

The Venson Mada

By **C.C Hazel**

The ways of the "mystics" of Arshea were set. Like stuck with like. Mada learned the hard way why it seemed better that way. She was meant to grow up the venson way and when given the choice Mada intentionally opted to go against the grain. With dire consequences for herself and those she loved. When tested would she be found wanting?

The question of Venson Adam had plagued those in The Forgotten Mountain for a very long time. Was this new venson, Mada, the answer?

Chapter One

Tamrip keep

It is a terrible thing to say, a heartbreaking thing to say but the death of Mada's parents was no great loss to her. Not that Mada was evil or indifferent to them, it was just the way it was. Their relationship had been the product of fate, chance, circumstance and a little more. Not maliciously instigated by any one of them. As Mada stood by their graves with her siblings and the keep people she shed a tear. Not for what was, but for what could have been. Her only other emotion was guilt. After all she had, in a way, helped put them there.

Washing her hands in the soil from each of the graves she could only sigh. More interested in the ritual she was performing than the people who lay in the ground just a couple of feet beneath her. It was an old ritual. Mavrik had said that it was done as a way of washing your hands of the dead. Necromancy and all mysticism were frowned upon, to put it lightly. No one need waste any time worrying, the children of a-Alorya and Carrab had no desire to attempt a resurrection. Still she could not help being swept up by nostalgia. As far as one could feel nostalgic about people who were practically strangers.

Carrab, their father, had been a hard man who had had a hard life who had never known or tried to be any way but hard. His duty to his family was to provide for them as best as he could. He seemed to have nothing to offer beyond that. a-Alorya, their mother, lived only for her husband. a-Alorya had come from the south. Leaving behind family, friends, security and comfort for Carrab. Believing that she was the one to save him from his "sadness", his "loneliness", his "broken heart" save him from himself, as can be the dreams of a romantic young fool. Running away with Carrab and their three sons. She had had a comfortable life with her parents and brothers, Sawen, Neneep, Ariss and Lev, she being the last. Her father, died when she was very young. Too young for her to remember him. Though not widely known her mother, Alorya, was venson. Naturally Alorya was over the moon when a-Alorya was born.

Alorya waited and watched for ten year spans which amounted to nothing. She had even gone as far as attempting to bring forth the venson. This was not strictly taboo but had adverse effects on the mind of a mere being. These ranged from minor barely noticeable quirks to madness or a total breakdown of all mental and motor skills. Depending on the nature of the mystic and the arshean involved.

But every so often an impatient venson mother attempts to bring forth the venson. The vensons did not embrace this practise as it was potentially dangerous to the girls who though not venson themselves had the potential to give venson life. The venson way was against the taking of ashean life, unnecessarily.

With her dreams dashed by the arrival, duration and end of a-Alorya's tenth year span Alorya began to pay less and less attention to a-Alorya. Until she virtually ignored her. Her hopes had been unfounded and her treatment of her daughter once the dream was not realised was unjust and cruel. Alorya felt that all that was left was to wait for the first five "children-children". Before the new hope was born a-Alorya ran away from home. Alorya searched, but never found a-Alorya or the children.

a-Alorya bore the first three year spans with Carrab thinking that if she could just give him a son, an heir, it would change him. Even though there was nothing to inherit. Their first child was a boy, who she named after his father, a-Carrab. He did not do the trick. Nor did the second or the third. Twenty-nine year spans and several children later naught had changed. Not to say it was not romantic at the beginning, at least in a-Alorya's eyes.

Before they passed a-Alorya and Carrab brought seven beings into Arshea. Daughters, Mada, a-a-Alorya and Avené. Son's a-Carrab, Mavrik, Lon and Manny, who was a-a-Alorya's twin. Ordered a-Carrab, Mavrik, Lon, Mada, the twins and Avené. Had Alorya known of them her hopes would have centered on a-a-Alorya and Mada or at least until time had proven them to be venson or not.

When a dream is thwarted and there seems no hope of it ever being realised one runs the risk of receding into their own dreamland. Such was a-Alorya's lot. Shackled to reality by the faint hope of the improbable fulfillment of unfulfilled love. The hopes of a-Alorya like that of her mother had not been realised. Both had something very good but it did not live up to their ideal. Their hearts lost in past dreams were not willing to settle on the lot the gods had deemed theirs.

Carrab lived out the last of his year spans in much the same way he had lived the first. He saw nothing lacking in their lives. He loved a-Alorya in his own way. Though hard he was a quiet man with no notions of grandeur.

Carrab and a-Alorya like everyone else went on with being. Then suddenly they were both struck down by a mysterious illness. An illness which baffled everyone. Many treatments had been tried. A hundred elixirs had been drunk. All to no avail.

Strait from the cemetery the children of a-Alorya and Carrab were to be found sitting in their little cooking room trying to decide what to do with the rest of their lives now that their parents were gone. Having been struck down by the illness so suddenly they had had no time to make arrangements for their children's welfare.

Mada looked around the table at her brothers and sisters and wondered how they would feel if they knew she had had a hand in the death of their parents. This was just another mistake, another awful secret she would just have to live with.

"I think we should go south and try to find our mother-mother. There is no point in our staying here and working on Comris' land." Lon said, seemingly from the blue.

"No one is going anywhere Lon." a-Carrab said quietly thinking it was another one of Lon's ideas which would come to nothing.

"With mother and father gone and them leaving none of us in anyone's keep means we are free as air fowls." Lon replied his older brother.

Mada had not been considering leaving Tamrip keep. But now that Lon said it, it would do her good to leave the scene of her crimes.

"How far do you think mother-mothers place is from here," Mada said brightly, 'And it is lovely weather for trave..."

a-Carrab stood up and banged his fist on the table. Rattling the tin cups that were on it and upsetting a cup that was on the edge.

"No one is going anywhere, why, what for? I am the oldest and I say everyone stays put."

This sudden outburst was a little startling. Not that he had ever been violent towards any of them. But now it seemed he thought he was now in charge of them. Knowing a-Carrab he probably had their lives planned to the last detail. Lon was going to have none of that.

"Tsk tsk tsk a-Carrab a-Carrab," Lon said, shaking his head, 'I know, I hope you know as everyone else knows the law which states that with our parents gone and having chosen no one to keep us we are all free. Free to choose where and with whom we stay providing the person is willing. Not to mention that Mavrik, Mada and I are not little children. And I,' 'puffing his chest out a little, 'have decided to go south to find our mother-mother.

a-Carrab, as soon as he realized that their parents were not going to survive had made plans for the next growing season. With his siblings providing the labour of course. He could also arrange a very profitable union for Mada. If only she would stop being so stubborn. A union to either one of Lamron's sons would bring their way mines or a union with Yuhlik would bring land. He was not a cruel or callous man. Just practical. He did what he thought was best for everybody. If he should benefit in the process, what harm? He had taken it upon himself to guide the family, with the assistance of his wife Piper.

As for Piper, marrying a-Carrab, for someone who was in her situation, was considered moving up in the world. Though she had not gone very high she was now better off. And she would not have minded it one bit if they were all to pick up and leave. After all she had her own family who could use the land. Piper, though looking to better her situation in life had had the good fortune of being genuinely in love with the ladder she had chosen to climb.

Lon too had been making plans. He had some fends saved up. That would help them buy fresh fruit along the way and pay for their accommodation, if necessary. It was unlikely a-Carrab would surrender the one ageing inga-trat the family had. He had not from the blue decided to leave as soon as he saw their parents were gone. He had always had dreams of arcadia. The passing of Carrab and a-Alorya was just the catalyst to his seeking it out. With a lot of effort and determination he believed they would make it to their mother-mothers in the

south. It was just as well a-Carrab was upset about the whole thing Lon had hoped he would stay behind. Anyway someone had to keep the home fires burning in case they had to return.

"For shame, for shame the earth is still damp where we buried our parents and all of you are carrying on like this."

Mavrik barely ever spoke but when he did they took notice. He was a kind, soft spoken and very handsome young man. He looked very much like Carrab. All the girls were after him. But he never seemed to notice them much to Lon's dismay. He spent his time helping, as the rest of the family did, with the farming. Or he could be found reading when he managed to borrow books from the other keep people. He had expressed an interest in joining one of the kentish groups of religious, some might say superstitious, men and women.

The twins, a-a-Alorya and Manny, who could have been siamese twins for the amount of time they spent together, were the first to leave the cooking room. They went outside to play as the house only had one other room. The sleeping room, which was a long rectangular affair, was divided by two curtains. a-Carrab and Piper slept in one section, the other was occupied by the other children, head to toe. The last one had been occupied by their parents.

Mada felt no love for their parents but the least she could do was not bicker on the day of their funeral. She could see that though not having been close to either parent Avené, the youngest, was upset. Death was a strange and frightening thing and Avené was hit the hardest. Though it was more confusion and fear than bereavement.

"Can I get you some bread and cheese Avené?"

"No. Thank you Mada. But I think I will go and lie down for a while. I need a little rest."

She stood up and went to their section of the sleeping room. Mada decided to take a walk. She needed to think. She decided to take the old footpath at the back of the house that led to the forest. Mentally tracing the path so she was there before sheeven left the house. Taking a basket to pick berries and mushrooms.

The forest smelt wonderful. The fantias were in full bloom and the air fowls were singing from every tree and bush it seemed.

How much easier life would be if she were an air foul. The passing of their parents seemed so unreal to her still. She wondered how they were. And loathing mysticism as they did would they have accepted it if offered them a chance of return.

Life could be such a hassle. It was too bad you could not will it to stop or to go into a state of suspended animation and reanimate yourself when things were better. She could not run away and she dared not look to mysticism to make it easier on not just herself but her family.

Mada would never forget seeing Pevious's wife being burnt alive. Alo-er, Pevious's first wife, was able to start a fire at will. So when Fente's house burnt down mysteriously, the town's people concluded that she, being the only pyrokinetic person in the keep, had to be responsible. Never mind that Fenté was a notorious drunk who had broken a leg and once almost drowned after she had been well-oiled. Most who knew Alo-er personally did not believe she had done it. But no one said a word in her defense. Being in sympathy with a mystic was almost as bad as being one. Even her parents had refused "supernatural" help as a possible cure. Though in actuality there was nothing supernatural about it. What was supernatural to one being was simply an ordinary state of existence for another. Regardless of this fact the mere mention of it sent her father into fits. Death, he had said, was preferable.

When Mada discovered she had the ability to do several things that would be considered mysticism by the Arsheans, as can be expected, though very young, she kept it to herself. Fortunately her self preservation instinct had kicked in very early. The only other person in the know was her friend Sar, a mystic herself.

While looking for mushrooms Mada found a fairy ring. Caught up in a childhood fancy she went around it clockwise and put in her left foot and moved a bit of earth with her big toe. She then went around it counter-clockwise and put in her right foot and again digging up a bit of earth with her big toe. Maybe its magic could tell her what to do.

"Do you not know that it is just a myth?"

The sudden interruption did not startle Mada because she knew that voice all too well. It was Sar. Her voice was calm, crystal clear and melodious. She seemed to sing rather than simply

speak. After listening to her for a while you would get an urge to break out in song yourself.

"Truly Sar you ought not to sneak up on someone like that."

Sar jumped down from the branch she was standing on and it was some fifteen or so feet span high. For someone her size it must have been quite a leap. Sar was barely over fourteen inches tall. She landed soundlessly a few feet from Mada. Mada smiled affectionately at the little hazel and green nymph.

"How are you Sar?"

"Is it not I who should be asking how you are. How are you Mada?"

"Much better than would be expected."

"Have you given your parents to the earth?"

She smiled at this. Sar was the only being who she knew who spoke in such a way.

"Yes we have."

Sar was looking at Mada basket and frowning. She walked over, stood on her toes and looked in.

"You only have two berries. I have, have I not, said time and again that it is only for mere beings to labour so?"

Mada could not help but laugh this time. She sat next to the basket. Sar decided to do the picking. Berries flew into the basket from all directions.

"You consider Arsheans to be mere beings, am I not a mere being too then? I am Arshean."

"You talk to the dryads. Does that not make you more than a mere being?"

Mada considered this for a while, worrying her lower lip.

"I do not think so. I do not know. I guess. You never tell me exactly what I am. Being told that I am venson does not mean anything to me. You are a dryad. What am I?"

She looked closely at Sar's face as she spoke. But it was impossible to make out a dryads thoughts from their facial expressions. They could make their faces completely expressionless if they chose. Sar's face was just like that at that moment.

"Does it matter by and large in the ways that truly matter do we not chose how and to an extent what we are?"

"Sar will you ever give me a straight answer?"

"The knowledge is of no use to you at the moment. Besides it is not my place to tell you," A berry flew out of the basket into Sar's mouth, "Mmm nice and sweet."

"Whose place is it then? So I can go and find this being that can help me seeing as the one being I know who can help me refuses to."

"Again is not my place to tell you that either. As I have told you, you will have to seek out the other vensons. Leave Tamrip keep and go. But to do that safely it will require caution on your part." Sar answered not baited.

"You never give an inch span." Mada said smiling.

"No I do not. And with good reason. The balance is maintained by everyone respecting the boundaries. Anarchy and complete destruction can be the only result if we do not observe the rules."

"Do you really think that will happen from your just telling me more about vensons?"

"It was agreed Mada. And it has been so since time immemorial."

"Could you just bend the rul...?"

"I have. More than I should have. But it would not be right for me to endanger others, even for you."

"No wonder people fear us. Everything is so surreptitious. I can understand that approach towards the mere beings. But do we have to be so secretive in dealing with each other?"

"Yes it is necessary. One day you will learn everything. But it has to be from the right source."

"Very well," she sighed, "I still think it is absurd that we are the ones to shy away from *"mere beings"*."

"The rules of the ancients were not made for their amusement."

"The ancients are not here now. So why should we bother with them?"

"Why should we bother with them? It is only a child and a fool who refuses to learn from another's wisdom and experience."

"But how do we know this wisdom and experience are complete?"

"Honestly Mada. I will see you soon. I have duties I have to attend to."

"Yes bu..." Sar disappeared.

Mada began idly picking mushrooms. Trying to decide if leaving or staying was best. She had to consider how it would affect the children. Tamrip keep was small and did not offer a lot of opportunities for them. But it was safe. Their education was not complete yet. Would they easily pick it up once they were settled again? Would their mother-mother welcome six people who are for all intents and purposes strangers?

"What troubles you Mada?" Sar said, having returned.

Mada shifted a little, it was disconcerting to have someone read you so easily. Sar already probably knew what was troubling her. Out of politeness or whatever it was she seemed to always act oblivious.

"As you know our parents are dead and my... Lon... my brother, has suggested we all go south to seek out our mother-mother Alorya who I think lives in a place called Tarrent keep. I do not know how serious he was but I think it would be best for us all. I do not want to spend the rest of my life slaving away on land that is not even ours. Besides you and maybe a-Carrab there is nothing to make me ever look back at this place."

Now that she had said it out loud it sounded all the more the right thing to do. Sar seemed to be considering this while eating another berry.

"Does not your brother still seek to marry you off? You say he has received offers already?"

"Yes he has, all of which I have declined but he seems to think he owns me!"

In her anger and a rock suddenly flew into the air toward a trundle that had been minding its business, singing its song. Fortunately it flew away in time and the rock was deeply embedded in the tree trunk.

"Has that trundle joined forces with your brother to force an unwanted match on you?"

"Sorry. It is just that it is so frustrating! I wish I were free like you Sar"

"Nothing with a thinking mind can ever be truly and completely free. Freedom is a privilege that requires constant sentry duty. You have to mind that you do not abuse it and at times you have to protect it..."

Mada had heard this speech what seemed like a thousand times.

"I know I know."

"I hope so. Is it not proven to be true? There is great power in you.' Mada shrugged, 'Use it only for good and it is great so try to get a grip on it. Once a deed is done its not easily undone. As you know, it is not wise to do things you might wish undone later. Time is a very delicate thing, no? You will remember my words, yes?"

"Yes I will remember your words. The gods know I have heard it so many times it is engraved on my mind."

"Good. But even that can prove to be not enough."

"I am not going to try to tamper with time Sar. Why would I?"

"Sometimes we *feel* that circumstances dictate and we do what we *know* to be wrong."

"Fear not Sar. I have nothing in my past that is particularly wonderful that I want to relive. Yes there are, as you know, things I would like to undo but I have learnt my lesson and will not abuse my power."

"I hope so Mada. That you have learnt your lesson. And that nothing will ever happen that will make you..."

"Oh Sar! You worry too much."

"I do not worry enough."

"Seeing as you love to worry so much. Please tell me. Is there something wrong with me, with us?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well the people who raised me have died and I am sorry they are gone but I feel no... no pain."

"You are after all only venson."

"What do you mean? That we are cold hearted by nature?"

"No. I am saying nothing about being venson."

"No surprise there." Mada teased.

"How funny you are," Sar said sarcastically, "But I understand. You cannot force a love that is not there. What is to be gained from it?"

"Nothing I guess. I just feel bad, they did feed, clothe and shelter me. Maybe I should have reached ou..."

"Regret is a terrible thing Mada. Cast it from your heart. What came of it the last time?"

"Yes I guess." Mada answered quietly with a bowed head.

"Please tell me you are not still dwelling on *that*?"

"No I am not. Its jus..."

"No Mada. No. You made a decision, hasty and foolish though it was, you made it. Do not try to undo it. I empathise with you but that has to remain in the past."

"Is it in the past? Look what I did to my parents."

"You did not kill them."

"Yes I did. It is kind of you to say otherwise but we both know what I did."

"Leave it in the past Mada. Please. For all our sakes. You can never know for sure."

"It is in the past. But I cannot help the occasional twinge of regret and guilt."

"I will see you Mada."

"Bu..."

With a leap in the woods Sar was gone. She knew it was useless to look for a dryad, in a wood, who did not want to be found. But it mattered little. If Sar said they would be seeing each other again they would be seeing each other again. At least being a mystic was not completely pointless.

After picking a couple of mushrooms Mada began to make her way home. On the way back she ran into Lon and his catch of the day. He had caught three capars. She felt the involuntary flutter she always got when she saw him.

"Well cross me in a fairy ring, just the person I wanted to talk to."

"As it happens brother dear I wanted to talk to you too."

Mada took the smallest capar and slung it over her shoulder. The best person to plan the move with was Lon, after all it was his idea. They walked a few steps in silence.

"I know it will not be easy, especially for the younger children but there is nothing to stay for here..." Lon said pitching his idea once more.

"You do not have to sell the idea to me. I have been thinking about it and you are right. If we did not have to make preparations I would pack up and leave today. It's not a nice thing to say but I do not want to end up like mother and father. Not to say that staying here will necessarily do that but I would rather leave. I feel finding our mother-mother is a step away from that direction."

Lon nodded. Thank goodness. If Mada decided to leave the younger ones would follow her without much persuasion. He still kept his fingers crossed that a-Carrab and Piper would refuse to leave. All that was left was to dry the meat he had just trapped and they would be on their way.

"I am relieved, I cannot tell you how relieved I am you agree with me. It is not going to be easy Mada so you have to be sure."

Mada smiled at this. Typical of Lon to be so kind and considerate. Even his desire to leave, which she sensed was very strong, did not stop him from wanting to do right by them.

"Worry not, I am sure. Besides anything is better than waiting around and have a-Carrab try to force on me one undesired match after another."

"You do not desire them then?" He asked cautiously.

Mada who had been walking beside Lon, but looking down as she was kicking a pebble along the foot path, looked up. She could not place his tone. But it had sounded very strange indeed. Could he be remembering? No that was impossible. She heaved the capar which was beginning to slide down.

"Of course I do not! Honestly Lon why would I want to be united to a stranger. Speaking of unions, what happened between you and Oreel?"

Lon kept quiet. She nudged him.

"Well?"

Sighing and answering reluctantly.

"It did not work out."

"What, that is it? Come on tell me the truth."

"There is nothing to tell," he answered rather sheepishly, "we did not fit well together and we do not love each other."

"No. Oreel worships the ground you walk on, the poor girl. To love one who does not love you." Mada said shaking her head in a knowing way.

"Yes it is tough." Lon nodded in forlorn agreement.

Without realizing it Mada found that they had reached the house. Time to pack and deal with a-Carrab. Piper! Why had she not thought of it sooner? Piper would have no qualms about seeing them go. All she had to do was ask her to smooth a-Carrab over.

They reached the house and put down the capars which had to be skinned and cleaned before being brought inside.

"How would you know that it's tough to love one who does not love you?"

"I just do." Lon said plainly.

There was that funny tone again. Before she could ask him about it Piper came out of the house. Good, no time like the present to get things under way.

"You have done all the work by trapping them why do you not let Piper and me prepare them"

Lon let the Capars drop and began walking towards the house.

"Here take the basket in for me Lon. Thank you."

Piper had gone in to get some bowls and knives to skin the capars with.

She returned and knelt next to Mada. She kept thinking how she could have been sharing this food with her own blood kin. If only they would really leave. a-Carrab had recounted the conversation that had taken place earlier in the cooking room to her.

"Lon is a very impressive hunter is he not."

"Yes he is. It was lucky he even got three at all. These two, pointing to the largest of the three, are quite large but they have to be split amongst seven mouths." Mada answered.

She did not know it, that was the very thought that was going through Pipers mind.

"If we went to find our mother-mother it would reduce the pressure on this tiny piece of land. If we were to go maybe you and a-Carrab could do something productive with this place,' She looks around their, or rather Comris' land, nodding her head with a sagely expression on her face, 'yes you two would get more out of this land."

Piper took a deep breath and chose her words carefully. She was eager to see them go but she was no fool. She knew when she was being baited. If she played this right this could be her opportunity to get rid of them all. The parents were gone. Albeit death would not have been her choice had it been in her power to get rid of them. All that was needed was to give Lon or Mada the courage to get up and go. She was positive the others would follow them.

"It sounds like an awfully long journey are you sure you could manage it?"

Mada was about to answer but Piper kept going.

"What with the younger children, could they manage it?"

Again she was about to reply but Piper kept going.

"And what of a-Carrab, he would not be too happy."

"I am sure we would be okay,' She rushed to put in before Piper could start again, 'we would stay on marked populated roads and travel with other suitable groups whenever we meet them and..."

"Well if it means that much to you I will discuss it with a-Carrab for you."

"Really! You are too kind. Thank you."

"It is the least I can do after all we are fami..."

That was all Mada wanted. She was now content to let Piper prattle on. If anyone could influence a-Carrab it was Piper. True they did not need his permission to leave but he was their brother and she would rather when they left it would be on peaceful terms. The sun was out it was a warm day. She was already cutting the meat into thin sheets so it would dry faster. She would put it by the fire later. Yes it was better for them to part on peaceful terms if not for her sake for the younger children and for a-Carrab's sake also. Well that was it then, Mada was going south. Mada had decided to leave a-Carrab to Piper. She could now concentrate on the other preparations. The rest of the day went by very slowly as time often does when you are waiting for something.

Piper too was waiting for the best time to talk to a-Carrab. The day time would not do, he spent most of it in town dealing with their parents affairs. He was taking over the business agreements that his father had. He was determined to make a success of the farming. Which was why he did not want the others to leave. Free labour. And if she played her cards right she would be rid of them all very soon.

The nightmeal went buy unusually quietly. Anyone who did not know them would have thought it was missing their parents that had brought on the silence. But the truth was that each was caught up in their daydreams and plans for the future.

Mada's thoughts were obvious. What would the journey be like would it be that hard? What would their mother-mother be like? When would she see Sar again? Where would she see her again? It was impossible to even try to guess. Anything was possible with Sar. If only she could foretell the future. Her parent's illness and subsequent death, she never saw that coming. Only the gods knew what was in store. Sar had spoken of mystics who had oracles. She had explained how they themselves were not oracles. How no mere-being or even a mystic could know the future. The oracles were chasms in time that could be looked into, if you knew how and had enough power. There were no mystics with oracles in Tamrip keep. At least none she knew about. Dreams often gave glimpses into the future but these were often foggy, symbolic and shrouded in mystery and took no effort other than falling asleep. Was it coincidence or true perception? It was said that the only beings to have been enlightened enough to pierce the veil of time with their minds had ascended and become demigods and goddess's. But these like dreams were also shrouded in mystery. Fact or fiction she did not know. Necromancy was out of the question. It worked but the consequences were too great.

Once the soul had passed on it ceased to be what it had been. It came back as a caricature of itself, more often than not with dire consequences for the necromancer and others. Sar had extracted an oath from Mada swearing she would never do it. Even going so far as to give a soul pledge.

Lon too had been thinking about their journey, their mother-mother, their uncles and the one thing he never dared speak out loud about, his love for Mada. He had thought nothing of it in the beginning. But he found himself being more and more partial to Mada. Everyone chalked it up to her just being his favorite sister. He had been in denial at first. Then eventually accepted his feelings for what they were. He was in love with his sister. Madly and irrevocably in love with Mada.

Lon did indeed know what it was to love someone who did not love you or at least love you in the way you loved them. Why should he be cursed to love his sister of all the women in Arshea? Why? Mada was beautiful but that was not why he loved her, for Arshea was filled with beauties. He was not sure why himself, all he knew was he did. Thank goodness she had declined all of a-Carrab's suitors. How he hated a-Carrab for that. It was not his fault, but still.

Mavrik had spoken to Mada about going south. He was beginning to warm to the idea. There were no Kentish groups in Tamrip keep. This could be his opportunity to get into one. He was a nolander. It was not something he consciously chose he thought, it just was, as he often debated with himself. The only person who knew his secret was a-Carrab. a-Carrab had caught him red handed. He had been at Garth's tavern in one of the rooms when a-Carrab saw him. He was sure it was all over, but surprisingly a-Carrab had said and done nothing. They never spoke about it. So Mavrik never knew how a-Carrab felt about it. And he did not dare bring it up. He sure knew how people felt about it. It was not right. It was unnatural. The gods did not like it and such people would bring down the wrath of the gods in the keeps they lived in. There was a prime god and a prime goddess not prime goddesses or prime gods the people said. So it only fit that all beings should pair up as such. That was the thinking of some, but not all.

The twins were excited at the prospect of adventure and the trip to the south was just the thing to bring some their way. It was infinitely more interesting than slaving away in the field.

Avené too was looking forward to the trip. Wild trats would not be able to make her stay behind with a-Carrab and Piper. With mother and father gone she did not want to be away from Mada.

a-Carrab was occupied with all the ideas he had for increasing their output, cementing old and creating new partnerships. The future looked bright. He could

not remember the last time he was this excited or if ever. The only other significant event was meeting and marrying Piper.

Piper had decided to talk to a-Carrab that night. The sooner the better. The moment they were alone in their new section, having taken over Carrab and a-Alorya's section, Piper went to work.

"Fancy your brothers and sisters wanting to leave Tamrip keep."

"They do not have it in them to make such a long journey. They would turn back in a couple of hours," a-Carrab said confidently, "They are not going anywhere."

Perfect Piper thought. She could not have worded it better had she written a script for him.

"Then let them go..."

"What! The land needs to be plou..."

"No listen. Like you said, they are not going to go far. They won't do any work when they feel they are being forced to do it against their will."

"I do not know."

"They just lost their parents. Let them vent the way they want. What do you have to lose? They will be back soon. Realising that their future is truly here they will make a real effort to work the land. If you force them to stay they will resent you and the work."

a-Carrab was quiet, considering this for some time. Piper was right. Lon especially would be impossible if he did not get this out of his system. One day without them working the land would not be that bad. They had spent all of today "grieving". One more day would not be that bad at this point. It was best they got this foolishness out of the way for good.

"You are always right my dear. With you by my side we will make something of this place. And who knows we might be able to buy this land from Comris one day. Or better yet get our own land someday"

Thank goodness.

The forgotten mountain

Another young girl had been brought to Virida by her mother. Nacou was eight year spans old. Her power had just been discovered and her mother, Taxia, had wasted no time in presenting her to the other vensons. Aomo was witness to Nacou being presented. It was a matter of honor for some to bring forth a venson as not all could manage it. The potential to be venson remained in their blood line as long as a daughter was produced in the second generation and she was one of the first five offspring. In the speaking chamber Nacou stood trembling before The Five as they discussed the ever burning question when another venson was brought to Virida.

"Could she be the one?" Andine asked peering closely into Nacou's face.

"She does have power but not to the magnitude Adam is supposed to possess." Farrar said. This was not Adam and she desired to waste no more time on the interview.

"There is no set out method to identify venson Adam. She could be here already, she could have come and is now passed on venson Farrar. We trouble ourselves needlessly. Almost to the point of obsession." Cilian accused, looking at everyone but not taking note of anyone in particular.

"You call it obsession Venson Cilian I call it diligence. For everyone's sake." Deti said knowing to who the charge of obsession was directed.

"Come now Venson Deti. We put our faith in some old piece of parchment. Which we do not ev..."

"Venson Fantah I understand your reservations but the parchment has been around for many year spans. Have all those who have taken care of it and heeded its warning before us been mistaken, insane maybe?" Deti asked artfully.

"Yes and the "prophecy" has never been fulfilled. Are you not tired of waiting and searching?" Cilian said.

"Tire? Tire! How can I or any one of us tire of protecting us? She is here. We all felt the rip in time. Venson Adam is powerful and we have to be careful!" Deti shouted.

"We do not know who that was. It could have been anyone. Any being.Venson Adam indeed!"

"Vensons, honestly! You behave like children. Have we not had this discussion what seems like a million time spans? Venson Taxia, Venson Aomo, Venson Nacou forgive us. Venson Nacou welcome. I am sure you are eager to explore and meet other vensons your age. And I am sure that you Venson Taxia are eager to get her instruction underway." Andine said trying to bring a semblance of peace over The Five.

Tamrip keep

They woke early the next morning. a-Carrab was first to wake and go to the fields. Mada was next. She busied herself with more packing. She felt remarkably calm. She had thought she would wake up anxious. Maybe this was how one was meant to feel, at ease because you knew in your heart of hearts that what you were doing was right. The question of her eldest brother still nagged her. She had to know one way or the other and do what was necessary. There was nothing for it so she went out to the fields to feel out a-Carrab.

"Goodmorning."

Without stopping but looking up briefly he replied.

"Goodmorning,' a-Carrab said cheerfully and smiling indulgently, 'are you all packed for your trip?"

Piper had done the trick. What had she said to let them go without incident? Had it been her or just her and Lon she would not have bothered to make peace but she had to do it for the younger children and for a-Carrab too. Arguing would have only served getting someone hurt and isolating him.

"I hope one day you will understand why we have to do this, thank you a-Carrab."

He never stopped his work. Why make a big fuss. After all they would be back by day break or tomorrow morning at the latest. A night outside would cure their wander lust. And anyway the cerium would not be ready for harvest for a couple of days yet.

"What is not to be understood, one has to do what one has to do. Could you pass me that bag of seeds?"

She gave him the bag and started back for the house.

"Mada."

Oh dear here it comes, Mada thought.

"Yes,' she answered tentatively, 'what is it."

"Say hello to our mother-mother for me."

She gave a great an inward sigh of relief. All was well. What had Piper said to make him understand?

"You should all get a move on if you intend to make it south this year span."

"I will pass on your greeting. Goodbye brother."

"Goodbye. Happy and safe travels!"

Her curiosity was stirred but not enough to risk jeopardising the peace.

She thought of going into the forest to see Sar one more time in Tamrip keep before they left. Then thought twice about it. They had to get moving. She was not sad about Sar, she knew she could see Sar anywhere. It was easy for Sar. She could go anywhere there was vegetation easily enough, being a dryad. Soon her own power would be well directed enough for teleportation. Though Sar had said it was a dead giveaway of what she was as someone was bound to notice and it was energy consuming. It would require skill, sense and stealth.

As they had started yesterday they were almost finished with their packing. Mada took a deep breath and took a good look at their home. She was not going to miss it one bit. She was tending to the capar meat which she had taken out to dry a little more. Mada hoped they would not run into any trouble. She had never used her power against another person and she hoped she never had to. But they were likely to run into trouble. Two young men, a young woman and three children. She was not sure how much use Lon and Mavrik would be in a fight. It was just as well Sar had taught her to harness and direct her power. She was not an expert yet and she was a long way from getting there but had just enough to protect them. At least she hoped.

Chapter Two

Tamrip Keep

The air was thick with excitement. The one with the most travelling experience was Mavrik. He had gone to Derash keep a couple of times. But then Derash keep was only two keeps away. That alone would be a day span journey. With travellers who had not done a lot of travelling and had no trats it would probably take longer.

"Well let us get moving we want to reach Derash Keep before nightfall." Lon shouted.

a-Carrab did not bother to leave the field to say goodbye to the rest. He just waved to them from the field. So sure was he of their failure.

Mada looked back one last time at the house, the forest and the Drow mountains. She pulled on her pack and began walking. She felt they were doing the right thing, going south.

She reflected on the last year spans. She wondered why she was thinking of it now. She had cast it from her heart and mind a long time ago. And yet here it was to tug at her heart again. She looked at Lon discussing a map with Mavrik. And it all came pouring back as if it had happened yesterday.

She had been deep in the forest. She remembered it was a very hot day. She had been daydreaming when her daydream was interrupted by a splash in the pool some meter spans from her. Whoever was there could not see her because of the thick undergrowth. She scanned the area and found Lon. She knew before she looked that it was him. Besides herself he was the only one of the family who frequented that part of the forest near their home. But this time he was not alone. She could hear a female voice laughing and urging him to get into the pool. Against her better judgment she went to take a look..

It was Oreel, a beautiful girl from the keep. Oreel was coloured white with dark hair and the exact opposite of Mada in every respect. She wondered that if she were more like Oreel would Lon like her more. But he had taken a fancy to a very colourful bouquet in the past. She could not very well try to mimic them all. She, Oreel, was naked. Lon too was

undressing. What could she do to prevent this? No. What was she thinking? Oreel had more right to him than she did, she thought to herself, Oreel's heart was not incestuous and completely base as hers was. She was again filled with repulsion for herself. How could she lust after her own brother? He was hers for the taking. What use was stolen love? Could she be so depraved as to beguile her own brother into committing involuntary incest with her? But then was she not already depraved if she was in love with him. Agonising as it was she would never cross that line. She would never cause him to sin and to bring shame to himself. No matter how much she desired it. She turned away unable to watch Oreel be where she desired most to be.

The daylight rose and set, the seasons came and went. Little, little of consequence to the rest of the inhabitants of Arshea happened in Tamrip keep. But great in the world of Mada. Then in the end greater for the people of Arshea. The weather turned cold and the Drow Mountains on the Tamrip outlands were snowcapped. Meaning querau would be plentiful there. It had particularly tasty meat. It was a tiring trek there but it was worth it. Those who could not be bothered to go and hunt querau for themselves bought from those who did. Bought at a very good price.

"I shall be heading up to the Drow Mountains. It must be full of querau by now. And Memruw and Comris have requested some querau meat. They have both offered very good prices for it. And I know how you all love it. Their hides too could bring in some fends." Lon declared to his brothers and sisters.

"I am sorry I will not be able to join you this year span." Mavrik said, though secretly happy that he did not have to freeze in the mountains but was instead going with Carrab to Derash keep.

"It is okay. I will manage."

"We could help you!" The twins offered in chorus.

"I think not. But thank you for offering." Lon said patting a-a-Alorya on the head.

a-Carrab could not be pried away from Piper. After all they had just had their union celebration.

"I will go with you Lon." Mada added happily and somewhat guiltily.

"It is a very difficult climb Mada."

"I have gone up there with you before!"

"Yes but that..."

He knew she could make it and would probably be helpful but he did not want her to come. He had spent his time with the keep girls trying to get her out of his mind and heart. The last thing he needed was to be alone with her for what could turn out to be day spans. But if he said no she would nag him into an early grave.

"It is not fair Lon. I really want to go and it looks so lovely from here and I would really lo..."

"Okay okay. No need to go on. You can come but you have to do exactly as I say."

"Oh thank you Lon!"

"Exactly Mada."

"Okay."

"It is not fair we never get to do anything exciting!" Manny said sticking out his lower lip into a needle point.

"You are right." Mada said as she cut up some vegetables and meat to make some soup.

"I am?"

"Yes Manny you are right. And I think it is high time you two went on an adventure and I have just the right thing mind."

"What!" They practically screamed.

"I need you to battle all armies that stand in your way. Slay all dragons that attempt to stop you. It is very dangerous but I want you to..." She stalled for effect.

"To go where to get what?" a-a-Alorya pleaded, already on their feet ready to do battle.

"To go to the well to fetch some water."

"Mada!" The twins shouted as the others broke into peals of laughter.

Two days after Lon's announcement wrapped up in warm clothing and with their packs on their backs they set out for the Drow Mountains. Even in the chill and with most of the blooms which favoured the daylights warmth gone the forest was still beautiful. It was very cold but the snowline never came further than halfway down the mountain. So they had some way to go before they reached the querau.

Drow mountains

Mada wanted to stop and admire every new view but Lon would have none of it. He took his hunting very seriously.

"Look at th..."

"This is why I did not want you to come Mada. This is serious and all you want to do is play. This is not the forest where you spend hour spans on end running around. Here we have to be carefu..."

"Alright father-father." Mada teased as she skipped ahead of him.

"Say what you want. I just want you to be careful."

"Does careful have to mean boring father-father?" Mada shouted as she ran ahead.

They had made a very early start. Well before the daylight rose. Now they

could see the snow. She ran and jumped in the snow. The last time she had been here was about four year spans ago when she, Lon and a reluctant Mavrik had snuck away to play in the snow. Now she was rolling around in it before putting on her snow boots. Lon followed at a sedate pace.

She supposed he considered himself too mature and dignified to roll around in the snow. But not too mature to frolic in the forest with Oreel. Mada thought bitterly.

Lon too was thinking of Mada. He worried that she would get married soon. He had seen how Yuhlik and some others had been eyeing her at Weendrin and Sarims's union celebration. He had gone out of his way to keep them all at bay that night. It was a wonder no one had discovered his true feelings. But then the over protective brother was a good guise. And it was in essence true. He sat on a rock and began putting on his snow boots. Then wham! He was hit by a snowball on the back of the head.

"We did not come all this way to throw snow balls Mada." Lon said without quitting his task or even bothering to looking up.

"Sorry. I was just... I... I hope we find a lot of game." Mada said dejectedly.

"So do I." Lon replied flatly.

He carried on with his snow boots and she took up the task of digging up snow with the toe of her snow boot. He got up and dusted the snow from her snowball from his shoulders. She began walking ahead. Thinking that maybe she had made a mistake volunteering to come. Then wham! She was hit by a snowball. Before she recovered from the first another hit her and more kept coming.

"Lon that is not fair you gave me no warning." Mada squealed, trying to make a snow ball of her own.

"Warning? I do not remember hearing a warning earlier!"

She was barely getting any across. She could not stop laughing long enough to get proper aim. And he was using the trees for cover. But she was determined to get him back. She made a large snow ball. A very large snow ball. She felt him out to get his general direction and as he was about to pop his head around a tree trunk he was knocked back and down by a large snow ball. She had used her power to guide it. He lay still on the ground. Had she hit him too hard? But with a snow ball? She walked over to him and stood next to him. She leapt back from an anticipated grabbing hand. He began to get up, she ran and he gave chase. They ran through the trees as they had done as little children. She hid behind a cawas tree.

"You know I have to get you back Mada. Come out come out wherever you

are."

She made no reply. She was hard pressed not to laugh. She felt him out and found him and hit him with another snow ball. But this time she was not so quick in her escape. And he got her but in her attempt to get away she fell and took him with her.

They had grabbed each other as they fell and neither made an attempt to get up or lose their hold on the other. Her pounding heart suddenly stilled and all she could hear was his breathing. He had beautiful eyes, she thought, when was the last time she had looked into them she wondered.

"I have got you now." Lon said with mock wicked glee in a voice, tinged with anxiety.

"Is it not I who has you. I am after all on top o..." Mada began but was cut off by the screeching brays of the querau.

"Querau. Come on then," Lon said pushing her off, "It is getting dark and we should go to the cave." Lon said getting up and looking at the sky.

He began walking to the cave. They had played in this cave as children and Lon, Mavrik and a-Carrab had used it to sleep in when they came to hunt.

He had to be careful. The last thing he wanted was to do or say something he would regret. Especially here where they were completely alone.

"Come let us follow the river." He called over his shoulder.

"Okay. I do hope mother and father do not return and father leaves with a-Carrab before we return. I wish to talk to him about the children's music lessons. I would ask mother but she could not care less. Father will not care as long as it costs him nothing."

"She has a lot to... Oh why bother." Lon said abandoning his notion to justify their parent's indifference.

They walked up the mountain to the cave. They had been on the opposite side and to reach the cave they would have to cross the river. Parts were frozen making the crossing dangerous. Mada decided to cross over the waterfall. There were rocks that one could use to hop across. Lon advised that they cross above or below the waterfall but Mada was determined to have a good time.

"Please Mada get down from there. It is too dangerous let us..."

He wanted to go after her but he was afraid if he went after her she would try to cross faster. It was a dangerous place, made more so by the ice that had formed at some places.

"Oh father-father let me have some fun for once."

"Fun? That is just insanity. No actually it is stupidity."

Mada stopped and half turned to face Lon with her hand on her hip.

"Stupidity aye?" Mada said tartly.

She tried to turn all the way around without making sure of her footing. She fell. She could have simply floated back up but how would she ever explain such a thing. She had no choice but to let herself fall. She could hear Lon screaming her name. There was the water to worry about also. It must be freezing, she thought to herself. She began to warm up just before hitting the water. Her winter clothing was thick and bulky and it seemed to take in half the river. It was weighing her down but she brought herself to the surface. Lon was running down to the bottom of the falls. She could see him remove his pack preparing to jump in after her. The water would surely be the death of him. She quickly went to the other side.

He stood on the opposite bank gaping at her. She waved at him shouting that he should go to a safer spot and cross as the water was very cold. He picked up his pack and went up the river. As she watched him go up she began thinking of a good explanation of how she was not freezing and how she had come up so quickly despite her bulky sponge like clothing. She had to be careful from now on. She did not know how he would feel and she figured it would be rather frightening for him up here with no one else around. With company or without she had no intentions of disclosing her true nature to him anyhow. She got up and went up river a little and waited for him. She dragged her pack in the snow. It weighed more with the water. She did not want to exhaust herself besides she wanted to use her power to keep herself warm. She began shivering as he got closer. Would she be able to make her teeth chatter she wondered? She decided against it. The cave was still a bit of a walk away and she did not fancy the idea of rattling her teeth all that way.

The moment he got across he ran to her side.

"What is wrong with you?! That is the stupidest thing you have ever done Mada. What is wrong with you?! What if you had been ki... What were you thinking?! What? Thank the gods you are okay. I knew I should have left you at home. No more games! Okay? Are you hurt? Lon asked patting her all over, 'Well do you hurt anywhere?'" Lon shouted.

He was angry at her for her selfish carelessness. But all he wanted to do was to take her in his arms but he had to get a grip and do what had to be done.

Mada was too stunned to say anything, she just shook her head. She had expected to be overwhelmed with gentleness and sympathy not anger. She could have been seriously hurt and all he could do was berate her as if she had intentionally jumped off the waterfall. She looked at him blankly.

She must be in shock he thought. He wanted to cry. If she had died. It had taken her a few second spans but she seemed, to him, to fall forever. He had never had such a tense few second spans in his life. His stomach seemed to hollow and his heart dropped into it for those sickening few second spans.

"You will catch your death. Come let us hurry to the cave." He said giving her a push in the direction of the cave and picking up her pack.

He walked very quickly and she had to practically jog to keep up with him. He went ahead into the cave to make sure it was empty and to start preparing a fire.

She sat on a small boulder in the cave watching him make the fire. She kept on shivering. He had not asked her why she was not half dead from the cold. Which was just as well as she had not been able to think of a good explanation. She wondered if she was behaving the way an arshean would in a similar situation.

"Remove your clothes." He ordered a little shakily.

She attributed it to exertion and his anger.

"You have to get out of that wet stuff and sit by the fire. Here." He said gruffly, removing his coat to give her.

"No you will get cold. Keep your coat."

"You just fell in an icy river. You need it more than me."

"No." She said folding her arms.

"Mada..."

"No!"

He got up and pulled her arms apart and began removing her clothes.

"Lon!" She squealed with excitement wriggling away.

"Will you stop acting like a child for once!" He reprimanded harshly.

His harsh tone forced her to get a grip on herself. Reminding her that he was her brother and she should get a grip if she did not want to humiliate herself and embarrass him and ruin their relationship. She realised she had stopped shivering and she began again. But it seemed he had not noticed.

He had removed most of her clothing. All that was left were filmy undergarments. She immediately regretted not wearing warmer underclothes. But then she had not expected she would be removing her clothes in front of him. She did not look down but she was certain her nipples were erect. He would attribute it to the cold she consoled herself. She averted her eyes to avoid eye contact. Now she did not have to fake her trembling.

He took a quick glance and looked away just as quickly. He had to control himself. No matter how he felt about her she was his sister. In the history of removing footwear no none had ever concentrated so hard on unlacing a pair of boots the way he did that day. Finishing with her boots he took a steadying breath and pulled down her pants.

"Get into my bedding." Lon said moving his bedding, which he had unrolled, closer to the fire.

She did as she was told without replying or looking at him. Thank the gods awkwardness was not fatal. She pulled the bedding right up to her chin. She kept her gaze fixed on the fire.

"I am going to get more twigs to get the fire going I will be back shortly." Lon said as he went out of the cave.

As he got out he felt the cold like a physical blow. He had not realised how warm he had gotten. He had to remember that he was with Mada. An innocent and most importantly his sister.

She removed her flimsy undergarments and got into Lon's bedding again. Here she was naked in Lon's bedding alone with him in the Drow mountains. The stuff dreams were made of, Mada thought smiling mischievously to herself. But she had come here to hunt not on a dream fulfillment quest, she chastised herself. She began glowing. The one good thing about being up here was she could shimmer in peace. She looked at her hands. Her nails wanted cutting. She got up and got her brush. Her hair had been tangled in the water. She tried as hard as she could to keep herself occupied but her thoughts kept returning to Lon.

The cave was too warm and too cozy. When he got back into the cave he found her curled up in his bedding. Her under clothes had been put out to dry on one of the rocks in the cave. He knelt with his back to her as he put more wood on the fire.

"I am so cold. The river was so cold." She said chattering her teeth.

"The fire will warm up the cave soon enough. Move closer to the fire. We do not want you getting ill do we? No we do not."

"No we do not." She echoed as she stood up to move closer to the fire.

She had taken a few steps when she stepped on the edge of the bedding and tripped. Lon moved to catch her. She let go of the bedding when she put her arms out to break her fall. He caught her just before she fell on her knees. She was clinging onto his shoulders. His hands were on her bare flesh. They stayed that way looking into each other's eyes for what seemed like an eternity span. She felt as if she was waiting for something but she did not know what. So she just knelt there looking into his eyes.

Was this some sort of test the gods were giving him. To throw her into his arms shimmering, naked and in the middle of nowhere. What did they want him to do with her looking at him like that with her huge aquamarine eyes which appeared almost black in the firelight.

"You better cover up. We do not want you getting ill. Do we?" He whispered in her ear.

She shook her head. But neither made a move to let the other go.

"I better cover up." Mada said moving away from him, very reluctantly.

She had to be careful. How could she openly lust after her own brother like that. Not that doing it in secret was more moral.

He shared his food with her as hers had been soaked and mixed up.

"If we do not catch a querau tomorrow we will have to try to get a bowa for the next day."

"I am giving you all this trouble. I am so sorry I..."

"It is okay. What is important is that you are okay."

He remained near the fire. The Drow mountains were very cold. She knew he must be freezing. But he would never consent to her giving him back his bedding and she really did not need it. What could she do without giving herself away.

"Why do we not share the bedding?" She said twirling a strand of hair, not quite able to look him in the eye now.

"Are you sure? I mean I am okay here. It is not that cold really."

"What do you mean. It is freezing Lon. I am the one who was stupid enough to cross over the waterfall not you. How can I in good conscience let you suffer for my mistake."

"Thank you but It is not that cold. Now try and get some sleep."

"If it is not that cold I am getting up and...," She was about to throw off the bedding when she recalled she was naked, And... and I will wear my clothes because it is so hot in here."

"Mada."

"Do not Mada me. I do not bite."

"Who knows." Lon said laughing.

"If I wanted to bite you I would not wait for you to be in the same bedding as me. I would simply get up and bite you."

"I would like to see that."

"If you continue to be so stubborn you just might."

"Ma..."

"Lon we are in the Drow Mountains. You know how cold it gets up here."

We came here to hunt not to both foolishly die from exposure. I do not want to have to drag your frozen carcass down the mountain. Though it is cold here and your body will keep but from the foothills it is warmer. So you will start to rot before we get ho..."

"Okay. Okay. If I share the bedding with you will you shut up?"

"Probably not. But at least you will be warm while I am nagging you."

"Such an attractively packaged offer, how can anyone refuse?"

He got into the sleeping bag and each was sleeping at the edge afraid to brush against the other. Lon was sleeping on the side that was closed. The bedding was rectangular and folded in half with the bottom closed.

"Comfortable?" She said, trying to sound casual.

"Yes." He answered gruffly.

She lay very still listening to her heart which was beating so loud she was sure he could hear it also. All she had to do was roll over and she would be touching him. He was closed in so he could not move away and would think she was just rolling over in her sleep. She pinched her hand to punish herself. Here she was thinking such things while he was probably thinking about the hunt tomorrow or Oreel. That thought made her want to pinch him. If only there was some way to know what he was thinking without violating him.

"Lon are you awake?"

He contemplated pretending to be asleep but realised how obvious and ridiculous that would be.

"Yes."

"What are you thinking?"

He was taken aback by her question. How could she have known. Then he realised he was being ridiculous. There was no way she could know what he was thinking. Thinking about her.

"Why?"

"Nothing. Just asking. Making conversation. I am not sleepy."

"I am thinking about queraus. And I am sleepy."

"W..."

"Sweet sleep Mada."

"Sweet sleep." She answered pouting.

She closed her eyes for a while but she could not fall asleep.

She opened her eyes again and looked into the fire. How could he just go to sleep while she was up and in agony, over him to top it off? She had to try to get some sleep. But the way she felt now she could be awake for day spans. She was too excited to sleep. It was Lon who she lived with and saw every day. But now was different. Then she had a very wicked thought. She would spice up his dreams. He would recognise it as his own thoughts she knew. She was curious to see his reaction to the idea of them being together. She projected seeing him in the forest with Oreel, only she substituted Oreel with herself. She was aching to look at him but she kept her eyes on the fire. What she was doing was cruel and wicked, but it seemed like just a bit of not so innocent but harmless fun. She felt him fidgeting.

He was trying so hard to banish all thoughts of Mada. But part of his mind seemed reluctant to comply. Why would he think of her in a place he had been with Oreel? The best thing would be to try and fall sleep. But he seemed to be unable to stop thinking about her.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and took a fateful roll over to Lon's side..

She woke feeling languid. She could hear a distant drum. Drum? She opened one lazy eye and realised she was sleeping on Lon's chest. The "drumbeat" was been his heartbeat.

For a moment her mind was completely blank. Then she slowly pulled herself up on her elbow as the previous night played back in her mind. She was in her brothers arms. Naked in her brother's arms, waking from a night of passion! She clamped her hand over her mouth and bit into her palm to keep herself from screaming.

She tried to get up but he tightened his grip. She had to get up and dressed before he woke up. She slowly edged out of his arms holding her breath afraid the sound of her breathing would wake him. She looked around but she could barely see anything the fire had almost died out. She coaxed the logs back to life. She used the little light now available to pick up some of the wood Lon had brought in. She had to keep the cave warm but not too warm. She did not want him to wake up yet. She needed time to think. She packed the bedding gently around him. Stopping to look at him and think how much she loved him. She used her power to dry her clothes, pack and bedding and went out of the cave. It was still dark. The nightlight was bright and she went to sit on a fallen tree trunk a few meter spans from the cave.

Lon woke up to find that Mada was gone. Had he dreamt everything?. No he had not. He smiled to himself as he remembered. Tonight was the happiest night of his life. To find that she felt the same way about him. But where was she, her clothes were gone but her pack and bedding were still there. He put on his clothes and went outside. He saw her sitting on a log. He was about to go to her but figured she had a lot to think about. He would give her that time. Come to think of it he too had a lot to think about. What would tonight mean to the rest of their lives. It was going to be difficult. But as long as he had Mada it would be okay.

What had she done, to them both. Nothing was worth feeling like this. What kind of a person did this? Even being a mystic could not account for this. She was better than this. How would she ever face him again. She would give anything to turn back time.

It suddenly dawned on her that she could turn back time. Sar had told her how it could be done. Did she have enough power to do it? She would use all her power even it meant being left with nothing. But Sar had warned her against it. Sar had said she would regret it. Time affected everyone and everything. But what could possibly be worse than this?

It was bad enough she had done what she had done but to turn back time also? She had no way of calculating the possible repercussions of such an action. But what choice was there? She owed it to Lon to right her wrong. She closed her eyes and recited over and over the speaking Sar had taught her to help her concentrate.

time is light

light is light

my plea is not right

my intention is not to slight

pass this time

erase this time

light is light

light is time

No sooner were the words spoken did she wish them unsaid. She was washed with a staggering feeling of nausea. Everything blurred. The universe seemed to stop and then spin around her in a fantastic light display. Blurry pictures of Tamrip keep and other places she did not recognise flashed before her. At Tamrip keep she saw her parents already at home with her brothers and sisters. She saw Sar surrounded by other dryads in what must be her home. Only everything and everyone was moving backwards. Time was literally being turned back. Her legs trembled, her whole person shook. Her bowls threatened to give way. Saliva threatened to choke her. It seemed to pour out of every gland in her mouth. She fell to her knees. Her actions left her on the ground bracing herself on all fours, drooling and trembling. She began throwing up. She could not stop retching. Her throat was constricted and her very innards seemed to want to come up and out. Her whole frame seemed to want to turn inside out. The pain was amazing. She passed out before the world stopped spinning.

"Mada? Mada?." She heard her name being called from far away. She could faintly smell smoke. She felt weak, as if she were in a dream.

"Mada, Mada." She heard her name again. This time she had a vague sensation of being violently shaken. Her head was throbbing. Every move felt as if her head was being used as a rattle, with her brain knocking around in her head. Never had she ever felt such pain. Being venson had kept her from most things. How did mere beings live she wondered. She opened her eyes a crack and saw Lon kneeling by her side. He had been the one shaking her. If only he would sit still and stop moving around the way he was. She fought down the feeling of nausea and tried to sit up. He pushed her down gently but she would have lain down again herself. For the first time she felt the chill of the Drow mountains. What had happened to her? Then it all came flooding back

"Do not try to get up," Lon said feeling her forehead, "You are not warm. But you seem feverish. You should not have played over the waterfall like that."

Had it not worked. Surely she had not gone through that, was feeling this way, for nothing.

"Let me heat up rumin and capar meat for y..."

"No. I...," Mada declined weakly, her throat was so dry, "rumin." She managed hoarsely. She felt too tired to eat anything but some rumin would be good for her parched throat.

"Okay." He removed his coat and put it over her.

"What... happened?" Mada wheezed. She never imagined that just talking could be this exhausting.

"I went out to get some firewood and when I came back you were unconscious. You were like that for almost a day and a half span. Tomorrow morning we are going home."

"No... I just need some... some... sleep and I will be fine."

"We ar..."

"No Lon..." She was trying to sit up.

"Okay. Okay. We will see how you feel tomorrow morning. You will have some rumin and rest."

He came over and pushed her down again and tucked the bedding tightly around her. Now that she was awake he was taking her home. There was no point in tiring or upsetting her with arguing.

Besides her feeling awful it did not seem like anything remarkable had happened. Why did she still remember though? If time had been indeed erased why did she still remember? But Lon said he had gone to get more wood and that was all. She had done it. She had turned back time. Archiving such a stupendous feat was little consolation. Had she lost her power? She had not thought much about it before doing it. She had considered it as a possibility but it had seemed worth it at the time. What use was it if she still knew what had happened? She eventually fell into a dreamless slumber.

She felt considerably better the next morning. She shifted, to rub her eyes, and she realised for that she had someone's arms around her. She felt as if she was falling. What had gone wrong? She looked at Lon's bare arm draped over her. She closed her eyes hoping she would open them to a different scene. She opened them again but it was to the exact same scenery. She woke up to find that she was wearing his coat and he was dressed. His sleeve had just rolled back. She was flooded with a feeling of indescribable relief. She got up and slowly restacked the fire, she was not quite recovered yet. If only she could have forgotten also. She would have to live with this for the rest of her life.

They went back home only to find that their parents had not returned. She recalled seeing them already at home. She figured that as she had altered time their lives too had been altered. They did not return for a while. And they made another trip after a short time. It seemed they had enjoyed their extended stay so much they had decided to travel some more. Which was very unlike them. It was then that she began to wonder about the exact magnitude of her actions. The guilt over what she had done would not subside. She grieved over her lost love. She often wondered what would have happened had she not turned back time. Hers was doomed to be a life of loneliness regret and sorrow. She could not even bring herself to confide in Sar, the only

place she could possibly find comfort. She had no choice but to go on. Maybe one day she would be over it.

Tamrip keep

Alone in the forest Mada sat hunched on the ground with her head in her hands and legs folded beneath her, rocking and shimmering. Confession was said to be good for the soul. But to whom and how did one confess to incest? The days passed and Mada guilt did not abate. Ignorance was bliss, she thought, Lon did not remember. It was only fair he should be spared the torment. What had she done. Surely there were consequences for wrong doing of this magnitude. Sar had sensed the tampering with time. Other mystics had sensed the tampering with time, Sar had told her this since they were all consulting each other trying to find out who and why. How could she confess now. She had lied to the two beings she loved most. She wondered if Sar suspected anything. Surely she must sense a change. Tears rolled down her face unchecked. She had been crying and agonising over this for days and it had done her no good. She would lose her mind soon. Sar was her friend and she knew their friendship, though never tested, was unconditional. There was nothing for it but to just tell everything to Sar. Whatever the consequences.

"It is good of you to water the forest. But I think the rain and the river and streams do that already and more efficiently." Sar said evenly and melodiously.

Mada looked up to see Sar standing in front of her.

"Oh Sar. I did not hear you coming." Mada said sitting up and wiping her eyes vigorously. Extraordinarily trying to pretend she had not been crying.

"Evidently not. Arshean life seems extremely emotional." Sar replied hopping onto a stone and sitting down with her legs crossed.

"I was just..." Mada tried to explain but stopped unable at the moment to think of anything plausible.

"Come now Mada I do not need to use my power to see that something troubles you. Crying and shimmering as you are in the open."

"I am not in the open. I would know if so.."

"You did not hear or sense me approach. If you can not sense me what more a mere being?"

"I knew no one would be coming this way. No one ev..."

"I have kept quiet for some time now. I assumed you would tell me in your own time but I see I will have to drag it out of you."

Mada decided now was as good a time as any. Besides she had planned on telling Sar anyway. She had to be brave and just get it out.

"It was I who altered time." Mada said looking Sar in the eye.

"You?" Sar asked sceptically though from her level tone her thoughts were lost on Mada.

"Yes." Mada answered fighting the urge to look away.

But how did you do it, who helped you?" Sar said still unconvinced.

"You are the only mystic I know. Who could I have possibly asked for help!"

"How did you... You have that much power?"

"I do not know I just did it."

Sar was silent.

"Please do not hate me Sar. I know what I have done. I would undo it if I could do it without causing any mor..." Mada pleaded though Sar did not look angry.

"Why Mada? Why? To test your strength? No. What did you do?" Sar asked her eyes turning to saucers as she recalled Mada closed mind. For the first time afraid of what she was going to hear but at the same time feeling Mada could not do anything bad.

Mada looked down her courage failing her. How could Sar or anyone for that matter understand. She doubted that if the shoe was on the other foot if she would understand.

"I did something I had no choice but to undo. I had no choice."
Mada repeated trying to convince them both.

"There is always a choice." Sar said quietly.

She was beginning to believe what Mada was telling her. She closed her eyes for a while.

"What did you do?"

"Sar I... I did an evil thing..." Mada choked as the tears flowed anew.

"What?"

"I...," Mada faltered this time because she was unsure if Sar, being a dryad would understand, how could she explain it, "I had... relations with my brother." The tears stopped.

"Relations?"

If there were a deep dark dank hole to crawl into Mada would have jumped in.

"Sexual." Mada said, her voice barely audible.

"What?" Sar asked blankly.

Mada cleared her throat. "Sexual relations." She said not very much louder and wishing to die.

"With your brother?Lon?"

Her head jerked up quite taken aback.

"You know?"

"If you mean did I know that you had sexual relations with him, no. But I do know how you... feel about him."

"You entered my mind?"

"If I had entered your mind you would have felt it. No, but often when I scan the area before I approach you are thinking of him. I have told you that just because you think there are no other mystics in Tamrip keep it does not make it so. Anyone can

know unprotected thoughts. Anyhow how does that relate to you altering time?"

"That is all you have to say?" Mada asked in amazement.

She had imagined many possible scenarios for Sar's reaction to her confession. None of them had been remotely close to indifference. Maybe as a dryad incest was not as big a deal as it was to arsheans.

"It seems a small issue compared with altering time."

"Yes. Maybe. But he is my brother! I have committed incest. I think I caused him to commit incest and all you can say is it is..."

"You altered time to undo it?" Sar cut her off.

"Yes. Bu..."

"It was an extremely foolish thing to do."

"I did not plan to..."

"It was extremely foolish to alter time for that. He is not even your brother."

"What do you me..."

"I mean... you are venson. He is Arshean." Sar said reluctantly.

"Bu..."

"Maybe I have done you more evil than good letting you live here without other vensons. *I have done us all a great evil.* There is no way to know how your tampering with time has affected arshea but be sure it has. It is a small place ours. Mystics have rules to govern it. To protect us all."

"What do you mean he is not my brother?" Mada said having stopped listening at those words.

"I mean there is no evil thing no... listen..."

Sar went on to explain what she knew of venson life, only what she felt was vital. Stressing as she always did that it was not

her place to say but that it seemed necessary to avoid another like disaster. Mada listened attentively until Sar came to a stop.

"Though he is not my brother I am evil because I did not know it at the time and I had wilfu..., ' looking away, 'relations with him thinking, knowing at the time that he was my brother."

"That is true. But it does not change that what you did was foolish, irrational and selfish. Maybe I should have told you earlier about where vensons come from."

"Do you know where I came from?"

"It is not my place to say Mada. The rules governing our conduct are not for fun. But you would do well to look before you leap. You are fortunate to have a lot of power Mada. You need to be responsible when using it." Sar said sadly.

"I am sorry Sar. You will never know how sorry and foolish I feel. Even more so now. Can you ever forgive me."

"It is not a matter of forgiveness Mada. I have no need to forgive you. I am not angry. Just sorry. Very very sorry."

Long after Sar was gone she stayed by herself thinking how Lon was not her brother. So venson life had been willed to her mother. It would seem that even her mother was not aware of this fact, for surely she would have said something. But who was her mother? Was she to act on this new information? After all the best decision was an informed one. But what could she do about it now anyway. She could not make Lon love her as anything other than a sister. To seek out her venson mother could mean forfeiting Lon and the others.

Even after knowing this Mada did not make a move to seek out other vensons. She chose to make her life work in Tamrip keep. Though no actual wrong had been committed she had sinned in her mind. Always having thought of herself as an upright person she was surprised by how low she was willing to sink. It was after this that she began shielding her mind incessantly. Then there was what she had done to all of arshea. Why had she been so impulsive? Mada often asked herself. But there was, never would be any justification. Only the curse of always second guessing all misfortune. Time, though it could never remove the dagger, it would blunt the edges some.

A change would be good, for all of them. Give them all a chance to start

over. They went along the wide dusty road in silence for about a quarter mile span until a-a-Alorya broke the silence.

"a-Carrab took our leaving rather well. Not a single word! What did you say to him when you went down to the field to talk to him this morning Mada?" a-a-Alorya asked.

They were bound to ask sooner or later.

"He said to say hello to mother-mother for him and wished us safe and happy travels."

She laughed when she saw their incredulous expressions. She was determined not to tell Piper's crucial role.

"That is all he said?," 'Lon asked disbelievingly, 'I expected a lot of huffing and puffing. I guess I misjudged him."

"I do not think Piper was very heartbroken about our departure either." Avené put in.

"Ha! Very heartbroken,' Manny sniggered, 'she could barely contain her joy. The witch!"

"Now now Manny I doubt that is entirely true. Yes Piper did not slip into a catatonic state from fear of losing us but what did you want her to do? She has her future with a-Carrab to think about as we have ours to think about. Do not think ill of either Piper or a-Carrab. Besides none of you are very broken up about leaving them."

Ever maternal, well sort of. Mada was the closest thing the children had had to a mother. Now more than ever she realized that she had to refine her performance as a mother to make the trip, not to mention the future, smoother.

"Still their reasons were far from pure. Piper wanted us gone not for the sake of our... future but for herself. a-Carrab wanted us to stay not because he would miss us but to work the land." Manny said.

That was the truth. What could she say?

They had taken the back roads to avoid the where's and whys. They had not run away completely. Mavrik had thought it prudent to inform some of the key keeps people of their departure. And none of them had any close friends they were leaving behind. Maybe Lon.

"How did Oreel take the news of your leaving? She must be very upset." Mada said unable to curb her curiosity though she vowed regularly to stay out of Lon's business.

"I did not tell her."

Mada was mildly surprised. She did think it was rather callous of Lon.

"You know Lon you have to learn to be a little more sensitive to other people's feelings."

"She knew where I stood. I never promised union or forever-after."

"True, but that is hardly reason to not say goodbye."

"If you are so worried about Oreel's feelings why did you not go say goodbye to her?"

"You should have done right by her." Mavrik who had not seemed like he was paying attention to their conversation put in.

"I pity the girl you do deem worthy to take the trouble to make some effort with." Mada said allowing herself to half wish that girl would be her.

"You cannot force these things. Either you love someone or you do not. And I do not love Oreel! And I would rather not hear any more about her thank you!" Lon retorted unnecessarily harshly.

"Very well," Mada answered unperturbed, "So Mavrik how far is it to Derash keep?"

"You are worse than the younger ones Mada we have not even been on the road for an hour span!"

"I know. I guess I expected some kind of excitement. I do not know."

"What excitement? The surrounding keeps are more or less the same as Tamrip keep."

"I guess that means there will be no dragon slaying then." a-a-Alorya asked with disappointment dripping from every syllable.

"Why would you want to kill dragons?" Mada asked.

"Because they are evil." a-a-Alorya said in a matter of fact voice.

"Because they are like mystics." Avené added.

"We are the true beings," Manny said proudly, "and it is our right to kill them..."

"Are you serious? Who has ever seen an evil mystical dragon or an ordinary dragon for that matter? They are thinking feeling beings like us and I think they are kind and noble..."

"Kind and noble!?" Every one shouted incredulously.

"Yes kind and noble. Think about it. Most other beings are physically... and mentally, stronger than Arshean beings. The mystics are so powerful they need not bother with exercising physical strength. But do they go around slaying weaker beings claiming it is their right?. Do they?," No one answers, "No they do not or at least we have not heard of any cases which means it is rare."

"How can you say that? What of Fente's house? Her house was burnt down by that mystic Alo-er. They lost everything." Lon joined in reminding her.

"I did not expect that from you Lon. But then another beings side of the story has never been of any interest to you."

She said pointedly at Lon deciding to steer their minds away from mystics.

"I thought I was not going to hear any more about Oreel." Lon answered in mock exasperation.

"Brother dear who said anything about Oreel?" Mada replied sweetly.

"You are determined to see me in love and married off. Well it will never happen."

Mavrik and Mada laughed at Lon's solemn tone.

"You will find yourself in love when you least expect it and maybe even with the most unlikely girl. And you will live happily ever after." Mavrik said sagely making a so-so, maybe-maybe not motion with his hand on the happily ever after part.

"That I do not doubt," There was that funny tone again Mada thought, 'That I do not doubt at all. But the married part, that is never going to happen." Lon said sadly.

He loved Mada, would always love Mada but he was not completely delusional about their situation.

"Honestly Lon do not be so dramatic. I am quite sure you will be following in a-Carrab's footsteps very shortly."

"No Mavrik I do believe I will not. You three do not fall too far behind!"

They had slowed down. They were huddled together looking at a leysh Manny had found. When had his life ceased being that simple Lon wondered.

Mada always felt a little twinge of pain when they spoke of mystics. She would never be able to tell them. The risk that they would not understand was too great to take. She was inclined to believe that they would not understand. She would not be able to bear their looking at her as if she was some sort of monster. She sighed inwardly when she thought that maybe she was a monster. After what she had done. She quickly set to casting such thoughts out of her mind. The last thing she or anyone needed was her sinking into an emotional sinkhole while they were on the road.

Tamrip keep

"It is daymeal time. Where do you think they are?" a-Carrab asked his wife between mouthfuls.

"They took plenty of food with them. So they are probably sitting somewhere chewing on dried capar meat trying to figure out what to say to you when they return."

a-Carrab laughed and refocused on his daymeal. Piper disliked having to lie to her husband but what attractive alternative did she have. None. If she told him he was likely to follow them. And enough time had not passed for them to be adequately far away. He might just catch them and may very well persuade them to come back. Besides it is not like they were dead or gone forever. And she had not chased them away. They had gone of their own free will. He would see them again, eventually.

Greop keep

Sitting under a poit tree on the outskirts of Greop keep they had their daymeal about one and half hour span after daymeal time.

"This is a lovely keep. Are you sure we do not have even half an hour span to look around?" a-a-Alorya whined.

She and Manny had their hearts set on adventure. And so far none had come their way. Not one troll, dragon, warlock, or witch.

"No, besides I have been there and there is nothing to see. It is very much like Tamrip keep." Mavrik nicely forbade the touring.

"Besides we have to get a move on. We do want to reach mother-mothers this year span." Mada said getting up and dusting crumbs off her tunic.

Derash keep

They made surprisingly good time. They reached Derash keep just before midnight. They had crossed to the other end but kept within the keep territory. The outskirts of Derash keep would be safe enough. Their bellies were taken care of but their feet were aching. Mada had been contemplating flying them all to Tarrent keep but that was simply too risky. If anything, anything at all, were to go wrong she would send them plummeting to their graves. She would not be able to save them all or even just one. That one was most likely to be herself. She was not willing to gamble their lives. It would be easier to keep herself airborne than another being. A mere being, as Sar would put it. A mystic could at least assist you in rescuing them in some way, right? If only she had paid more attention when Sar had tried to teach her. There was no point in berating herself about it now. She should concentrate on the present and think of something that would help them now. But what could she do.

"Let us rest a while here, besides it would be safer if we stayed within the keep for the night. And also I am exhausted."

"Bless you Mavrik,' Avené said, 'finally!"

"Well, putting his arm around Avené' shoulders, not right here I was thinking maybe over by that pool"

Avené and the others groaned.

"I was thinking we could soak our feet for a bit?"

They all, except Mavrik, ran to the pool and began removing their shoes.

"I thought you might like the idea." Mavrik said, laughing.

No water had ever felt so cool and so wonderful to their feet. The girls were up to their knees in the water. The boys sat by the edges of the pool with their legs, only up to their ankles, in the water.

Manny was aching to jump in and splash with the girls but he so badly wanted to fit in with his brothers who until now he had never spent an entire day with. He wanted to be "grown up" and

"manly" too. In fact he had never spent so much time with any of them except a-a-Alorya who was his constant companion.

As the girls played in the nightlight light Lon was stuck, as always, by how beautiful Mada was. She was coloured green. A beautiful luminous living green. A green that was mutable. She had removed her head scarf and had let loose her silver tresses which also had a green tint. She made an effort not to change when people other than family were around. So she tried mostly to keep company with the family only. Which frustrated her suitors. This kaleidoscopic complexion caused a-Alorya no end of worry. She was sure that the keep people would think her daughter was a mystic. She was able to halt the changes when other people were around (due chiefly to the assistance of Sar). Why, a-Alorya had thought time and again, was she not golden or brown like her siblings? She had to be coloured like her and her mother-mother, but a-Alorya had never seen her mother change shades like that. She had never changed shades like that herself. Mada could manage all the shades in the spectrum between green and blue. Just then a lively rich olive green.

Lon was not the only one admiring the olive beauty. Unbeknownst to them one warlord Cas-hé and his men were watching them. One minute they were looking at an unremarkable group of farmers and children then the next moment one of them lit up. From the ends of her hair to the tips of her toes she was aglow. She seemed to be a celestial being. They had never seen anyone shimmer and change colour like that. Trivan, one of the Lord Cas-hé's men, had seen a couple of green women. The only other green beings he had seen were mystics, including a water sprite. But this, this he had never seen and he told the rest of the men as much. They debated on what kind of mystic she was for that she was a mystic was certain.

Cas-hé quite besotted by the shimmering girl decided to go to them and introduce himself. What were those children doing at the outskirts of Derash keep they had wondered. The two young men with them were tall and well-built but young men nonetheless. He, Cas-hé, decided to go see them alone so as not to frighten them. The last thing he wanted to do was scare them away before he got to know more about the girl. Before he reached them she had been shimmering but came to a sudden and complete stop when he addressed them.

"Good night!" He called from a couple of feet.

All frolicking stopped and six pairs of wary eyes were upon him. The nightlight was bright enough to see reasonably clearly when you were close

enough to something. And being closer to them they saw that they were farmers. His expensive military garb was not lost on them.

"Good night to you." Avené answered in a cautious tone.

Now at the edge of the pool, he bowed to her. At which she and a-a-Alorya giggled. He was a very handsome man.

A little embarrassed Lon and Mavrik cleared their throats and quickly said good night to the stranger. Who Lon and Mavrik noticed could barely keep his eyes of Mada. Mada and the twins also said their good nights.

"I am Warlord Cas-hé from Ramily keep."

The "warlord" part greatly worried Lon, Mavrik and Mada but they politely introduced themselves. The children were now out of the water inspecting the red munmo that had come with him. Even Manny who had secretly vowed to give up all activities and interests of youth could not resist this new curiosity.

"Well we are from the non warring Tamrip keep." Mavrik answered putting great emphasis on the non-warring part. Which made Cas-hé laugh.

"Fear not, I have no intention of declaring war on you. I just came to say good night to you and introduce myself," and added as an afterthought, "And my men."

"Your men?" Mavrik asked, looking around and seeing no one, hoping that none of the worry he felt sounded in his voice. This was just what they needed, trouble on their first night out. Besides himself and Lon the others would be completely useless in a fight, or so he thought.

"Yes my men. You have nothing to worry about, truly. We mean you no harm. I only came over to offer whatever assistance we can."

He sounded sincere enough Mavrik thought. But one never knew what was "truly" going on in another's mind. To Lon he sounded very suspect and could not be trusted. And did he have to stare at Mada like that?

"Anything you need," He offered, "Anything." He added pointedly to Mada.

"Thank you. Well it has been a pleasure to meet you. I did not think people like you existed..."

"People like me?" He cut in, his brow furrowed. Did she mean warriors. As they came from a non-warring keep. And he was golden coloured like the twins and Mavrik. People like him?

"Yes. People like you. People who are willing to help complete strangers. Thank you very much for offering but it has been a long day and for the life of me I cannot think of a single thing that we need right now," she could think of several, "But thank you again for offering."

It was a thank you and a dismissal. Handsome though he was, very handsome indeed, Mada had never had the patience or desire to blush or gush. Much to Lon's relief.

Cas-hé was a little disappointed but not deterred. He was accustomed to women falling all over him or at least getting a definite response, almost always positive, no matter how well concealed the response. She was spirited. This one was not going to be easily got. But he was going to get her, he always did.

"Well. Okay. Then sleep well. I will see you in the morning."

"Sweet sleep." They all said in unison. He bowed ever so slightly and moved away. Conversation resumed when they were sure he was out of earshot.

"Do you think he saw me changing?"

It was obvious he had. No one answered her. They had behaved as they would have done when someone from their keep had seen anything they should not. They had somehow gotten away with it all those times. But they doubted that Cas-hé could be so easily tricked into believing it had been a figment of his imagination.

In fact here in the open and with the nightlight so bright several people must have seen her. Cas-hé had said he and his men had seen them. How many men? He, Cas-hé, had acted naturally as if he had not seen anything but he definitely must have. For they only realised his presence when he was just a couple feet spans from them. Who else had seen them? The outskirts of Derash keep had seemed deserted.

"If he did he did not show any sign that he had and I am positive he saw you. Warlord Cas-hé is dangerous and we should steer clear of him and his men. And Mada..."

"Yes Lon?"

"Please do not change anymore. I am sure that changing is an unnatural state for you but it's too much of a risk here."

"I will not change anymore in the open."

She felt bad that she had brought the unwanted attention of Lord Cas-hé and his men and who knows who else upon them. She had to be more careful. The last thing she wanted was to have them burnt at the stake because of her. She was now sitting by the edge of the pool with the nightlight light reflecting on her face. Her thoughts must have shown on her face because Lon promptly put his arm around her to comfort her.

"It was not your fault Mada. I would have cautioned you but I was also sure this area was deserted. There are no fires. It is a warm night and the nightlight is so bright tonight."

Mada laid her head on Lon's shoulder. He was a good kind and loving brother, always there to comfort and take care of her.

"Why did we not see them?" Lon thought out loud.

"They must be covered by bushes and or are in tents maybe. Being soldiers they must be very good at camouflaging themselves," Mavrik answered, "I'm sure they are on higher ground than us. Still we should have seen some sign of their presence right?"

"Meaning they are watching us right now." Mada said miserably.

"Yes and I think we should get some rest."

"Sleep at a time like this?" Manny and a-a-Alorya, the young adventurers asked.

"Yes," Mada answered them, "We cannot do anything about anything right now. It is the middle of the night and from here on out it is uncharted territory for us. So it is best we stay put until the daylight rises. We cannot fight them and we cannot outrun them. Our best bet is to stay put. Now someone help me with the tent."

The tent was set up and it was decided that Mada and the children would sleep in the tent. Mavrik and Lon stayed out and took turns with sentry duty. What they would actually do should Cas-hé and his men attack was anyone's guess. Not much was the likely one. They were farmers and other than that Lon was a hunter and Mavrik was a scholar.

Mada lay in her bedding looking at the tent ceiling. She had to decide what to do. But what. She could feel out Lord Cas-hé and his men. This was one of Sar's lessons she had paid attention to. She simply had to locate them and get a feel for their moods and cautiously enter their minds. But Sar had likened entering someone's mind without their permission to rape. Abuse. Using superior power to force someone into something they did not agree to. And would probably not agree to given the choice. Sar had also said a mind was a base and vulgar thing and she would do well to stay out of them. She knew this from personal experience. So she had never forced her way into anyone's mind. Besides who would ever willingly let their mind be penetrated by another? If it was ever to be done Mada reckoned it would have to be by force. By just listening to their thoughts from the outside she could shield herself. But if she entered or tried to enter their minds and there was a mystic amongst them the mystic would sense her. As much as she would like to be with another mystic Sar had told her to trust no one. She had defended mystics to the others. Anyway mystic or not all beings could be driven by self-service. Mada began deep even breathing to help relax herself. Clearing her mind and performing the mental exercises necessary to create a barrier to her mind. Remaining thus for some time. Then she began to feel out lord Cas-hé and his men. She began to pick through the thoughts of her siblings which she ignored and passed. She went further and many thoughts and feelings streamed in from many directions, there were probably several minds, sentient and non-sentient around her. Filtering these she was soon with Cas-hé's men. She found their location, in relation to herself, was north and indeed on higher ground as Mavrik had suspected.

There was something or someone else there. She was sure she felt a presence. It was gone just as quickly as she had found it. She was not sure if there had been anything at all it had happened so fast. She fanned out going away from the soldiers but there was nothing. Could it have been another mystic? Maybe just her nervous mind playing tricks on her. She went back to the soldiers thoughts. There was someone there using their power. No

on closer investigation it turned out to be a thing. A power source, a sort of shield perhaps. She could still sense the people within it. She better tread very carefully. What magic was the warlord practicing, Mada wondered. He was dangerous as Lon had said. Cas-hé and his men were north of her. Did she dare look outside? No. She could not risk them knowing she knew where they were. Especially since it seemed they did not want to be found. For she had looked around, all around, before she had gotten in the tent and had seen nothing. But there were definitely there.

From the warriors Mada picked up a lot thoughts. Most of which she would rather not explore. She tried to concentrate so she could isolate Cas-hé's thoughts. Before she had homed in on him she caught a flash of herself shimmering and a host of other green women. All but one was an Arshean being. The one was a water sprite. The water sprite was blue-green. More blue than green though. She had never met one. Sar had shown her one through their minds. So they had seen her. They knew she was a mystic. From the thought Mada could sense bewilderment. They did not know what kind of a mystic. This truly was worse than she had thought. If only Sar were here. She would know what to do. To seek Sar out?. She did have her own life with the other dryads. Was it fair to bring her into this without knowing exactly what she was up against. It could turn out to be nothing. She decided not to call on Sar just yet. Mada sought out Cas-hé once more. She found him. He was a couple of feet from the rest of the men but still within the strange barrier. He too was thinking of her. He was imagining her naked and lying with him... She did not wish to wait around for his mind to turn to other things. So she retreated. Without entering his mind and looking for the information she wanted there was nothing she could do. Great power Sar had said.

Now back in her own mind she tried to figure out what to do. She still did not know if Cas-hé was a threat. They had and used power to cloak themselves. But what was she to do if they did make an aggressive move. To pick up in the night? They would be heard for sure. Her lifting them out of Derash keep would be their best hope if that was what she decided to do. Or would she be exposing herself and her family to unnecessarily. To lift them out of Derash keep, very close to the ground of course, would require a large amount of energy. Some mystic was sure to sense that energy. To risk confrontation with a possibly hostile mystic or to stay and face Cas-hé and his men. Which right now was the greater evil?

After mulling this question over and over again in her mind she finally decided on staying put. There were bound to be other people about tomorrow when the daylight rose. Hopefully none who had seen her display. Having other people around might stop Cas-hé from doing anything and give them a chance to flee. Also she would have to explain to her anti-mystic siblings why they should not be frightened of waking up where ever she will have to land before the daylight rose. Or worse, they would want to know how and who brought them there.

She was a rather lousy mystic. Had power. Could not use power. Cas-hé and his men were not mystics yet they had harnessed and directed power. Their journey could be so much easier if she would, could just use her power. First order of business in the morning, get some kind of transportation without exposing herself. Then she curled up and fell asleep.

Everyone was up before the daylight. Mavrik had cautioned them all to behave naturally and not hurried so as not to alarm the warlord's men. Who were also up and about themselves and clearly visible.

"So how are we going to leave Derash keep without "alarming" them Mavrik?" Mada asked.

Lon and Mavrik glanced at each other. Her feelings of helplessness had made her a little testy.

"When people are up and about we will simply walk away. I hardly think they would try to make us sta..."

"They might follow us." Mada cut in.

Follow us. This alarmed Manny and the girls.

"Follow us! For what? Tamrip keep has never been at war and we have no

fends, nothing that is of use to them." a-a-Alorya stated.

"Mada was just being dramatic. As you said why would they bother with us?" Mavrik said lightly and evenly to calm the children.

"But then that man did look at Mada rather closely. In fact he was staring." a-a-Alorya said to everyone's surprise.

There was a stunned silence for a while.

"Oh a-a-Alorya really. Why would he go to all that trouble for me. And he did say he did not want to cause trouble. What an imagination you have." Mada said trying to laugh casually but failing dismally.

She had thought that the children were busy with the munmo and not paying any attention to Cas-hé or their brief conversation with him. The twins at twelve year spans were growing up. She would have to keep a closer eye on them.

"I doubt they would just attack for no reason. You three gather some fire wood. We should have our morning meal and be on our way. Hurry hurry!" Lon said to change the subject and to get things moving. The sooner they were out of Derash keep and away from warlord Cas-hé the better.

"They are clearly visible now yet we could not see them at all last night." Mavrik stood with his hands on his hips surveying the terrain as if the land held the answer to his question.

"I reckon it is some kind of sorcery," Lon said, "Do you suppose warlord Cas-hé or one of his men is a mystic?"

Mada was a little startled at this. She had not thought anyone else was thinking the same thing as her.

"That would explain a lot and o..."

"Brothers of mine you two really do have a wild imagination!"

"Think about it Mada. The night light was full and bright. Look," he pointed, "where they are. We should have been able to see them last night." Mavrik said still 'looking around' for an answer.

"Maybe you are right. Yes. Maybe. Would that not make them all the more dangerous?" Mada agreed miserably.

"You know. This whole mystic thing is rather abstruse."

"How so Lon?" Mada queried.

Mada did not want to show too much interest in mystics when they were spoken about. She had resolved long ago not to be drawn

into discussions about mystics. But who would not want to defend themselves if they were being portrayed as an abomination incessantly.

"I mean... where do they come from. Why are they here on this..."

"Why! Do you think you have more right than 'them' to be here? They come into the world the exact same way as most beings or things. Their having abilities and powers you do not understand is hardly reason to..." Mada shouted

beginning to shimmer. Although she had asked herself those very questions a million times.

"Calm down Mada. I did not mean it that way. You are always ready to defend them. And you are shimmering. In broad daylight!" Lon said.

"Sorry. I... It is not fair that is all."

"You cannot afford to be all wild and abounded..."

"That is it!" Mada squealed with delight as a thought struck her.

"What!" Mavrik and Lon said looking around.

"Wild karakees."

"Wild karakees?" They both said.

"Yes for transportation. Lon you could track them and..."

"Mada."

"...we could use the..." Mada carried on without even hearing her name.

"Mada!"

"What?"

"Even if we caught some it would take a long time to break them. Time we cannot afford..." Lon was saying.

She was laughing and jumping up and down. Why had she not thought of it before. She could control one easily and get them to their mother-mother faster.

"Oh Lon, Mavrik! More faith brothers."

Her brothers looked at her as if she had lost her mind. Karakees are large grey octapeds and were notoriously hard to catch and tame. But were very good once they were trained. They were not sentient beings.

Instead of taking ages taming and training it she could reach its mind. She could do it, she had to do it.

"Lon let us go. Mavrik mind the children we will be back in a little while."

"Mada..."

"Please trust me Lon. Please."

She looked at him with a beguiling look in her big dark aquamarine eyes which was always infallible on Lon. He thought it was a crazy bad idea. She was already skipping away. What had come over her? Some kind of sorcery? From that Cas-hé perhaps.

"Mada for the..." Mavrik was saying walking towards her to hold her.

"It is okay Mavrik I will go with her." Lon said knowing how difficult Mada could be and feeling, as always, quite indulgent when it came to her.

"Oh and please try to find out about getting a cart or wagon or something from the people you know here Mavrik." Mada said skipping away.

Mavrik was left smiling to himself as he thought of his friends here in Derash keep. He had already decided on not dropping in on them. But suddenly

it did not seem such a bad idea. And it beat standing around the outskirts worrying about warlord Cas-hé and his men.

The children finished gathering the fire wood and had returned to their little camp.

"Where are they going?"

"Do not worry Avené they will be back very shortly."

Avené was not the only one curious about their departure.

"You say she stopped changing colour when you got to where they were?"

"Yes Trivan, but what is she. I thought about it all night."

"I bet you did." Trivan said with a knowing smile.

"Yeah well,' clearing his throat, 'where are they off to do you think?"

"Not far. Not without the rest. Where would a "farmer" mystic be going?"

"I do not know but I intend to find out."

Trivan was quiet trying to decide whether to voice his thoughts or not. He decided to proceed.

"We ought to have left already. Over warlord Khan is waiting for us to retur..."

"I have thought of that. And I have decided that you men go ahead without me..."

"Bu..."

Putting his hand up to silence Trivan.

"I know Over-warlord Khan will not be pleased but I have to get..."

"Say no more Cas-hé. Just be careful though. She is a mystic and you do not know what kind, how powerful or her intentions."
Trivan said gravely.

"I doubt she is dangerous. I mean she is so..."

"Do not let her pretty face affect your judgment. Many a man has been lost to the sirens song."

"Do not worry she has no feathers..." Cas-hé joked trying to lighten Trivan's mood.

"This is not a joke Cas-hé, be careful."

Cas-hé decided to follow them and speak to Mada while she was alone. Not completely alone but close enough alone.

Chapter Three

Derash outlands

They moved out of the keep territory. As they did not belong to Derash keep and were not visiting anyone there they could not hunt in the keeps territory. They could have asked Mavrik's friends about hunting within the keep but that would have meant too much exposure and twice as many questions. Lon got down to the business of tracking the karakees. Mada had considered simply scanning the area with her mind but realized she would have to explain how, she who had never done any tracking in her life, had tracked and caught a karakee. Also she did not relish the prospect of scanning the whole area trying to figure out which were karakee minds. She had opted not to search for the karakees using her mind. Had she done so she would have known that they had company. The "easy" taming and training of it would still have to be explained. She would have to cross that bridge when and if the question was asked. Because the transportation was too good and easy to pass up. Lon as a good tracker and hunter soon found a group of karakees grazing by a lake. Mada could not decide which she wanted and which would be best suited for them. She decided on a mature female. The last thing she needed was a playful young mind which would be difficult to manage. She reached out to the one she wanted. She got it to come over. She did not have the time or desire to befriend it. To dominate it would be best. Anyway it was not a sentient being. It would not be traumatized by it she figured.

"Get back." Lon whispered as he pulled Mada back.

"I do not think it will hurt us Mont...," He pulled out a dagger, 'No!" Mada shouted as she tried to get it front of Lon.

"Please Mada this is not a game it is a wild animal."

The karakee came and stood a few feet from them. Mada relaxed and as soon as Lon loosed his grip she ran to the karakee and patted its head. It was enormous. She wondered what Lon planned on doing with a dagger against a karakee.

"You are a good tracker indeed. What should we call her? Mumps I think. What do you think?"

At that very moment Lon could have been knocked over with a feather. Wild animals did not just walk up to people and let them pat them. It must be an escaped tame karakee. But tame karakees were not known to ever return to the wild even after being abandoned by their owners. They would loiter near arsheans or who ever had owned them till someone else took them or until they died.

"Mada please back away slowly from it, slowly."

"It is perfectly tame. Come it will not hurt us."

"If it is tame then it probably belongs to someo..."

"I do not mean it is tamed but that it is wild but friendly. This is great. Now we have transportation."

After a lot of persuasion Lon finally agreed to come near the karakee. For the life of him he could not imagine what would have made it willingly leave its herd and come to them. And to top it all be willing to leave the herd and go with them. Mada spent every spare moment conditioning the karakees mind. She did not want to spend the rest of the journey working to keep a mental hold over the karakee. All minds were base. Even an animal mind was base at a certain level.

As they were making their way through the Derash outlands Lon suddenly cried out in pain and fell to his knees clutching his head. A moment later he was screaming and writhing on his side. Then he went completely still and quiet. She was certain he was dead. She ran and knelt at his side to check with a trembling hand for any sign of life. Through the mercy of the prime god and goddess he was alive. But barely. Then he seemed to be murmuring something. She lowered her ear to his mouth but before she could hear what he was saying he began screaming and writhing again.

"Lon what is it." Mada asked trying to remove his hands from his head so she could see what was the matter.

She could not budge his hands and his rolling around did not make the task any easier. Then just as suddenly as he had started he stopped. All that was left to show that something had happened at all was his heavy breathing, a sweat beaded brow and a bloody nose. She opened her oilskin flask and gave him a drink. She knew what had happened. Someone had entered Lon's mind. Sar had described to her what signs to look for. But the

murmuring was new to her. Maybe having one's mind invaded affected people in different ways. She made a quick search of the surrounding land with both her mind and eyes. She found Cas-hé. She was careful not to suddenly look in his direction. Her first inclination was to attack in some way but she held back. There might be others who had hidden themselves. But she felt no hostile feelings from him and she could sense no extraordinary power coming from him. Save his cloaking magic. It could not have been him who had just read Lon's mind. She searched again and found nothing, whoever it was had closed their mind. All it took was calming your thoughts and blending in with your surroundings. She made another sweep and quickly turned her mind back to the karakee. The last thing they needed was to lose it. She felt exposed here. The sooner they returned to the Derash outskirts and joined other people the better. But who had it been. So she had not imagined the mind she had so briefly encountered last night.

"Are you okay?" she asked Lon as she helped him to his feet.

"I think so. I just had this sudden excruciating pain in my head. I have never felt anything like it... it... It was so strange. Let us get back to the others."

"Here," She wiped the blood from his nose, "Are you sure you do not want to rest for a while?"

"No. I feel a little tired but whatever it was is gone. I can make it back."

Ordinarily she would have insisted they rest but she did not want to be out here with a hostile mystic hiding in the bushes plotting his or her next move.

Cas-hé, who had followed them, watched all this with interest. From the capturing of the karakee, only with a lot less astonishment that Lon, to Lon's strange illness. It had been confirmed to him she was a mystic. What kind of a mystic he still did not know. The wild karakee just left its herd and came to them without any visible sign of coaxing. Her brother had been frightened by it but she had been calm. How had she done it? Mind control? Cast a spell over the beast? Trivan was right, he had to be very carefull. He wondered what disease ailed the young man. He was not close enough to hear them talking. She had looked around as if she knew the attack had come from someone else. He had had to stand very still himself. He knew from experience that sometimes the best thing to do is stay put.

Movement would most likely draw attention to you. He had looked around himself and he had seen no one. At first he had thought she had been the one hurting her brother.

Derash keep

Mavrik took the younger children and set out for his friend Tier-rah's home. They had not seen each other for over a year span. He smiled as he recalled their first encounter.

Mavrik had accompanied his father to Derash keep. While his father was seeing to his business he had gone off with Bilnem, the son of the man who his father did business with. Naturally Bilnem had taken him to his friends. One of which was Tier-rah, and he was throwing a celebration that day. Tier-rah was a young man of pale blue and could be best described as delicate. He had light blue hair vulnerable blue-grey eyes and was so graceful he seemed to float where ever he went. He loved celebrations and having a good time, whilst Mavrik was a bookworm and something of a recluse. They hit it off immediately. Bilnem had taken Mavrik to the celebration at Tier-rah's house. Mavrik had been instantly enchanted by him when Bilnem had pointed him out. He could barely contain his emotions as the blue vision drifted towards them. Tier-rah was a kent of the Phimroc Kentish group. He wore the flowing Kentish gowns which added to the illusion of his floating. One thing had led to another and they found themselves alone in Tier-rah's reading room. After looking at a couple of books he was standing before the full length mirror. He looked at the reflection of the room against his. He looked drab in his farmer browns against the beautiful cream titri wood furniture and Tier-rah's bright white robe and a silver band around his head with a clear opal piece at the middle.

"So what do you think so far of our keep?" Tier-rah asked as he came and stood beside Mavrik and placed a wine glass in his hand.

"It is beautiful. Far more interesting than Tamrip keep."

"Oh. Do you think I am too short?" Tier-rah asked from the blue.

"What?"

"Do you think I am too short?"

"I ah I..."

"Come now. You must have an opinion. I saw you watching me all evening."

Mavrik was embarrassed. He felt flustered. What could he say. Could Tier-rah have guessed what he had been thinking? Had he been that transparent? To think such things of him. A kent to top it all off.

"I did not mean to embarrass you I was just curious." Tier-rah said, smiling coyly over the rim of his silver goblet as he took a sip.

"No... you are perfect." Lon whispered slightly breathlessly. Tier-rah had to strain to hear him.

Tier-rah moved and was in front of Mavrik. He ran his hand across Mavrik's chest. Feeling the coarse peese wool of his tunic. He stilled over Mavrik's heart which was beating at a terrific speed. He grabbed a handful of Mavrik's tunic and as he, Tier-rah, leaned towards Mavrik he also pulled Mavrik towards him.

"No. We cannot. Should not..." Mavrik protested very weakly.

It was but a token resistance. And Tier-rah kissed him full on the lips. This was not Mavrik's first kiss but with the way it felt it might as well have been. The other people he had kissed had been female. He had always known how he was, never dared to make sure but now it had all been enchantingly proven true to him.

"Thank you. But I am hardly perfect." Tier-rah said nonchalantly.

He went over and sat on the reading settee under the window. Placed there to take advantage of the natural light. Mavrik sensed that Tier-rah wanted him to follow him. He went and sat next to him.

It was Mavrik's first carnal experience. It was not as awkward as Mavrik had feared it would be as Tier-rah was very experienced. Afterwards he had been very quiet which caused Tier-rah to ask how he was.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes it is just that..." He hesitated afraid what he wanted to ask would break the spell that held them.

"Just that what?"

"Well it is none of my business but..."

"But?"

"But are you not in a Kentish group?"

"Yes. The Phimro Kentish group. Worshipping the..."

"Demigod and goddess Phimroa and Phimroc of purity."

"Yes purity. What a joke."

"A joke? I want to join a Kentish group... what have we done."
Mavrik said regretfully.

Mavrik got up and began dressing. He stopped for a second to look at his guilty reflection in the mirror. Tier-rah stayed on the rug lying on his side smiling at Mavrik and watching him as he got dressed.

"Get up and get dressed someone might come in." Mavrik said in a panicky voice.

"You did not seem to mind my being a Kent a short while ago."
Tier-rah replied not moving an inch span.

"Well I... I... I..."

There was no excuse for what he had done.

"It is okay. There is nothing wrong with being the way we are. I am not going to not be in a Kentish group just because of it. It's stupid and unfair."

"We are nolande..."

"Do not say that ugly stupid word," Tier-rah cut in bitterly, "we have as much right to be Kents as anyone else. Okay, maybe a Kentish Group of purity was not the best choice but it is the only one in Derash keep and I wish to remain in Derash keep."

"But you have to live with it. Knowing you are lying to your Kents."

This did not anger Tier-rah for he had thought along very much the same lines once upon a time. He saw he would have to help the young man.

"You mean the same way you lie to yourself and others?"

"I..."

"Your desire or reason to become a kent is no more pure or noble than mine was. You, just like me, want to escape the world. The only difference being I do not deny who I am. You choose it as a way to make yourself feel better about a wrong you think you are committing whi..."

"It is not a way to..."

"Oh. Then which Kentish group do you want to join and why? Which do you feel spiritually in tune with?"

"I... I just want to be free." Mavrik chocked out.

He fell to his knees before the beautiful blue sage. He had been tormented by this for so long, could it really be that simple. His head bowed as tears rolled down his face. Shaking with quiet sobs. Tier-rah got up and put his arms around him kissing his temple.

"There there,' Tier-rah soothed, giving him a squeeze, 'We are all who we are. We can either choose to accept it and be happy as arsheanly possible. Or we can spend the rest of our lives battling ourselves."

Tier-ran began undressing him.

"Which do you choose Mavrik?"

His lack of resistance clearly stated which he chose. Any reservations about Tier-rah being a kent or the consequences of being a nolander and being caught seeped out of the pores of his mind. All that mattered was here and now. The bliss of here and now.

Mavrik was brought back to the present by someone tugging at his tunic.

"Mavrik. Mavrik..." Avené said.

"Oh ah wha... what?" Mavrik stammered.

"Are you okay Mavrik?" Avené asked looking at his face closely.

"Yes. Yes I am. Sorry I must have just gotten caught up in my thoughts."

"I say," a-a-Alorya said, "They must have been really good thoughts. You were a million mile spans away. Where were you?" a-a-Alorya added slyly sensing a good story.

"Oh I was just remembering my last visit here."

"Really. Well it must have been a very pleasurable visit then."

Mavrik was a little startled.

"Pleasurable? Why do you say that?"

"You were smiling and had this funny look on your face." Manny joined in.

"Honestly you two. Now behave yourselves, we are almost at the home of my friend Tier-rah. And maybe I just have a funny face?"

"Yes you do." Manny said laughing.

Mavrik could feel his pulse quickening despite himself. He had to get a grip. The last thing he needed was that. Especially with his brothers and sisters here.

Derash Outlands

The wild karakee had just left its group and had just come to them. Her brother had been frightened by it but she had not been scared. How had she done it? Mind control? A spell had been cast over the beast? Trivan was right, he had to tread very carefully. Very carefully indeed, he was a successful Warlord and here he was hiding in the bushes spying on a young girl and her brother. Had the mystic cast a spell on him? He would have never risked angering the Over Warlord for anyone else.

They were now making their way back to the Derash outskirts. Mada scanned the area now and again and all she found was Cas-hé following them. Lon led the karekee with a rope.

"I still cannot believe it. It is so docile. It is..

"Good morn."

They both looked up to see Cas-hé leading his trat by its reins.

"Warlord Cas-hé. Good morn." Lon said unable to keep his irritation completely out of his voice.

"Good morn." Mada said coldly.

He realized they were not pleased to see him. He would have to watch what he says and does.

Mada's mind was racing. Had he been watching them all along. He used magic could he have been the one who used the magic and concealed it in some way?

"What are you doing out here? Scouting for the enemy?" Mada asked in an icy tone.

"No. Just walking. Seeing the land." Cas-hé answered cautiously.

"Ah," Mada said suddenly smiling brightly, "Well we were just looking for karakee. Which as you can see we found. We thought it would be more convenient for us than trats." She rushed to explain.

If she laid it all out on her own there would be no room for questions. If he was the one who had entered Lon's mind angering

him now would not help anything. And if he was not the one she would be being rude for no reason.

"I see. Where, if you do not mind my asking, did you find a tame karakee out here?" He asked. Making his tone curious but light. Wondering what had caused the sudden change towards him.

He knew. Somehow she knew he knew.

"Well..."

"It is not tame,' 'Lon cut her off, 'and it just came right up to us. It was strange. So lucky, these things are a hassle to catch, tame and train. But this one seems especially docile." Lon said unable to stem his own wonderment and also wanting to cut their conversation with Cas-hé short.

He was already leading the karakee away.

"We have to go." Mada said looking at her brother who was already a couple of paces ahead.

"Do you mind if I walk back to the campsite with you?"

"Why would we mind"

"I would not want to intru..."

"If you are coming let's go! We have a long journey ahead of us Mada." Lon practically barked out.

They walked in silence a little of the way.

"You sure were lucky..."

"Yes we were,' Mada quickly answered Cas-hé before he could continue talking about their 'luck', 'Oddest thing I have ever seen."

"The oddest?" Cas-hé asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes the oddest." She replied smiling genuinely.

Derash keep

At Tier-rah's they were received by Tier-rah's man servant Minoe. Who ushered them into the waiting room as he went to summon his master. Mavrik felt a little apprehensive as he sat on Tier-rah's crimson waiting room seats. He felt as if the walls would at any moment blurt out to his young siblings what they had witnessed. Was this a good idea? Mavrik thought.

"Thank you Minoe." Mavrik looked up to see Tier-rah floating towards them.

He looked just as, if not more, beautiful as the last time Mavrik had seen him. They all stood up.

"Tier-rah." Mavrik sighed, breathlessly and barely audibly. But just loud enough to draw puzzled looks from his siblings.

He quickly cleared his throat.

"Tier-rah." He said more firmly as Tier-rah came to a stand in front of them.

"How are you?" Tier-rah said as he smiled at the children. He looked at them all closely. With particular interest in Manny, but not looking for longer than was pardonable.

"I, we. Are okay. It has been a while."

"Yes it has Mavrik." Tier-rah answered looking Mavrik in the eye. Mavrik felt all flustered once more. He felt his body warming to Tier-rah. He had to get a grip on himself, carrying on like a lovesick child.

Tier-rah looked as serene as ever. Which made Mavrik feel even guiltier than before. He had not seen Tier-rah in a while and all he could do was lust after him.

"Let us not just stand here." Tier-rah led the way to one of the sitting rooms.

"Please sit sit." Tier-rah said motioning them to sit.

Mavrik looked good he thought. The younger boy, rather chubby but not half bad. No, not bad at all. There were three others.

Mavrik had said he had three brothers and three sisters. He wondered if the other brothers were as delectable as these two.

"Ah, this is my sister Avené and these are the twins Manny and a-a-Alorya."

He enquired after how the children were. And a-a-Alorya who's heart was in a flutter when Tier-rah had entered the waiting room was now completely in love with him.

"The others are in Derash outlands," Mavrik continued, "and we will be in the keep proper later." Mavrik said, finally getting some measure of control over himself.

"Oh. I look forward to meeting them also. And what of your parents?"

Mavrik attempted what he hoped was an expression of loss and sorrow. He did not want Tier-rah to think he was callous and unfeeling about his parent's death. And he also did not want to go into a long explanation about their relationship with their parents.

"They died," Mavrik said looking down for good measure, "Three days ago." Injecting emotion into his voice.

"Died!"

"Yes a sudden and mysterious illness. Everything was tried but..."

"Oh Mavrik." Tier-rah said putting his hand over Mavrik's. Mavrik looked down at the long delicate fingers curled around his. Let's just say pain over his

parents was not what was going through his mind.

"You poor children, but," Turning back to Mavrik, "What are you doing in Derash keep then?"

"We are on our way to our mother-mothers in the south."

"Oh. Well you must be exhausted travelling all night."

"We camped at the outskirts of your keep..." a-a-Alorya put in, recovering from some of her shyness.

"What! Camped? Mavrik why did you not come here?"

His real reason he could not say out loud in front of the children.

"Well there were six of us... I did not want to be any trouble..."

"Trouble? Oh Mavrik. I would have been happy to have you over. Really where are my manners. Children why do not you follow Minoe to the eating room and he will get you something nice to eat whilst Mavrik and I... catch up."

Such a grand place was bound to have a lot of delicious things to eat. So the children followed Minoe, who had been standing nearby, eagerly. Leaving Mavrik alone with Tier-rah.

"Is there anything I can do Mavrik?" Tier-rah said stroking Mavrik's arm.

"Well we do have a slight problem."

"What?" Tier-rah asked as he continued to stroke Mavrik's arm.

"We need to buy a carriage. Something simple and affordable to get us to our mother-mothers."

"You mean you all left Tamrip keep without... on foot?"

"Our brother, a-Carrab stayed behind with his wife and we left everything with them,' Tier-rah did not comment so he went on, 'We are going to use a karakee. My brother Lon and my sister Mada are in the outlands as we speak, tracking karakee."

"Tracking wild karakee?"

"Yes wild karakee." Mavrik confirmed, feeling a little foolish even if it had not been his idea.

"Then you will be in Derash keep for some time then."

"No we are leaving today."

"To...,' Tier-rah could not help laughing, 'You must know that it will take longer than that to tame and train a karakee."

"Well my sister seems to think she can do it. It's crazy, I know, But we just lost our parents and this could be her delayed reaction to the shock and trauma so I thought what could it hurt to play along?"

"It is very good of you. Then you were always like that. I could get someone to drive you down to your mother-mo..."

"You do not have to go to all that trouble."

"It is no trouble at all."

Mavrik opened his mouth to protest. Which Tier-rah promptly put a silencing finger over."

"It is no trouble Mavrik. I would be happy to do it. I just hope that either your brother or sister has experience with animals because it could be dangerous."

"Lon is quite the expert tracker and trapper."

"Good. So. Have you decided on a Kentish group? But then I suppose not, what with your parents illness and passing on and family obligations and what not. Do you plan to stay in the south permanently?" He was still stroking Mavrik's arm.

"No I do not think... I do not know."

Derash Outlands

"Should we go into town and look for Mavrik or should we wait?" Mada asked Lon.

"And risk missing each other. We should wait. Derash keep is much bigger than Tamrip keep."

"But we could be waiting for hour spans! One of us should go and look for them and the other stays with the karakee."

Mada was eager to see the attractions of Daresh keep during the day. But could not in good sense leave Lon alone with the karakee. How much was taming and how much was the control she still held its mind that kept it calm she did not know. Even more important there was a mystic out here who was trying to hurt Lon or all of them.

Had it been her display last night that had drawn this mystic to them? She was sure it was. This was going to be difficult. She had never encountered a hostile person or mystic before. But then Sar was the only mystic she had ever met.

Lon did not want them to separate for fear of leaving her alone with Cas-hé.

"Then we should go together."

"If we both leave the others could come back."

"If the others come back and only find one of us here it still requires more walking and searching."

"Yet looking for them could save us a lot of time. We could leave sooner Lon!"

Leaving Derash keep and *warlord* Cas-hé sounded very good to Lon.

"Very well," Lon agreed, "You go and I..."

"No! I mean I would rather stay here with the karakee."

That just would not do. Leave her alone with a strange man on the Derash outskirts. True it was partly jealousy and possessiveness but also practicality. There were no people

around. Even Cas-hé's men were gone. Who would come to her aid should anything happen?

"Okay I will go" Lon said smiling at Mada, and turning to Cas-hé, I have a favour to ask of you, if you are able and... willing."

"Cas-hé was more than willing. He was sure Lon was going to ask him to stay and protect his sister. He would get to be alone with her and win over her rather oddly protective brother.

"I am free at the moment. I am at your service."

"Thank you. But you do not even know what it is I want." Lon said evenly but growing all the more suspicious of Cas-hé and liking him even less.

"No no I am happy to help any way I can." Cas-hé said happily.

"Very well. Thank you again. We should move closer to the keep and I was hoping that maybe you,' looking at Cas-hé, 'could help me look for the others."

"Me. Help you..., oh, ah, ah, oh, okay." Cas-hé stammered.

Mada barely stifled a giggle upon seeing the look on Cas-hé's face. It was all Lon could do to suppress a smile himself.

Ha! Lon thought, he had hoped to be left alone with Mada. Not on his watch he would not.

"This is a fantastic idea Lon. Thank you Cas-hé. Remind Mavrik about a carriage or something and *please* hurry."

And so they made their way into the keep proper. Cas-hé left his trat with Mada. She was left alone scanning the area. She soon gave it up as the place was full of people and their thoughts. All that mattered right now was to get as far away as possible from Derash keep and who ever had entered Lon's mind.

Should the person follow she wondered if she had it in her to fight. She had never used her power to harm another person. Would she have it in her to kill if it came to that? She was who she was and she rather liked herself. She feared she would not walk away from this unchanged. If only Sar were there. She had

to discover the source of the threat first, if it really was a threat, before she called on Sar.

Sar was a dryad and they liked their privacy. She would not risk bringing Sar into the open for nothing.

Tamrip keep

Back in Tamrip keep a-Carrab was beginning to worry a little. They had spent the night out and they still had not returned. Could something have happened to them? No. He knew practically everyone in Tamrip and also in Groep keep he would have heard something had anything happened. Comforted still by the notion that they did not have it in them to go far he did not go after them. Piper had joined him in the field to make sure he did not run off to look for them. Every time such an idea popped into his head he voiced it to Piper. She was always on hand to put it down. Even convincing him to give them a couple of days as they would undoubtedly come back home. If the prime God and Goddess had thrown this blessing her way who was she to question their kindness and wisdom. She vowed to repay a-Carrab for this little deception by endeavouring to make him as happy as possible until her dying breath.

Derash keep

This time Tier-rah and Mavrik found themselves in Tier-rah's sleeping room. And well, history does so love to repeat itself. Mavrik was again scrambling to get his clothes on.

"The children will be wondering where I am. Please get up Tier-rah."

Tier-rah did not even twitch.

"Calm down Mavrik. Minoe has them occupied. No one will come bursting in to find you in such a *shameful* situation." Tier-rah said. His voice dripped of pain and hurt.

"No," falling to his knees before Tier-rah, "I am not ashamed. But they are children and it would not be right to..."

"Here I was thinking that you missed me." Tier-rah cut him off pouting.

"You cannot imagine how I have missed you. How lonely it is, was, for me in Tamrip keep." Explained the easily baited Mavrik.

"Then why are you in such a hurry to get away from me?"

Tier-rah was tracing his finger around Mavrik's naval. Which made Mavrik tingle all over and played havoc on his concentration?

"I am not... I... It is hard to concentrate with you... touching me... I..."

"Oh! Oh dear I am sorry." Tier-rah said in an apologetic voice and pulling hand away only to grab Mavrik's...

"Tier-rah!" It was meant to come out as a stern caution to stop but was more a high pitched squeal.

"Please Tier-rah, I need to keep a clear head right now. I need to take care of..."

What or who needed taking care off was never mentioned.

"Derash is a large keep. It will take all day to find them." Lon said looking around vainly hoping to catch sight of Mavrik and the children.

"Do you know the names of your brothers friends or business associates here? They could help us narrow down the search."

"That is a good idea. It's Bloom no Blein it was Bilnem. Yes Bilnem," Lon said, "Mavrik said he met him when he and father came to Derash keep on business some year spans ago." Lon added unnecessarily. Cas-hé just nodded, "Where is the local grain merchant do you know?"

"Only smiths I fear. Still we do not even have to go to the smith." Cas-hé said nodding his head in the direction of a group of young women.

Maybe if he could find the young man a bit of entertainment he would be distracted and would not hover protectively around his sister. Giving him a chance to know her more... intimately.

"Why do we not ask these young lovelies?," Cas-hé said, and bowed grandly to the girls when they were within earshot, "Good morn fair ladies." At which the Girls twittered and giggled becomingly.

Cas-hé cut a fine figure in his military garb of the Ramily keep war colours of royal blue and gold. The expensive materials boasting of position and wealth. And despite his former brown peese wool tunic Lon was an undeniably handsome young man.

"Allow us to introduce ourselves ladies. I am Warlord Cas-hé of Ramily keep and my companion is Lon, from Tamrip keep. And we would be much obliged if you ladies could tell us, if you know where, we could find one Bilnem?"

"Oh Bilnem. Yes we know where he is. Friend of yours?" The auburn haired honey coloured girl answered, taking a couple of steps to stand closer to Lon.

"Where then?" Lon answered evenly. Hardly phased by the brazen proximity of the girl. She acted rather familiar for a girl who was obviously from a well-off family.

"I am Ambrosia," She said, "These are my sisters Carlené, Uhniit and Zorah." She added rather unhelpfully as she did not point out who was who, seemingly unable to take her eyes off Lon. All

four girls were honey coloured and one could see that they were obviously related, there was a marked resemblance between them. What united them more and at the same time set them apart was their red hair. It was in the various shades of red that hair could be found. Lon noted that all four were very easy on the eyes, very easy indeed. He had to admit she was a beauty. But she was not Mada and it was not what he had come into Derash keep to do. Any time before he would have gladly bedded the girl but everything had changed. Destiny awaited him in the south. He was sure of this. And when the time came and destiny called he wanted to be at the right place at the right time. The dream had been foggy but all he remembered was that he was in Mada's arms and he was not going to let anyone or anything get in the way of that.

"It is very nice to meet you Ambrosia. But we are in a hurry and we really need to see Bilnem."

"Very well. We will take you to Bilnem's home. You are in luck because he lives very close to us."

All six made their way through Derash keeps noisy and colourful bazaars to Bilnem's home. Lon had never seen anything like this. Every conceivable article was on sale. From gold to tin, silk to sack cloth. Strange exotic scents wafted out of the food shops and from the stalls of spice merchants. Strange animals which he had never seen were also on sale. This made Tamrip keep all the more drab and he was determined not to return unless it was with this kind of splendour. Unfortunately Bilnem was not at home and he was not expected back until much later. They were received by a servant who informed them that Bilnem had gone out with a friend. Eager to get some inkling of where they had gone they asked who the friend was. Hoping that maybe it was someone the girls knew and they could find them. Unfortunately they had been told that it was a friend from another keep. Who else could it be but Mavrik?

"We will never find them they could be anywhere." Lon said dejectedly.

"We have no choice but to wait." Cas-hé said already planning how this could work to his advantage. He had to find a way to spend that time with Mada.

"How unfortunate. You are welcome to come and while away the time at our house. And we could check every now and then for their return." Carlené the red haired sister offered.

Cas-hé could have kissed her. This was his opportunity.

"You are very kind but we..." Lon began to decline.

"We would be honoured to while away the time in the company of such beautiful women." Cas-hé cut him off.

"How can we stay when Mada is waiting for us? She will wonder..."

"She?" Ambrosia asked disappointedly.

"She i..."

"She is his sister," Cas-hé rushed to explain before Lon, Ambrosia looked visibly relieved, 'and I will go and get her from where she is waiting."

"Maybe I..."

"No Lon. I know this place. I can find my way back here without any trouble. And when Bilnem and your brother return you should be around to speak to your brother."

It all sounded reasonable but Cas-hé could see that the young man was hesitant. Why would he pass up Ambrosia? Married? No. That was not likely. Probably "in love" with some girl back home. Well that was not going to get in the way of his getting Mada.

"You are right," Lon agreed reluctantly, 'I will wait here." He was loath to leave Mada alone with Cas-hé even for a minute span but the sooner they all got together the sooner they could leave Derash keep and Cas-hé behind.

"Then let's go, we are eight houses down warlord Cas-hé." Ambrosia said linking her arm through Lon's.

"I will be back shortly." With that he was off to be at long last alone with Mada.

Meanwhile Mavrik and Tier-rah had returned to his sitting room.

"I had missed you Mavrik, very much. I just wish you had come two day spans earlier. You could have met my mother..."

"Your mo..."

"She knows I am a *nolander*. If only you had arrived a day earlier you could have met her. She has gone to a celebration in Cemlyn keep." Tier-rah said laughing at Mavrik's astonished look.

"She knows? And she does not mind?"

"At first she was quite upset but she came to accept me as I am. Unless whoever it is is prepared to cut you out of their life for good they are forced to accept it."

"You ar..." Minoe came into the room before Mavrik could finish.

"Excuse me Tier-rah but something has happen. It is the girl sir a-a-Alorya."

"What!? What has happened to my sister?" Mavrik demanded jumping up.

"She is fine now. She is resting. But I took them out to the animals' rooms and she was fine then suddenly she clutched her head and she began rolling around on the ground. Then suddenly she was better. She did get a nose bleed..."

"Where is she? Please take me to her."

"Yes. Take us to her. You have called the physician?"

"Yes I have. Follow me."

They followed Minoe down a wide sunny passage. On one side it was lined with carved doors made of Tier-rah's signature titri wood. Only the doors were of a darker shade than the furniture. The other side had huge windows which let in the light. In between the windows were large pictures in ornate frames. The one thing Tier-rah detested were blue furnishings especially if they should be the same shade of blue as him. Unfortunately Mavrik was in no mood to admire the beauty of Tier-rah's house. Mavrik guiltily looked at Tier-rah walking in front of him. His

sister had been struck down by some illness and he had been rutting in Tier-rah's bed. What if she had died? What if worse was still to come? How would he ever live with himself? They found a-a-Alorya sitting up in a huge four poster bed drowning in pillows and white bedding. She was insisting that she was okay. Another of Tier-rah's household staff, Shara was attending to her. The other children were sitting on the bed on either side of her. When they entered the woman who had been attending her a-a-Alorya left signaling to Minoe and tier-rah to follow her. Mavrik ran to his sister's side. Outside the room Shara told them that this was not the first case of its kind she had seen. Her uncle on her husband's side had had such an attack. Later it was discovered that a mystic had been involved. She had witnessed a few other such cases over the year spans. When she saw the girl on the ground and the subsequent nose bleed she immediately knew what it was. Shara had said not to worry as her uncle was not affected in anyway by the ordeal and it had happened almost sixteen year spans ago. They were all baffled and frightened that a mystic was amongst them and using his or her power on children. Shara advised they keep it between themselves for the time being until there was a bit of an investigation. The last thing they wanted was people to panic. Panic over mysticism more often than not led to lynching. Tier-rah told Mavrik all that Shara had said to him. Mavrik did not believe him. He opted to wait for the physician's diagnosis. The physician told them after a thorough examination and another, requested by Mavrik, just to be sure, that he could not find anything wrong with the girl. All he could recommend was a bit of rest and to call for him if any symptoms appeared.