped her wrist. He extended her index and middle finger and curled the others back onto her palm so that their tips touched the tip of the thumb. "Now keep index and middle finger *perfectly* straight. What do we call this hand position?"

"The first position of Wyrding."

"Good. And the first position of Wyrding is...?"

Sabeen's mind was suddenly blank. "It is the..."

Thane shook his head with barely concealed disdain. "The first position is from where all positions rise. Sweet Gethras and his children. Do you even know the words of power?"

"Yes, Tsi..."

Thane clamped a hand on her mouth, a wild fire in his eyes. "Whisper... you must *whisper* the words of power if you are not to... Oh... just... say them... say the litany."

Sabeen lowered her head, whispering. "Words of Power spoken vain, bring pain. Words of Power spoken sane, bring gain. 'Tsiridia' brings rise, Tulatha brings..."

"Stop. At least you know that much..." Thane rubbed his thinly bearded chin.

"Do Weavers need to use the words of power, too?"

Thane's face, usually pallid, turned red. "Weavers?" He seemed to have difficulty saying the word, lids bouncing as if they could barely stay open. "Weavers?"

"Yes..." Sabeen's hand began to fall. "The world has both Weavers and Wyrders."

"Only Wyrding exists. Sweet Cirilius, how have you allowed such ignorance to persist in your sight? Child, sapling, idiot. The notion that a person can draw power directly from the Sentience through the Life Seed and simply bend it to your will is preposterous."

"But the Akiun Warriors..."

"Akiun warriors spend a lifetime in practice and meditation and even then they can only draw power into themselves to make themselves better killers. They can't cast spells like a Wyrder. Attend me..."

Thane stepped away, turning to a barrel of water in the corner. His hands looked like he was speaking to the air in

some kind of sign language, but even though the gestures were precise they were a blur, too quick to follow. Under his breath he intoned a spell in the ancient tongue and as he spoke, a pinprick of bright orange sparked in the space between his hands and his forehead.

The pinhole became a line, shining bright, then another, then a circle and when the incandescent rune was complete he spoke "Tsiridia."

Whenever the Sentience was used an etheric pulse, like a wave of energy, would strobe out. It was the briefest flash of power, but for all its brevity it was unmistakable and potent.

The rune flew into the barrel and vanished, ostensibly extinguished. Moments later, the water rose, gathering into a big globe. It floated in the air, drifted higher, moved towards Thane, as if it was tethered to his every gesture and whim, finally coming to drip above Sabeen's head.

"Can your Akiun Master do this?"

"No, but..."

Icy liquid slammed onto Sabeen, splashing her to the ground with a shriek. Sliding on rock, then on wood, the flood washed her into fury.

"Now, get up. Take that cursing and focus it. Get up, I said."

So hot she might turn the water to vapour, Sabeen rallied trembling limbs.

Thane tapped her forehead with a sharp nail. "I know you have all the mental cohesion of a bag of wheat, and that you might have been born above ground, but even you can get it into your thick, primitive skull that there is no such thing as a Weaver." He held her hands in front of her. "Now, carve the rune again."

She inhaled, calmed her mind, willed her limbs to stop shaking, raised her arm, and began to draw the first line.

“No!”

He stepped back and demonstrated. “Carve the rune. *Carve!* It is *not* a dance. It is *not* a gentle convivial wave you give to your stupid friends. It is not stirring a *pot* in the Kitchen. It is like a sharp blade *piercing* wood, following an *exact* line from start to finish; a complete movement before starting the next one.” He threw the book of incantations into the corner. “Do it again.”

The difference between a Sage and a Sorcerer was nothing but a matter of license: the Emperor decreed who was allowed to use the Sentience, and they were Sages. *Sorcerers* were killed, burned alive. Sabeen enjoyed the thought of Thane being burned alive, but since that day he had sent her to the temple she had resolved to learn from his tirades rather than grind herself in resentment.

Again and again he made her repeat the movement until her wrists began to hurt, despite her stretching. They were already sore from the exercises he made her do every night, and it was not easy exercising one wrist when she was using the other to balance in a hand stand. In disparity to the venom she held for Thane, she blessed Maigurn for *his* tutelage.

She was exhausted when she arrived at her small tree top home. It was little more than a sheltered expanse of boards suspended between two branches. Her bed was a raised platform of crates she had shoved together and covered with blankets. Her belongings were stored in a trunk and she made her privy in a bucket that she had to empty daily. It was a far cry from the comfort and luxury of the apartment she had once taken for granted in Frethenia but, apart from needing a

better roof, it was adequate.

With her feet dangling off the edge of the platform, Sabeen lay back, reached, and hooked a painful digit into a parcel that had arrived for her, wrists protesting. The packaging, a coarse thick paper made mostly from compressed leaves, crackedled under her fingers as she removed it to reveal a small wooden box.

Griggor's network of spies was also a well-developed network of communication and news that reached into almost every corner of the landmass, and penetrated every layer of society. In this way they received funding from people sympathetic to their cause, monitored events in Trefolk and, like now, received parcels such as the maps unfolding in Sabeen's hands.

One day she would have a moment to explore the rest of Bluebirch. For now, at least, she could study the maps. There was comfort in a map, sanity even; a desperately needed distraction from Thane's acidic tongue.

Grumbling grey murmured through the canopy and she cast her weariness skywards, muttering under her breath as a warm droplet fell onto her thigh. She loved the rain but tonight she needed more rest than the perforated roof could provide. Pivoting on her buttocks she reached for a second box where she kept the Kindling for the Starry Shield. There were many wonders in the village of the Tenfeather people, and this was one. Here, one was not obligated to pay for Kindling for the sanctioned spells.

"*Mosh'na*... the *Njftiraven* mocks me again." Dismayed with the empty box, she would now need to go to the Temple stores to fetch more, and it was more than half a notch, barefoot. But... her spirits lifted - Thane's home was a much

shorter walk, and he would surely have no objection to his pupil requisitioning some from his, far more formidable, stocks. Perhaps after soaking her into obedience his cruelty was spent. Perhaps she would find kindness? Why, oh why, had Thane said that tonight she could go home?

Stowing the maps where they would stay dry, she placed a foot on a rung of the ladder that led to the bough road, then stopped. She needed to keep the kindling dry and one of the boxes would do the job.

Retrieving one, she climbed the ladder and by the light of mottled lightning picked her way to the forest floor, which was quickly turning into a pond.

Standing under a wide leaf set to shivering by raindrops, she calculated a course and then darted from shelter to shelter, arriving quickly under the wide eaves of the Sage's home.

She knocked, prepared her impassioned plea. Thane usually expected her to find her own Kindling, regardless of the notch, but maybe tonight he would make an exception. Surely, somewhere inside that wiry body was some semblance of compassion?

She knocked again, louder this time. Through the window she could see there was light within so somebody should be in, by Seisha. The rain seemed to ease somewhat but then the clouds belched and the downpour doubled and she could see thousands of pink blossoms floating down the road.

Caught up in her speech to Thane and the storm, she was quite unprepared when the door swung open and a broad shaft of light fell on her.

There was silence as she blinked at a man who was clearly not Thane.

“It is customary for the knocker to *greet* the knockee.”

Thick, curly blonde locks, yellow curiosity, and a hooked nose; Devon seemed as astonished as she was, but his tongue was ever quick.

“I... uhm... Antsun'alun, Devon...” Sabeen held her box in front of her as she stepped out of the cold.

“Enjoying the stormy night air? Gundseneday.” Closing the door behind her, Thane's other apprentice leaned casually against it. Before today she had never seen him in anything less than his robe, and the bare torso above his Kren'an was solid, decorated with a fresh ink-stain tattoo.

Avoiding his smirk she searched the room. “Is the Master not home? I was hoping to use some Kindling for the starry shield...”

“Ran out of supplies again?” Shaking his head, Devon led to the end of the room and into a dark corridor where he opened the door to the subterranean chamber.

“I was going to go get them tomorrow, Devon, by Gethras, Ka-samun. How was I to know that the storm would come early?”

The cave under Thane's residence was a remnant from days when the river had forged an underground tributary. The walls undulated with hundreds of ovoid hollows of different sizes, now used to house all manner of artefacts; including some interesting obscene-looking machines with moving metal parts and thick rods that Thane called 'pistons'.

It was a fairly large hall for an alluvial cave. With the exception of a great level area to her right, the natural floor was irregular. To make an even surface odd planks and boards, nailed or glued into place, made a walkway around the smooth area, then widened into a platform, some ten paces square.

From this, a short rickety staircase arrived on another shelf

where Thane and his two students had their desks and cupboards.

“Where is Thane, anyway? And what are you doing here this late?”

“He was called to council with Vykto and Maigurn and the other Sages. He said something about the state of Trefolk, and mentioned something about the prophecy. I wasn’t finished with my practice so he said I could stay.”

Sabeen dwelled on the flat rocky area. It must have taken a long time to chisel it to perfection and then make it smooth. Fire-etched into the surface were three Wyrding circles, one for Thane and each of his two pupils. Called “Loquations”, the circle was where the Wyrder bound his spells to his will, coupling their release to a set of simple gestures and shorter incantations, and the circles were essential to every Wyrder because only within the Loquation could the Wyrder effect such tools as trigger runes, storing within such boundaries the energy of as many spells as he or she could remember, until they were called upon.

Sabeen had not yet earned the right to stand within hers, and she envied Devon, whose circle glowed with a dull light.

While Devon snuffed the torches around his Loquation Sabeen stood at the edge of the wooden planks, staring into the darkness of the cave. Many times, sitting at her desk, her thoughts had wandered into the old watercourse, musing on where it might lead.

“What Kindling did you need?”

“Starry shield.” Climbing the creaky staircase she joined Devon next to his desk, noticing that hers was a bleak comparison, almost devoid of books and implements; and together their desks were humble compared to the elaborate

desk of the Sorcerer which spilled over with books and papers piled high.

“Hmm...” Devon pulled his mouth doubtfully as he inspected the contents of a box. “It’s all finished I’m afraid.”

“*Vama ferra!*” She glared at a coil of rope that lay on the floor, seemingly left there at random.

“You have a careless tongue for an aspirant mage.”

But she had spied a box on the Sage’s table. “See, the *Master* has some and...”

Her arm was grabbed hard, spinning her round just short of Thane’s desk.

“No!” Devon moved to stand in front of her, forearms crossed. “Absolutely not. Thane would be furious.”

Sabeen’s shoulders slouched. “Fine... I shall go sleep in the Temple tonight.”

“Maybe now you will learn to gather the kindling in *advance?*”

She certainly would. Though it was wondrous, the Temple was a spooky place at night, and while she could find blankets and even make a fire, it chilled her in places she could not warm. Dejectedly she stared at the rope, but then brightened. “What were you practicing?”

“Shall I show you?” Severity was supplanted by enthusiasm. His chin creased and his haughty cheeks bunched.

“Yes!” She giggled encouragingly, anything to avoid the storm, yet fascinated with the new conjuring she might see.

Standing opposite her, he squared his shoulders, cleared his throat and raised his hand into the first position. She expected him to perform an incantation, but his hand dropped and made a swiping motion as he said, “*Ro ma kanoon, Tsiridia.*”

The coiled rope leapt like a striking snake. In an instant

one end bound her ankles and the other lashed her wrists.

Outrage robbed her of all but incredulity. Insulted, not just by his arrogance but that she had been so easily tricked, she struggled against lustful fibres. She knew Devon liked her to know he was superior, dominant. In some ways he was truly Thane's prodigy, forcing her to submit to his power.

Indignation became acid on her tongue. She was ready to spit in his face, but the pulse from the Sentience rebounded through the cavern, dissipated into the walls, turning vinegar to honey and desire burst into blaze.

Unlike a gradual, savoured sensation that began as a faint awareness, slowly spreading through flesh and bone, it erupted from deep within, from her Life Seed, engulfing her.

A groan of pleasure escaped. Body betrayed mind, making her sway, painfully aware that her nipples had pulled into demands for caress.

"Oh..." Devon's mouth curled tastily as he realised what had happened. "You... like that, don't you...?"

A husky rasp was all she could manage; she was vulnerable, exposed, and inescapably under the spell of her own hunger.

Gripping her shoulders he turned her around, bending her forward over Thane's desk. Sheaves of papers, books, and letters scattered to the floor. He was fumbling, taking too long.

He rammed into her, her rasping expulsion echoed off the wall. She had seen his stamen before, had masturbated at her desk while she fantasised about it; that long cock gliding into her - and now he pressed it deep into her flower, made tight by her clenched thighs. He rode into her like a piston, the perfume of her flower thick in the musty air.

"Harder!" Her teeth were gritted and her voice was husky. "*Ferra me harder!*"

He was panting, pounding her tirelessly, her hips jammed into the desk so hard they would bruise, her naked breasts squashed against the sweet, sweaty rope on her arms.

He stopped, mid-stroke, pulled out and she wanted to cuff him, but he turned her, lifted her onto the desk and, as more books and papers fled to the ground, hooked her legs over one shoulder and pushed back into her with such force the desk tilted.

Her climax crashed into her like a Bannator smashing through the forest and she pulled his thrusting into her as her thighs contracted. “Faster! Harder,” She heard her voice demanding, “*Ferra... fer... ah.*”

Making noises she thought only beasts could make, he doubled his thrusting; sweat on his brow, dripping from his chin and with a yell his body quivered, hot seed shooting into her, filling her so that she was shoved into wild abandon once more, writhing on the table like a water snake.

Still panting, Devon eased his stamen from her dripping flower, reached for a knife and cut her bonds, then bent over to rest his hands on his knees as he caught his breath.

“Sweet... Seisha!”

Sabeen could hardly stand. Her bare soles were so unusually sensitive to the scrape of the wooden floor she courted climax through her feet. It would take a week of sleeping in the rain to wipe the smile from her face.

Sitting down next to the desk, it required of her a force of will to make her trembling arms pick up papers. Gods knew how they would make Thane’s desk look undisturbed.

“Good Gethras! Do you remember how it looked?” Devon was picking up books. “Thane will be so... so angry.”

“I think so...” Sabeen was abruptly irritated. She wanted to

kick Devon, but he had an argument. “The books were stacked on the edge.”

“Good.” Devon set the pile in his arms where he thought they should be. “What next?”

“Honestly... you tell me. Powders on the floor.”

“Vama ferra.”

Sabeen bent down to retrieve a green folder as Devon thumped down the stairs to fetch water. A series of letters had slipped out. She lifted the stiff cover, patterned with gargoyles, and slid the sheaves back into order. One of the drawers of the desk had opened a little. Pulling it further, she stopped herself placing the file inside, placing it on the desk instead. There was no way it would have jumped out on its own.

About to close the drawer her hand stopped, arrested by ice. A letter peeked out from under some papers, just enough for her to see the symbol.

It was a symbol she had not seen for many months, not since she had left Frethenia. It was a symbol that was opposed to the old ways of Trefolk, and it was a symbol that did not belong.

“Are you alright?”

She could hear liquid splashing up the stairs.

“Yes,” she answered, trying to sound confident, pretending to busy herself, closing the drawer and hoping she could pass off her expletive as appreciation for his prowess.

They tidied up the desk but it was only a semblance of its prior state. They rehearsed their excuse, how a spell had gone wrong, but eventually they decided to tell the sorcerer they had taken the *initiative* to tidy his desk for him as a kindness. They knew he would be angry, and probably punish them, but because Devon shared the blame it would not be too severe.

She did her best to hide her anguish with the guise of fatigue. She convinced Devon he was such a good lover she was exhausted, whereas in truth she could have stayed awake all night.

It required all her strength to resist searching the drawers for more, burning with fury that made her hands tremble, reducing her mind to embers of confusion.

As she lay down in front of the fire place upstairs, banishing Devon to the other side of the room, she bit her fist to hide her fear, and turned her back to him to hide her tears.

Chapter 5

*Thir'day, Day 39, of the Trefolkian Month of Atmose,
1630 ODT*

It was immeasurable how that night changed her.

Some kind of irrepressible force awakened; an urgency, an unslakeable thirst for knowledge. She no longer treated her lessons with Thane with the same half-hearted attitude with which Foranrian had treated her lessons at the House of Antiquities. With diligence and aptitude she applied herself, working harder at this than she had worked at anything before.

She left nothing undone for the day, read every book and scroll she could find, and gathered piles of kindling that would make the Temple envious.

She was close to her goal; that time when she could consider herself prepared to expose the traitor for who he was. Before Cirilius chased the mist from the ground and the fireflies from her window, and while the forest sang to a purple sky, she charted a path to the Rosey Road.

Although the rains were less heavy now, the road had been churned by the passage of Bannators, probably on their way to Wounded Meadow, and was little more than mush. Thrilling in the mud between her toes, Sabeen seized the opportunity to practice her Teegra-steps and, checking to see that nobody else was about, removed her satchel to practice and celebrate the latest ability she had learned.

It was nothing for a true Warrior of Akiun, certainly Tulascarri had learned the skill at a very young age but, for Sabeen, it was something she was bursting to share with

somebody. Perhaps, gods be good, she could show Ten'ia'sha sometime.

She crossed the river to Crookwillow Fey. It was an island where most people visited to pay homage to their ancestors or seek guidance from the gods within the standing stones of the Stormhenge. It was a sacred place but, while Sabeen was certainly contemplative, she braved cold showers from the willows in search of rare kindling as opposed to prayer.

From the bases of the intimidating menhirs she cut long-stalked mushrooms and from within the deep lines of the runes she scraped moss, storing it in small wooden boxes from her backpack.

Slipping her arms through the loops she checked the list in her mind. She would need to search the opposite bank for the rest, but there was one kindling she had doubts about locating.

From the top of one of the stones came an unusually intrusive cooing and Sabeen recognised white plumage.

“Antsun'alun, Sardagard. Another message for Master Griggor? You wouldn't know where I might find brittle briar, would you?”

Swirls of tiny white feathers were the only answer she would receive. He seemed to say he *might* know, but such trivial matters were beneath his station.

Landing steadily on the opposite bank, Sabeen's toes curled around the edges of a rock. If her study under Thane was dedication, her attentiveness to Maigurn was devotion. Ice cold water splattered her ankles before she sloshed a confident and nimble path in search of algae.

Maigurn told her he was from a school far away, and she surmised it had once been in the west, but he was vague and told her to stop asking questions. Rather, she should

concentrate on her applications. Though the moons may wax and wane before she could start learning the deeper teachings of Akiun, she could at least master the basics of martial technique.

He changed his mind, though, just a few days later when, quite by accident, something happened and Sabeen proved she was ready for more than just strikes and blocks. It was on this day that Maigurn had explained what he had meant when he said Seisha had seen her.

The days were full to bursting as her thirst for knowledge asserted itself. Somehow, she maintained a balance by taking time to be charmed by the everyday things that were alien or forbidden in her previous home, Frethenia.

When finally she had stepped into her Loquation it was sweet accomplishment sullied by bitter resentment. Was she truly worthy when such advancement was by a traitor?

That was when Sabeen had accelerated her plan.

It bothered her that, for lack of evidence, she was allowing a turncoat to live in this virtuous community; it bothered her that Vyktr had a ribbon-snake on his council, but it bothered her more that she had only suspicion.

Hanging her pack on a branch, she waded in to knee height and pulled up several black, slimy strands of kepple. Though it was not one of the items on her list, the spongy weed was used in too many incantations not to harvest. Tadpoles swarmed her legs, nibbling voraciously.

There was nothing wrong with Thane possessing correspondence with Truruch, she supposed, but a detailed list of several villages housing Tenfeather people was too suspicious to ignore. She could tell Maigurn, of course. His profound dislike for Thane would make him an eager ear, but

even he would need more proof than a list that could be denied or passed off as coincidence.

The only way to secure such proof was to search Thane's desk, the cupboards in the cave, the entire dwelling if she had to; and the only way to do this was to steal in when nobody was around.

The cavern under Thane's home had once been made by the river, and she knew it must have another, older, entrance or exit. For too long she had sought that entrance, using her maps to calculate where it may be, and for just as many weeks it had eluded her. Each time she thought she knew where it was she was led back to the large dam downstream from the Temple, called Innamere.

One of the rocks to her left began to move. Her heart jolted and she nearly dropped the kepple. As its perfect stone-grey camouflage melted away, replaced by riverine hues, she bowed at the octopus, grateful that such dangerous creatures of the forest did not need to see a certificate to know she was a Guardian.

By the time Sabeen reached Innamere she had all the kindling she wanted except the brittle briar, and she was no closer to finding the cave entrance.

Digging holes in the beach with her toes, the sun warming the fallen trunk that was her seat, it was maddening to think that she had the ability to commit hundreds of spells to memory but could not figure out where the cave exited.

"It is said that if you stare at the pool too long, your mind will be lost to its depths and you will become a mermaid, bound forever to the river."

Bouncing off the log, Sabeen embraced Ten'ia'sha.

"Five blessings, sister Sabeen. It has been some time since

we last spoke.”

“Your hair has grown quite long.” Sabeen filled her lungs with the scent of jasmine. “Such lustre. But why have I not seen you at the stronghold?”

“I... well, I’ve been away.”

Sabeen had been bursting to share her breakthrough, but Ten’ia’sha seemed distant.

“I hope nobody has tried to chase you away from...”

“Oh no. No... Forgive me if I am a little distracted. I made a short trip to a port in Feyle Grewla. I saw the ocean. It’s so huge! But I can see you have something to share, Sabeen. You made progress with Maigurn? Thane? Shall we spar a little?”

“No.” Sabeen stepped back, palms up. “Just watch...”

With a deep breath she focussed, felt the tingle in her feet, felt the lines of power leap, but instead of making her flower sing they shot up her spine. Slowly, she turned around.

“Your... *shikai*... You can raise your *shikai*!”

“Careful.” Sabeen caught embracing arms. “They are very, very, sharp.”

“Seisha’s laugh, Sabeen. You are Akiun!”

“Ah... Seisha is kind, but not that kind. Master Maigurn told me that Seisha had seen me. He meant my Life Seed had awakened. Now he can teach me the deeper secrets of Akiun!”

Sabeen sat down once more, *shikai* falling slowly, power ebbing into the sand. It would take many months, if not cycles, before she could leap through the trees like a true Akiun, yet Ten’ia’sha’s compliment inspired her to do just that. How magical it was that her words could set Sabeen’s heart to singing. A flock of luluwarblers swooped over the lake, fanned out, and darted up the cliffs in a palette of blues and greens to the trees above. Had Seisha seen her joy? Did the goddess

know it's true source was a Rainbow?

"Do you come to Innamere often?" Slung over one speckled shoulder was a canvas bag that Ten'ia'sha placed on the log.

"Thane's home is just over the ridge. Innamere is such a tranquil place, a good location to think."

"I would imagine an apprentice mage has much to think on."

Sabeen nudged her pack. "I have collected kindling from Crookwillow Fey, all the way down the east bank of the Gemborne, and even here at Innamere. I have secured all I need except brittle briar."

"Brittle briar? Are you making a pipe?"

"It's not quite the same and I need some young shoots, not the root."

"Perhaps I can help? Could you describe it?"

From her pack Sabeen produced a book. She had made detailed illustrations.

"But I know this plant!" Slender fingers with short nails traced the sketch. "In my home village it was called Softhorn. I think you will find plenty of it in the Hollow."

"The Hollow?"

"Hangman's Hollow, it used to be called. It's where criminals were hanged, before beheadings proved to be more immediate. You won't see it on any map. People want to forget that part of their past. I am on my way there now, if you believe. Come with me?"

Pushing through leafy greens behind the beach, Ten'ia'sha led them to a narrow animal trail. After some time, they climbed up onto rocks where old stone steps were littered with twigs and leaves.

“What draws you to the Hollow?”

Ten’ia’sha stopped, adjusted her satchel, and began to climb down a wooden ladder that had not been tended for a very long time. She grinned up at Sabeen. “You will see.”

When Sabeen stepped off the last rung she chuckled knowingly. “Sweet Seisha, I should have known.”

The clearing was no wider than twenty paces, barefoot, and it was jammed with hundreds of silk bushes like a soft green carpet, knee deep.

“You know the silk-fruit?” Ten’ia’sha was trying to keep to the grass, but many of the gourds popped as she brushed them, coating her legs in silky white juices. “It’s good for the skin, indigestion, a sore throat. You know singers use it before a recital?”

“That’s not all it’s used for...”

Ten’ia’sha half turned and winked. “No... that’s not all it’s used for.”

She bent forward as if to pick something from the ground and Sabeen’s blood surged. She had been so focussed these last weeks she was too exhausted to even pleasure herself, but the sight of glistening petals, and a pink ashensstar framed by firm buttocks was too much. She pushed Ten’ia’sha over, and they rolled sideways, while silk-fruit burst, coating them in aloe-scented butter.

Fingers slid into her and Sabeen rocked back, more fruit popping under her back. From her soaked satchel, Ten’ia’sha pulled a firm, flexible object with a perfectly desirous shape. Made from dark resins it was strong, but pliable, and would be used... repeatedly.

It needed some effort to climb out of the clearing much, much later that day, but they returned to the lake, blissful, to

wash the drying liquid from their bodies and hair.

“I am ever thankful to you, Ten’ia’sha.”

They were kneeling in the shallows, facing each other.

“Now you know where to find brittle briar, and a little something else.” She was rinsing the flexible toy that had been so well received.

Sabeen took the fake phallus from her, inspecting the attention to detail with interest.

“It’s made from the resin of the blubber tree,” explained Ten’ia’sha. “It’s called a ‘phaldo’.”

Ten’ia’sha took it back, a naughty tooth biting her lip. With a backward peep she joined her hands and began to press it into her flower, spreading her knees, pouted lips parted.

The washing turned to kissing, fondling, and when their bodies had buckled once more, covered in mud, they lay in the shallows, popping clouds, finally sated.

This time they were serious about washing off, and Sabeen dived deep under the clear water to rinse her hair once more. As her fingers worked, bubbles hopping from her nose, her body turned in the water, drifting with the gentle current, she slowly buoyed to the surface, and that was when she finally saw it.

The second entrance to the cave had been there all this time, hidden under the level of the water. She kicked to the surface with a triumphant yelp.

“It was good, *wasn’t* it?” called Ten’ia’sha from the beach, her satchel slung over her shoulder. In it was a jar, jammed with silk-fruit. “I’ve left you a present - our little friend - in your pack. I have another, might make a small fortune bringing them from the coast. Gundseneday, sweet lover.”

*Fifthday, Day 41, of the Trefolkian Month of Atmose,
1630 ODT*

After detailed preparation and planning, she had been successful in more than one way. There were no more lessons the level seven Wyrder Thane could teach her that the level five Wyrder Griggor could not and now, with her Martmetal dagger strapped to her naked thigh, Sabeen emerged silently from the pool that led into the old watercourse of the river.

The rock was slippery with algae and slime but, thanks to Maigurn, she was stronger than she had ever been. Grabbing the base of a stalagmite, she pulled her body up and out of the water, dropping the oilskin bag next to her where it would wait for her return.

Light danced on the walls in shifting shapes but beyond this small glow, the cave was as dark as Thane's heart.

She had to rely on touch only until she had carved the rune of the Bellman's Lantern, keeping the diminutive ball of light low, or hidden in one of the many hollowed pockets of rock.

Just as in the practice chamber, the floor was pitted with depressions of various sizes, most of which were filled with water and teeming with tadpoles.

She had expected to find bats, too, but there were none and, though she was somewhat in awe, nothing prepared her for what she was soon to discover.

Listening cautiously for the tiniest disturbance, she dimmed the Bellman even more until it was no more than a firefly and, though the passage was wide enough for her to tread in a half crouch, at times she needed to squeeze through a narrower section. With one foot preceding the rest of her, one tough sole settled onto angular gravel that crunched and

squeaked as she transferred her weight. Easing her right arm last she called the Bellman closer, squatting on the ground, intrigued that rough pebbles should be in a water passage that otherwise contained rounded hollows.

Glinting at her were thousands of tiny rocks, and among them were hundreds of alluvial diamonds.

Her exclamation was too loud. Immediately she dimmed the light to a mere glow, willing the crunch underfoot to be silent.

Straining to hear if anybody had heard her, for she must be close now, she exhaled long and slow, releasing clenched jaw and neck.

It was no wonder, though, that alluvial diamonds were collected here. The entire branch of the Kuornedan Mountains that fashioned the southern border of Trefolk had once been volcanically active, but she did wonder how long the stash, which must rival the coffers of Frethenia in value, had lain there, hidden under the nose of one who should have discovered it cycles ago. Why had he never gone deep enough?

In about fifty paces, though, she learned the reason.

She nearly stumbled over them.

Arranged next to each other two lifeless bodies, magically preserved, lay in a state of suspended decay. The female was missing her nipples and the male his stamen. It was very dark magic indeed, to use body parts as kindling, and sacrilegious to the sacred practice of Wyrding.

She began to grow afraid. Those who served the evil god Sfarr were among the most powerful of Wyrders. Was Thane only pretending to be a *seventh* level Wyrder?

If he discovered her here she would have no defence. What if the letter wasn't there anymore? Sweet Seisha, it had

been so long since she had first seen it, he had probably burned it by now. In her planning, everything had been perfect, and quick, where was her nerve now?

She had to keep moving, she told herself. Keep going forward, focus on the task, and finish the job.

Extinguishing the Bellman, her legs found courage and crept forward.

During her lessons, standing at the edge of the platform or sitting upstairs at her desk she could see into the watercourse, but only for a short distance until it veered right. She surmised the light she observed now was coming from the Loquation room and that when she rounded the next bend she would be able to see her desk.

That meant she could not spy into it without leaving the shadows. *Mosh'na*.

Keep moving, Sabeen!

However, the platform of the practice cavern was higher off the floor at this end by three or four paces, barefoot. She would need to jump high to gain a grip and hoped there was something she could use other than toothy stalagmites to help her up.

Senses primed, she scuttled forward like a monkey, distressed that what she had thought was a carefully conceived plan had been proven to be lacking.

Sliding into a hollow between two seams of rock, Sabeen thanked whatever god or totem was responsible for the uneven floor of the cave because it gave her a place to hide. Only the Loquation area was a uniform shelf. The rest of it was like a small mountain range with deep valleys.

The boards of the platform were directly above. If anybody was there she would have heard them by now, but just to be

sure she cupped hands behind her ears, poking her head out of the hiding place. Her long, black hair fell forward and she wished she had brought something to tie it with. The thought of using material from the dead bodies was repulsive, so she would have to make do with loose hair. Or she could cut it.

Too long, Sabeen. Stop this delay...

Removing her hand from the dagger, she steadied herself on the ground, shuffled forward, and jumped. Just barely she gripped the lip of the platform, ground her jaw to stifle the grunt, and pulled herself up, only to fall and scramble back, a scream wedged in her throat.

*Fifthday, Day 41, of the Trefolkian Month of Atmose,
1630 ODT*

His rigid body, arms locked at the side, had been within reach, but there would be no reaching him.

The open, staring, dead eyes of Devon were glazed. Once lively and intense, they were like blood-spattered glass, and there was a thin sheen to his body, like he had been coated with wax.

Shaking with fright and balled once more in the dark hollow her skin prickled with frost. She swallowed back tears, overwhelmed by doubt, bereft of the vengeance that had been her foundation till now.

She had been so certain of her plan; every step had been set out with perfect timing.

Oh Devon...

Suspended in time, in that brief moment, she had wanted to touch his face but the waxiness made him seem undead, halfway between this world and the next, and it unnerved her.

What if Thane arrived? What was she to do? How would

she...

Shrinking deeper under the wooden floor where it was slightly warmer, she wrestled with the despair.

Curse that man. Hateful, hateful man.

Sweet Seisha, what do I do...?

For too many agonising moments she hunkered in the dark until her shivering subsided. There was no way she could finish this. It would be better for her to retreat to the pool and go and fetch Maigurn. He would know what to do. The bodies were evidence enough.

As she shuffled forward just beyond the light, it seemed such a long way to the dark safety of the watercourse. She knew she could make it, but her feet were fused to the ground.

Bringing all of her meditation training to mind, she willed her petrified limbs to move, but it was like trying to shift a Bannator.

In that instant she heard a latch grind, hinges creak. Wood knocked and voices echoed.

She was trapped!

She dared not run but when Thane went down the corridor and came back from dumping the body... Seisha's tears! He would see her.

Frozen with panic, all she could do was hold her breath with dread as footsteps thumped above. The rasping boards seemed to grope at her hair like thick grotesque fingers, dust creeping down her back.

"Another one, Thane?" It was not a voice she recognised immediately.

"Yes, yes, another one. He was in the way." Impatience grated in Thane's words. "He was snooping where he should not have been and uncovered things he should not have

uncovered. Like the others. But my work is done. This little village will burn very, very soon. They are already in the valley. We have to leave tonight. Make the horses ready. I have what I need. I'll dump the body and unbind the spells. We will be long gone by the time that other one discovers them."

"You mean your star pupil?"

The body of Devon thumped, then slid to the floor out of Sabeen's sight. This time her legs obeyed. She retreated into the shadows once more, trying to make herself smaller.

"Star indeed. She does not know her true potential. Quite a mind, in fact. Fortunately, I have been harsh with her, kept her in submission, eroded her confidence even when she was doing well. She won't be a threat to us."

Sabeen's blood blasted the granite of her flesh. *Shikai* stirred with balling fists, and in the fire of outrage her purpose was reborn like a Guardbird from its own ashes.

"If you're not out soon I'm leaving without you. Vyktor already suspects me and I cannot stay if you leave." Retreating footsteps echoed in the chamber as the other man left. Thane jumped down from the platform. Landing on the uneven surface, he cursed as his ankle twisted.

She recognised the other voice! It was Dess, the guard who had mistreated her when she had been captured; the heat of anger threatened to ignite the wood above.

But she could not let it control her.

Maigurn had taught her that to lose herself to anger was to lose the fight, and she had to control it, channel it. Even if her body became a beast, her mind must fly above like a bird.

Thane grunted, bemoaning the weight of the body as he hefted it over one shoulder. Then, with a straining exhalation, he straightened up. His legs were shaking beneath the dead

weight as he lumbered into the knobbly watercourse.

The body bumped against an outcrop and the small pouch in which Devon kept his kindling plopped on the ground and, abruptly, Sabeen knew what to do. Drawing her dagger, Sabeen followed, crouched low.

Timing was essential. She waited for him to dump the body, changing the dagger to her left hand so she could cast the Bellman's Lantern, reminding herself to shield her face because it was going to be a bright burst, enough to blind him.

A Wyrder's most potent weapon was their voice. If she tried to kill him and missed, his skill would surpass hers and she would die; but if she cut into his throat, injured his voice box and sliced his wrists as Maigurn had instructed, he would be unable to cast any hexes.

This time, there was no "first position of Wyrding." She had pre-stored her spells in trigger gestures and now, with a flick of her finger and a whispered "T'siridia", she ducked.

The Bellman's Lantern exploded incandescently, an instant silent sun in the darkness right in front of Thane.

"Vama ...!"

He threw up his hands to shield himself and she sprang, clinging to him like a monkey possessed; yelling, screaming, thrashing. He flailed at her and the precise movements she had envisaged so clearly in her mind were shattered into mindless slashing as he tried to fight her off.

Her back slammed into uneven rock, the wind blown from her lungs. Something splintered but she dug her nails in, scratching at his face, always going for the throat, aware that her dagger had clattered to the floor.

Trying to flip her forward, he only succeeded in throwing her sideways and together they crashed into the pockmarked

stone, but he landed a blow to her midriff, as if to crush her guts.

Her body spasmed, folding her double, directly into an oncoming fist.

Knuckle splintered bone. Blood spurted. Her lip burst against her teeth, tears blurring her vision; but she clawed and scratched and bit and kicked with her legs until her toes cracked against the wall, making her yell in pain.

Thane scrambled to his feet, possessed of madness. He had the upper hand, fingers curling into the first position; but the front of his gown was soaked in blood and he coughed as he tried to carve.

Sabeen lunged for the dagger which lay just out of reach and buried it in his foot. He shrieked, a gurgling wounded animal, cuffed her hard on the side of the head and the dagger flew away again. Limping, he fled towards the cave.

Sabeen tried to stand, fell down, grazing her knee and palm, her head sore, woozy, blood trickling from a cut to her cheek where it had met the rough of a stalagmite, but she forced her legs under her, grabbed the stalagmite, and through will and adrenaline her shaking limbs obeyed.

Reaching the platform she jumped up, fell back in a tangle of limbs, jumped and scrambled again until she collapsed onto the platform, a sharp pain in her thigh telling her she was wounded, but there was no time to bleed, and she had been through worse in Frethenia anyway.

With returning strength she stood up again, and followed the bloody footprints.

Running out of the open front door into a boiling storm, she checked left then right, discovered the bloody imprints in the mud, and charged forward. This time she would not lose

her metal.

A figure loomed in front of her and she doubled her pace, cursing caution to the howling gale and yelling her attack.

Powerful hands intercepted her arms and she was spun around, the dagger removed from her as if it had never been there, and she dropped to her knees as Maigurn bent her wrists.

“How did you...? Don’t let him get away!” She yelled, icy raindrops pelting her face too hard for her to keep her head up.

“Who?” Maigurn was lifting her to her feet, his voice calm, but clear.

“Thane. He murdered Devon. He’s a traitor! Murderous plumage!”

“But I saw nobody when I came down the road.”

Two black horses burst from the bushes, charging through them, throwing them to the ground, galloping fast through the storm.

“Stop them!” Sabeen was rising but Maigurn was already on his feet and, as he snapped out a trigger-rune she heard him shout.

“Tulatha!”

The second word of power.

It was the diametric opposite of the first, and where *Tsiridia* activated, *Tulatha* stopped.

It stood for the final, the irrevocable: the finite end.

The forest pulsed with an etheric bulge - like a bag overfilled with water, like a breath held too long - and in that flash of suspense, sharper than a razors edge, the rain stopped in mid-air.

Halted as if they had run into rock face, inexorably

commanded by the Sentience, the horses froze; from gallop to stand in an instant, and their riders were flung forward, ejected like vomit after too much drink.

Moments later Maigurn reached them and, as his hands snapped out with pinprick precision and percussive power, Sabeen was glad he was not an evil mage.

She would have to ask him about those blurring movements and she knew she needed to tell him something, but there was only one man.

Thane was a gargoyle on his knees. Where was Dess?

Rough arms, a dagger at her neck, that familiar, repulsive stench.

“Step back, Maigurn. I have no quarrel with you. Just want to leave. You’ll never see me again.”

“Then let Sabeen go and you are free.”

“No, no, no. You’re fast. Too fast. She’s my shield out of here.”

Sabeen was gagging, trying to pull his arm away from her throat, the point of his knife too close to her eye.

“Sabeen, listen to the sound of my voice.” Maigurn used the same tone that he used when guiding them in meditations. It was calming, had a steady nature, completely alien to the situation, but it worked.

Shattered calm began to piece itself together. Her hands relaxed. She could breathe a little easier.

“No spells Maigurn. I’ll slice her throat like paper. Back away, and bring us that horse.”

Slowly, the powerful legs began to retreat, but Maigurn’s eyes never left her.

“Sabeen,” he repeated. “Most people think that the *shikai* rise first, and only then grow sharp.”

“What?” Dess brought the knife closer.

She could feel the pressure of his chest on her back, forcing her forward. At first she thought Maigurn was repeating a teaching to keep her calm while he bought more time. She was still scared, even though she was winning the battle over her panic.

Lightning might have flashed, she did not know, but the revelation was equally as bright and just as deadly.

Power pulsed from her Life Seed. The spines rose, they sliced, even through bone - she heard them crack.

The dagger splashed and Sabeen kicked away. Dess sank to his knees, clutching the gouges, unable to speak, little more than a spectre of red bubbles and raindrops.

She would have to ask Maigurn how he had been able to catch her and remain unharmed, but for now the darkness that welcomed her was a warm blanket and she had all the evidence on Thane she could need.

Chapter 6

*Sixthday, Day 42, of the Trefolkian Month of Atmose,
1630 ODT*

She learned the tribunal would be held a week later to allow the Healers time to tend the wounds of Sabeen and the prisoners, and for Vyktor, Maigurn, and Griggor to complete their investigation.

“A week?”

“Yes.” The Healer studied her pupils. “You will bring unfair bias to the proceedings. You are to stay in the Temple infirmary and rest. Tonight, the proceedings will begin with hearings and such but it will take some time...”

It seemed a Bannator was pressing her to the bed. Whirling pictures and echoed voices garbled her lips and turned her stomach green.

“Nausea is normal.” The Healer indicated a bucket. “If you need to vomit, then...”

“No... Rest is the last thing I want to be doing,” muttered Sabeen, but she truly had no idea what else she *should* be doing. She knew it was something important.

Mosh’na, why could she not remember?

The Healer changed the bandage on her thigh. It seemed that somehow she had managed to stab herself in the fight, not something she would wish to be reminded of by a blemish but already the wound had sealed.

“Will it scar?”

“You are young and fit. You seem to heal quicker than most and... it seems your skin has been well nourished by the

silk bush. I don't think it will scar..."

Sabeen's heart fluttered, the memory still vivid enough to call moisture to her flower, grateful for the voluminous sheet of the infirmary bed. She did not know what to say, but the Healer did not need an answer.

"The poultice will do its work. Fortunately, Martmetal daggers do not rust, and there is no danger of infection." Casually, the Healer opened her legs, tucking the sheet against one of them, his hand high on her inner thigh, oblivious to the effect it had on her.

Sabeen had groaned. Her flower had not been wounded, after all, and though her muscles ached for rest, the yearning between her legs was stronger. Perhaps it was the remnants of the adrenaline, the blood-rushing burn of the fight, the healing process, but now all she wanted was his manhood, to have him measure the *depth* of her temperature.

The fact that he wore no lowsheath made her lick her lips, the welt of his stamen visible, sadly flaccid, under his gown.

"Are you in pain?"

"I *am* a little hot..." She knew such breathy enticement was inappropriate, but her body was taking control now, and she was too tired to resist.

"Good." He seemed satisfied with the bandage, tying it off, and pulled the sheet over her again. "The heat will make sure the poultice works quicker. Try to lie still as much as you can tonight. It was only yesterday that you sustained this wound, and it is too fresh to be moved, understand?" Standing up, he selected a small bottle from a table. "I am going to give you a sedative, and something for the pain."

"No!" She tried to sit up, but the unexpected wrench in her stomach made sure she lay back into the nagging feeling

that something was amiss. “I mean... no thank you, Healer. Forgive me, but I am not in much pain, and I am sure I will sleep well.”

“Oh... Of course. I see now. Yes, it’s understandable that you don’t know who you can trust right now.” He placed the phial next to her bed. “If you change your mind, then swallow just a small sip. I shall tend you in the morning.”

The door closed and Sabeen was left staring at the lantern. She knew that by the evening her wounds would have completely healed and there would be no need for the Healer to tend her again but, for now, as her Life Seed drew power and coordinated healing through her, there was a very good reason to remain in bed.

Sabeen’s toes clenched, her back arched as her nimble fingers united with flowersong.

A knock at the door.

Sabeen recovered herself. “En... enter?”

“I came as soon as I heard.”

“Ten’ia’sha?”

A cool hand touched her brow. “Seisha’s tears. Do you have a fever?”

“After a fashion.”

“Thane was respected but there were rumours about the disappearance of two of his students. I *hear* they retrieved letters from Truruch in his desk; letters that mark him as a spy.”

Sabeen removed Ten’ia’sha’s hand from her brow and placed it where it was needed most.

“Close the door, Ten’ia’sha. I will tell you everything.”

Ten’ia’sha slipped off, closed the door softly, and lay down between Sabeen’s legs.

“Since our last meeting at Innamere, Sabeen, I have thought about nobody but you. It has been a week, at least, since I saw my last customer...”

Sabeen pushed on Ten’ia’sha’s head. She did not care for details, only for the mouth that she so desperately needed, but as tongue touched petal Sabeen sat up. This time there was no pain, and the urgency was of a different kind.

“Ten’ia’sha. I have to get to Hightree. Now.”

“What?” Ten’ia’sha licked her lips. “Why, dear gods?”

“Please... just trust me.”

Ten’ia’sha distracted the guards at the door. With a satisfied smile and sticky hair she joined Sabeen a little later, some distance along the road to Hightree.

“Put your arm around me.” Ten’ia’sha offered Sabeen a stick to lean on.

“No need.” Sabeen gentled Ten’ia’sha’s hands. “You have honoured me this day, and I shall not forget it. By all that is urgent, Ten’ia’sha, go to the Temple. Tell the High Segurai to get all the children to the stronghold.”

“Sabeen, whatever do you mean?”

“Pray Seisha I am wrong, Ten’ia’sha, pray. But do as I ask this night?”

Trembling lips, a parting kiss, and Sabeen doubled her pace to Hightree.

*Sixthday, Day 42, of the Trefolkian Month of Atmose,
1630 ODT*

“The council brings charge against the Sorcerer Thane.”

Griggor’s solemnity was a boom in the Hightree. Though it was jammed with people, Sabeen had ascended one of the outer stairways and could see Vyktor on a high but simple

chair. To his right sat Maigurn, two swords on his back; and to his left, closest to Sabeen, was Griggor, his ceremonial robes clearly too hot for him. The prisoner stood facing the tribunal, hands and feet bound, his mouth gagged.

“These grave proceedings and accusations will commence with opening statements from the accused. When she is healed, we will hear from your student Sabeen who...”

“I am whole, Master Griggor.” Shouldering her way through murmurs and concern, Sabeen was stopped by a council guard. “There is no time for a tribunal. Bluebirch is undone.”

“What is this you say, child? Guard, let her pass.”

“I heard Thane say the words ‘They are already in the valley.’ I don’t know who ‘they’ are but we do not have time for these proceedings. The village is in danger.”

Maigurn removed Thane’s gag. “Speak!”

With a bandage around his throat, Thane’s voice was raspy. “Speak? You have hated my words all these cycles and now you would have me speak?”

Maigurn summoned a guard from the door. Sabeen heard him whisper to double the men at the Bannator station, to set runners and reinforcements, then she watched in horror as Maigurn calmly sliced off Thane’s little toe.

The people were in tumult, dismay. Somebody was crying. One person fainted.

Vyktor raised his hands, calling for calm.

“Silence!” Griggor’s hands moved and the bleeding stopped.

The fingers of Maigurn’s hand came to rest on Thane’s abdomen, just below the navel. It seemed as if he might cup the slight swell of Thane’s belly, as a Healer might when trying

to diagnose a digestive problem, but there was no compassion in the touch.

“I told you to speak.”

Sweat was on Thane’s brow, tears still ran into his beard, but there was venom on his lips. “The days of the Tenfeather people are finished. You cannot stop Truruch and her power. Two thousand troops will turn this place to ashes but, unlike your precious Guardbird, you will not rise from them.”

Pounding a staff on the ground, Griggor ordered the crowd to be quiet again, but it was too late. Panic cracked their voices, terror stung their feet, and the stairs were mobbed with desperation. The swell was too great and the railings of the stairways burst with the screams of people falling to their deaths.

The guards tried to pull people back, to create order, but they were pushed aside and Vyktor’s yells had no effect.

It was an absurd idea, but the only one Sabeen could think of. Some days prior she had been practicing storing spells in trigger runes and had used one of the three Sanctioned Spells because it meant she did not need to use the rarer ingredients. The Sleeping Thanks was designed to put small animals to sleep. It would have only a small effect on people.

With her thumb she cocked her middle finger, her hand just over her navel. As she spoke the phrase the flicker of a rune flared; then her arm swept out and forward in a semi-circle like a whip. At the end of the movement her middle finger popped out as she whispered, “*Tulatha.*”

Five times, once for each staircase, she repeated it.

The effect was immediate. Her *shikai* snapped up as the pulse from the Sentience rippled through the people, slowing them and sedating them to a daze.

Maigurn barked orders, the guards stepped in, and the frenzy was gone.

“This is why the Stunted Elm bleeds.” Griggor gestured to his left, apparently sharing his revelation with the air. “Yes, yes, of course you knew it would happen, but we both thought... Well, portents are not always bad, but... Do you think...”

“Impossible...” Thane’s rasp could not disguise his disbelief, glaring with a purple face at Sabeen.

“Impossible that I could stop a stampede? Or that I thought of using the Sleeping Thanks?”

“He means your *shikai*, child.” Gently, Griggor touched her shoulder, admiring her *shikai* as the spines turned soft once more. “He has never believed Weaving was possible.”

“It’s *not* possible.”

“You can insist all you like, Thane. But the Stunted Elm does not bleed without a very good reason.”

“You are a fool, Griggor. You see signs in bleeding trees and regard advice from an imaginary friend.”

Griggor picked up the staff he had dropped earlier and approached a table that was being brought in. “If he’s imaginary, Thane, why, then, does your breath come in vapour?”

“Sorcery! A clever trick.”

“It is your *Kabarma*, Thane. When you led the attack on Sabeen’s caravan you struck her with a spell...”

“I was trying to overturn the wagon.”

“Of course you were. But you inadvertently awakened her Life Seed, and now you have become the product of that which you thought was impossible.”

“We have bigger concerns now.” Vykto retrieved the staff

from Griggor and used it to hold open a map. He motioned for Sabeen to come closer.

“Vyktor, what about this one?” Master Maigurn stood behind Thane, a dark and deadly shadow.

“Yes, what about me, Vyktor?” Thane jerked his head towards the village. “You have no escape from Truruch. You can brand my face, you can banish me, chase me from the village, but I will prevail...”

“*Prevail?*” Vyktor did not seem to understand the word, as if its meaning was lost to his mind.

Maigurn’s twin swords blinked, a silver flash, a metal blur, and returned to their scabbards even before the first drop of blood hit the floor, though there was not much. Thane, his heart and Life Seed destroyed by surgical accuracy, sank into oblivion. He fell forward with the loudest thud Sabeen would never care about.

The floor was being mopped when somebody shook her.

“Forgive me, Master Griggor.”

“You must have many questions.” He was leading her to the table.

“How did you know to send Maigurn to aid me at Thane’s?”

“Not me... Hatori.”

“Later, Griggor.” Vyktor leaned on the map. “If soldiers are already in the valley...”

“We must pull our people back to the stronghold,” said Maigurn. “We can withstand a siege.”

Sabeen stared at the map, then stared north at the mountains in the distance as the men debated. She knew nothing of strategy, barely even knew the districts of the village, but she knew a siege would end in slaughter.

“No matter how long we can survive, we can’t be locked in the stronghold while Truruch is free to replenish its troops.” Vyktoꝛ traced the blue line of Nuvien’s Folly. “With Ferson’s dams, they will have plenty of water and fish. They will raid the farms. All they need to do is wait and starve us out.”

“Is there no other way of escape?” asked Sabeen.

“The only way in and out of Bluebirch is through the Bannator station, to the salt road.”

“Master Griggor, you once said Bluebirch was only one village hosting the Tenfeather people. Could the others not come to our aid?”

“Perhaps, my child, but how long would it take for them to reach us? If Thane has betrayed our location he might have betrayed theirs, too. We have no way of knowing.”

A horn, distant but piercing, spooked birds from branches.

“*Vama ferra!*” Maigurn gripped the railing on the south as if he was about to pull it off. Black smoke billowed above the trees. “That’s the Bannator station. It has begun. Vyktoꝛ, we have about two hundred fighting men. I will lead them into Stag’s Run and hold off the army as long as possible. If they take the Birthright, we are lost. Get the people to the stronghold. At least Ferson’s dams have made Nuvien’s Folly clear enough for them to run.” Maigurn had reached the stairs. “Five blessings to us all.”

“Wait!”

Sabeen’s heart was pounding. Pressure in her head mounted and her hands were trembling so that she had to lean on the table. It brought her closer to the map where she had been imagining the dams being plundered while the stronghold was assailed and the people within its cavernous interior slowly starved.

“What is it, Sabeen?” Vyktor was strapping his swords to his back.

“Master Maigurn, where are the Bannators?”

“It’s a good idea, Sabeen, but we can’t use the Bannators to storm Stag’s Run. They’re too far away.”

“Up-river?”

“Yes, at Wounded Meadow.”

Sabeen called one of the guards. He did not move.

Maigurn shot a glare at him. “The lady Sabeen has the Tenth Leaf and is a Guardian of the Forest. She is now the third sorcerer of Bluebirch and fourth in command. If she summons, you will comply.”

The man’s face was white as he rushed to her. “Forgive me, my lady. I did not know.”

“Take as many strong men as you can to the stronghold. Take fifteen barrels of Drellion sap and pour it into the top dam. Go now!”

Maigurn stalked the table as running feet pounded down the stairs. “Drellion sap floats on water, Sabeen.”

“I know, you showed me on that first day at Wounded Meadow.”

“Would you poison the fish and water?”

Hope leaped into Sabeen’s lips. “Let me explain.”

*Sixthday, Day 42, of the Trefolkian Month of Atmose,
1630 ODT*

It was dark when Sabeen reached Thane’s house, running down to the Wyrding circle below. Though she could not see the orange glow of the burning Bannator station, the smell of the fire had filled the forest and spurred her feet.

Leaving her two guards outside, she ignored the smears of

blood on the stone and began storing as many trigger runes as she could.

“Lady Sabeen.” The guard called from the top of the stairs, a good while later. He was too scared to venture further.

With orange palms, purple dust between her toes and the sting of Drellion on her forearms, she paused mid-incantation. Had the time passed so quickly?

“The horns have sounded, my lady. We have to leave.”

“One more! Just let me finish.”

Though Cirilius did not care, for it was still night and Morphas was confused for she had not slept, Sabeen knew time was precious. She knew she should be running rather than casting, but just one more...

The men had found or caught horses while she had been busy and had loaded them with satchels of her supplies. Wearing only her sword on her back, her bare feet gripped the stirrups and grimy heels kicked them to gallop. Most of the road was choked with smoke, the noise of fighting was close and the early dawn air was ablaze with an unnatural sun.

The first guard fell to an arrow as they passed Stag’s Run. The second hung on for a while before he too fell off, but the horses stayed with her. Arriving at Bargepoint, they soared off the pier onto dry river bed, kicking up stones and weeds as she charged the beasts onward.

The stairs to the Pineway had been destroyed as she had ordered and the boards above her were deserted, except for the flag men posted every thousand paces, barefoot. It was their duty to flee their post when they saw attacking soldiers approaching.

Already, one man was running.

With a whispered prayer that Ella and her men had reached

safety, Sabeen clung to the saddle and begged her steed for more speed.

The horses skidded, jumped, but Sabeen had already dismounted. Three men quieted the beasts as Vyktor joined her on Wounded Meadow.

“Did you see Maigurn, perhaps?”

Handing her a Kren’an and two daggers, he accompanied her to the swollen Folly. Thanks to the dam, almost half the meadow was lost to water. The other half was lost to Bannators quietly grazing, unperturbed.

“No.” Sabeen slid the daggers into position.

“He’s a fierce warrior. He knows what he’s doing. Has the scars to prove it.”

Vyktor’s Kren’an was more red than white and hung in tatters.

“You love him?”

“As a brother.”

“Do you know, when I was in Frethenia - so long ago now - the woman I was would be ravaged by shame if she ventured unclad into the larder for a meal in the small notches of the morning.”

“And now you have ridden naked through fire and battle and... first flag man arrives... followed by the second. It will not be long now, Sabeen.” Vyktor waved an arm, summoning archers.

Sabeen squatted, bunching her Kren’an around her waist, and shivered as her stream gurgled into the grass. It seemed so normal, so natural. In times of crisis, conventions are suspended.

The wind drying her ankles rippled the dam. It reminded her of gentle waves on the shore of the Mystic Lake of Souls,

far, far away in Frethenia. By now the sungreeting would have been sung, and people would be bustling about their business. Bakers would be throwing open the shutters of their stores to free the yeasty allure of freshly baked bread, and taverns would be frying onions and ham and eggs to serve early morning customers...

Kind Seisha, sweet innocence of dawn's early light, guide my path this day...

She had not slept since the night before - Seisha alone knew when last she had eaten - but somehow she did not need either. Her hands ached from the reins, the balls of her feet had only just stopped tingling, and her flower was ridden raw, like after a night with Ten'ia'sha.

"Do you have a woman, Vykto?"

"Once. Maybe one day again. I have only two hundred cycles. Plenty of time for a family, which might be nice. Little feathers running around. You? I hear you have a woman. Is one enough?"

Sabeen guffawed. "One is enough, my friend. She makes my heart sing. She is the first light I see in the day. But... if you must know... she has tongue, fingers, toes, such gorgeous feet..."

"Ah, Sabeen." Vykto also laughed. "Such images will turn my stamen to a sword."

"Then ready both." Sabeen cast a glance at the Bannators, the archers, the dam slick with Drellion sap. "Here comes the last runner."

Firstday, Day 43, of the Trefolkian Month of Atmose,
1630 ODT

The sound of a rushing army clamoured, echoed in tones of doom through the valley. The soldiers were heard before they were seen - red armour, glistening spears, bloodied swords, and a shout of battle that carried to Cirilius. Their numbers filled the river bed and their voices filled the sky.

“Loose!”

Archers on Wounded Meadow fired flaming arrows. The soldiers in the river bed raised their defences, but not one shield was struck. Instead, water became fire as arcing arrows dotted the dam.

With a hand cupped at her Life Seed, Sabeen breathed the trigger. Her hand flicked out.

“Tsiridia!”

The fireball flew, slamming into barrels anchored to the dam wall. The explosion pulled rocks from the canyon and sent logs and shrapnel flying, spinning, slicing.

The river collapsed. A great wave of fire and water belched into the canyon. Like a scythe in a farmer’s expert hands it surged without resistance. Breaking each successive dam, the deluge grew, scouring the gorge. Barrels of Drellion that had not exploded before now boomed along the canyon, shaking its walls, and anyone in this path was drowned, burned, or shredded on the rocks.

A surge of lapping amber; a wash of seething steam. Drowning screams evanesced in a discordant dirge of deathly destruction, it flattened in fatal evanescence along baked stone and battered assumption. In its pungent wake was nothing save the return of solace.

Shouts of triumph, cheers, and the banging of spears on stone lifted from the battlements of the stronghold.

Earlier, Cirilius had been deaf to tears, now he heard victory.

Sabeen's legs gave way to mud. The flood of relief shook her until she fell forward into the grass.

"I think it is over, Sabeen. We should gather the men and clear the dead."

She wanted to lift her Kren'an, wanted Vyktor to bury himself in her from behind and have him pull her hair as she cried out to Seisha in celebration of life, but he was lifting her elbow, wiping her cheek with a rust-coloured finger.

The Folly was a stream again, skipping and babbling as if it had just been reborn. The grass at the bank was black and smoking, and stones were dripping from the cliff. A bluebird landed on the mud, pecking at bubbles, strutting cockily until another bird landed, which it attacked. The wind, cool and fresh, blew smoke and the smell of burning meat over the sodden lands while Bannators discovered new grassy delights.

"Is it... really... over?"

Vyktor shrugged. "We have to leave Bluebirch, of course. Find a new home somewhere. Maybe further south."

He rolled his eyes as if this was too much of a task. His words stuck in his throat as if this was a bad joke and something for another day and he wanted to talk of nothing more.

Too late to see the blur of fletching and too taken with relief, Sabeen felt the last strength of powerful arms push her away. Vyktor would never have the family he dreamed of.

Moments fragmented as blood spat from his mouth, and he shoved Sabeen to the ground, trying to pull the arrow from

his throat.

Somehow, only gods and totems knew, a contingent of soldiers had found a way to the Pineway. They had escaped the deluge and were streaming towards her.

An arrow slapped into the ground next to her.

Reflexively, Sabeen rolled, bumped against a Bannator and ducked under it. The beasts were frightened, lowing, moaning, growling, and the stampede began.

Sabeen would later thank the gods that she was at the edge of the herd. Their massive bulks shook the earth as they charged, flattening the advancing soldiers. Three-horned heads lowered, and bodies were tossed into the air in ribbons of blood.

Yet it was not enough. Somehow, a clever mob survived. They had seen her huddling on the grass, though she appeared as little more than a muddy knoll, herself. They knew she could not reach the stronghold in time and they knew she was theirs and they charged.

She became aware of rising *shikai* and, as they did, so did she. She watched as both arms snapped out and fireballs flew at the sound of "Tsiridia."

When the fireballs were finished, she unleashed a spell that sliced through anything taller than grass, and those remaining attackers fell away from their legs, crying, bleeding, and dying.

With her skill she fought the attackers, but in her mind she fought the onslaught of evil on her people; she fought against the treachery and injustice of Truruch: their falsehood, their lies and schemes and perversions. In her mind's eye she saw the blasphemy of a silver studded ear and the ignorance that pierced it there; she saw the drip of death on innocent toes and the falsehood that tied the noose; she beheld the prejudice

against skin that was perfect in its imperfection; and she would turn lies to truth, darkness to light.

She was too enraged, too blinded by fury to know the last had fallen. Something inside her made her raise her arms up, made her summon a dark sky to her will and as the Word of Power ravaged her throat, lightning turned bodies, trees, and meadow to ash. It blackened the cliffs, it turned mud to glass, and vapourised the river.

*Secon'day, Day 50, of the Trefolkian Month of Atmose,
1630 ODT*

Motion woke her, and the world took form: muted voices, the sound of cartwheels on gravel, the delicate waft of sandalwood incense.

“She awakens,” said the voice of a child.

“Run, tell the caravan to stop.”

The second was familiar. It made her heart smile.

Running feet scattered gravel outside and she heard the little one yell. “Stop the wagon!”

“Some authority, he carries.” Opening her eyes Sabeen sat up, meeting a smile from Ten'ia'sha who simply stared at her. Tears without sobs spilled onto mottled cheeks.

“What is it?”

The embrace was fierce, throwing Sabeen back onto the bed.

“I had begun to think the Blood Moon would come before you woke.” Ten'ia'sha palmed water from Sabeen's shoulders, sniffing.

“How long did I sleep?”

“You... don't remember what happened, do you?”

Sabeen touched her forehead. Flashes were returning,

visions of blood and battle, a dark sky. “Sweet Seisha...”

The sheets were crisp, although crinkled, and smelled of frangipani blossoms. There was no bunk above. There were no rafters, either. Instead, white material billowing on rattan struts formed the sides and roof of the wagon.

“We have our own wagon?”

“Our very own, yes.”

“How long was I gone?”

“Almost a week.”

“*Mosh’na*... The whole time?”

“Most of it. You spoke quite a lot. Who is... Jenna?”

“That’s all? I spoke in my... fevered sleep?”

“There was one morning when you woke. You seemed your usual self, but stronger, like a man. You pushed me down... quite forceful. Well, let’s just say I never thought a phaldo should go... *there*.” Ten’ia’sha’s cheeks told that she was glad it had. “I lay here with a smile long after you went back to Morphas.”

Sabeen searched the ceiling as she searched her mind. “Surely Seisha heard my prayers, but I am a beggar at a feast. I have no memory of... that morning. Perhaps it was part of the healing process. I spoke to Griggor once at the temple. Oh Sweet Seisha! The Temple? The Saplings?”

“Safe, my sweet. Your forethought ensured we were safely in the stronghold before the battle reached the river.”

“A great deal has happened since we last met at the temple.”

A small squawk from the back of the wagon was followed by flaring cobalt.

“*Enura?*” Sabeen fell back, more memories returning.

“You slept long and deep, my beloved. What can you

remember? Anything at all?”

“I remember Vyktor, dying, pushing me...”

“He saved your life, you said. That was almost a week ago.”

“I said that? Yes... I think I did.”

Ten'ia'sha was lying on her tummy. The shaded crescents of high arched soles wafted above bent knees and her voice, soft and musical, was muffled by the bedding. “Well, I am glad to have you back after your sojourn with Morphas, or the totems. He said this might happen.”

“Totems? Who said this might happen? What might happen?”

“Totem Pel. He said you would enter a long walk with Morphas. Do you remember him?”

“Who?”

“Totem Pel.”

This name, alone, brought to mind a journey of wagons and terrible events, even before she arrived in Bluebirch.

“Of course. He... An old man with dingle-dangles around his neck and...”

“That's him.” Ten'ia'sha kneeled behind Sabeen, pulled her hair back, and began to brush it, but then she thought better of it. Gripping one of Sabeen's hands she guided it to where it was most needed. “Good gods, I have missed you. He said he had been studying with Master Kinnor...”

“Kinnor's a fool.”

“What?”

“Well, Grig... Griggor said he was.”

“Maybe not so. Totem Pel has been studying with Master Kinnor and he said that after a major event like yours certain... changes were... to be expected. Do you recall

anything else?”

She remembered charging Bannators and then the sky had turned black. “I faint a lot, don’t I?”

“You saved Bluebirch. Some people stayed behind but most have already headed south into Feyle Grewla. We’ll be beyond the reach of Truruch but close enough to rally to the Queen when she calls. Thanks to those diamonds, The Tenfeathers can afford a better stronghold now.”

“The diamonds!” Sabeen remembered the fight with Thane, how she killed Dess. She could still smell his rancid breath.

“You did so much after the attack. Do you remember the battle at Glass Lake?”

“Glass Lake?”

“It used to be called Wounded Meadow, but after the fight... They say you brought lightning down from the sky.”

Even now, Sabeen’s arms bristled. “Yes... I did.”

“We thought about many new names for the meadow. ‘Vyktor’s Neck’ on account of the arrow he took... ‘Glass Lake’ stuck but we even thought of ‘Maigurn’s Surprise’ because you should have seen the look on his...”

“Master Maigurn lives?” Sabeen withdrew wandering fingers from moist petals.

“Put those fingers back and I’ll tell you. Of course he lives.” Ten’ia’sha groaned and thrust Sabeen’s hand back, her voice a quiver. “He’s the leader of the Tenfeather’s now, along with Griggor, second Sorcerer of the Tenfeather... people.”

“Second Sorcerer?” Sabeen’s hand stopped and she swivelled.

“Yes.” Ten’ia’sha tossed the hairbrush aside. “I shall tell Seisha if you stop again.”

“But... who is first Sorcerer?”

With a cry of frustration Ten’ia’sha turned her forward and began to plait her locks. “So many questions...”

“But I need to know. I’ve been missing for a week.”

“We have time, Sabeen. There. Finished.”

The kiss was soft, moist, filled with delights yet to be explored. Images and flashes from the week gone by were still flooding into consciousness. It was like she stood before Seisha with the empty bowl of recollection, and the goddess was ladling the last few days into it.

“After much deliberation, the council has changed the ranking of sorcerers to indicate a level of seniority, or proficiency, rather than who arrived first or second or third. So now... *You* are first Sorcerer. Sorceress, I suppose. But that’s fine. I don’t mind. You are even *more* beautiful now.”

More memories, more spoons from the goddess.

“What do you mean ‘now?’” Sabeen almost did not care for the answer.

Ten’ia’sha rolled them over and pulled Sabeen’s hair from behind her. The ponytail was pure white.

“Vama...”

“*Ferra?*” Ten’ia’sha grinned. “A wonderful idea, but...” Curling a finger into Sabeen’s hair, while others curled elsewhere, Ten’ia’sha’s words were a whisper of history and prophecy. “Even *I* could have told you... Lightning will do that, to a Weaver.”

- The End -

Characters

Analaya – High Segurai at the Temple of the Hunter,
Trefolkian

Barthon – Tenfeather “bandit”, *Trefolkian*

Calven – Farmer, Polytwine of Ella and Kaleb,
Trefolkian

Dess – Tenfeather “bandit”, *Trefolkian*

Devon – Student of Thane, *Trefolkian*

Dunnac – Travelling merchant (spy for Griggor),
Trefolkian

Ella – Herbalist, Polytwine of Calven and Kaleb,
Trefolkian

Erik – Blacksmith, carpenter, *Trefolkian*

Ferson – Tailor, animal trainer, “grower of certain
herbs”, *Trefolkian*

Griggor – First Sorcerer of Bluebirch, (Level 5
Wyrder), Master of Shards (spy-master), *Trefolkian*

Happala - Missionary, *Trefolkian*

Hatori – Invisible entity “tethered” to Griggor,
Alexileil

Kaleb – Tree-shaper (Level 9 Wyrder), *Trefolkian*

Maigurn – Akiun Warrior, *Trefolkian*

Nerrikon – Tenfeather “bandit” (Archer), *Trefolkian*

Sabeen – Apprentice Wyrder, *Trefolkian*

Sonia – Tavern Keeper at the Bannator Station,
Trefolkian

Ten’ia’sha – Seamstress, prostitute, *Trefolkian*

Thane – Third Sorcerer of Bluebirch (Level 7

The Tenfeather People

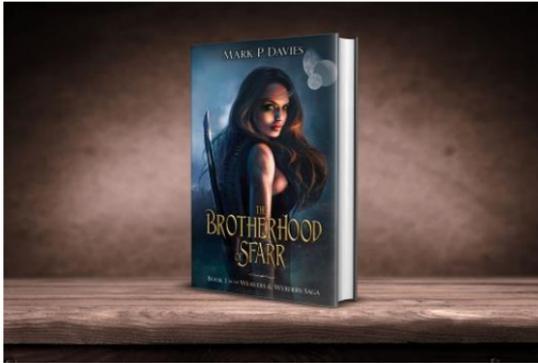
Wyrder), *Trefolkian*

Totem Pel – Old man, *Trefolkian*

Vyktor – Leader of the Tenfeather people, *Trefolkian*

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