

Chapter 1

*“Accept this child into your blessed love, Goddess,
and show him the way to your arms.”*

High Priestess Alixliltan

Ano was a slight boy, shy and awkward, with a flair for absolutely nothing – except for looking after sheep. He would spend many hours on his father’s farm acting as lookout and ‘friend’ to each of the animals that his father owned. He taught himself how to shoot a full size bow as he entered his teenage years, an achievement not matched by many of his peers. He grew to be as tall as his best friend and equally as able with most tasks on the farm. He would walk for hours around the farm, bow at the ready looking for the wolves that took sheep. He had killed three wolves before his sixteenth birthday but was still looked upon as the ‘runt’ of the village. He was completely unexceptional in the eyes of many of the villagers but he spent many hours every day far from their view watching the sheep and practising with his bow.

Aliyah was a loud and brash little girl. She was the little girl who would challenge her peers to run faster than her or to jump higher than her but turned into a slender, elegant young woman. She had her eyes set firmly on Karnak, a tall broad-shouldered

youth whose father was arguably the richest man in the village – with over 400 sheep, 200 cattle and a farmhouse bigger than any other in the region. Unfortunately for her, Karnak's parents had arranged a marriage with a wealthy merchant's daughter for 'political' reasons more than the happiness of their son. He agreed – largely due to her very obvious beauty and voluptuous figure noticed instantly by his late teenage hormones – but that left Aliyah with no real options within the village.

The lives of the two most important people in this story were never intertwined, nor were they particularly attracted to each other. Aliyah thought that Ano was too 'farmer' for her and, to be honest, Ano thought that Aliyah was stuck up and far too big for her boots. To say that there was no romantic spark between them was an understatement but, unbeknown to anyone in the village, the Goddess had different ideas. Her plan was to be implemented in a manner that even Ano could not have imagined.

Aliyah and her sister, Terin, were out walking in the hills around the village one afternoon in late summer. The summer had been longer than usual with very little rain. It happened sometimes and the villagers were used to finding ways to conserve water for both themselves and their crops or animals. The late afternoon was still warm with bright sunshine filtering through the canopies of the trees. The two girls were laughing about boys, their parents and the futility of finding a future husband in a small, remote village many days on horseback from the nearest large town. Aliyah heard a twig snap somewhere behind them and looked over her shoulder. Her sister asked if she had heard something but Aliyah shrugged.

“It’s probably nothing... did you see that fool, Ano, during the last festival? He was bragging about his skill with the bow but he only just managed to win the final round. He looks like a complete fool! He’s not going to find a wife ever, is he?”

Shrieking with laughter, the two girls wandered further into the forests surrounding the village. They were oblivious to the fact that Aliyah had actually heard something in the forest behind them.

Ano was sitting on a rock at the edge of the tree line overlooking one of the large meadows used by the sheep when the weather was too hot for them. Being nearly two-thirds of the way up the lower slopes of the ridge sheltering the village from the worst of the winter weather, the temperature was much cooler than down on the valley floor. He watched intently, trying to learn how to ‘see’ everything whilst not actually focusing on any one object. If the truth was known, he was bored rigid and his mind had already started to wander back to the memory of seeing Ta’ryl bathing naked in the pond not far from his home. He recalled the details of the curve of her breasts, her back and her backside with the detail that only a teenage boy could muster – as well as the rush of testosterone that raced through his nether regions as she walked out of the water and lay naked, soaking up the sunshine for a good twenty minutes before dressing herself and returning to her family.

The sun was now beginning to set and, as he dragged his mind back to his duties as a shepherd, he knew that predators preferred the cool of the evening – or darkness – and this was the time that wolves could be more active. Little did he know how much his archery ‘training’ would change his life!

The two girls were slowly closing on Ano's position. He was unaware of their approach and they were completely unaware of anything except the apparent security of the forest and their own conversation.

"How long do you think it will be before you finally find a husband?" asked Terin.

Aliyah laughed. "How long will it be before either of us finds a man worth marrying? The current choices are not exactly heroes or that handsome!"

They carried on, strolling along the trackways, unaware of anything but their own little bubble as they chatted.

The pack of wolves that was following them was not aware of Ano but was very aware of the potential meal that was walking – occasionally skipping – along the trackways in front of them. The girls broke out of the trees into the evening sunshine nearly half a mile from Ano. He saw them below him and off to the right but they did not see him. They walked out into the meadow and sat on the sheep-cropped grass looking down on the village. The sight of their home, nearly two miles away, but clearly visible as a small collection of buildings, a patchwork of different fields growing different crops and the larger meadows for the animals, was comforting but also allowed them the freedom to gossip about the other villagers, their parents and boys... mainly boys, to be fair, but they were teenage girls after all.

The wolves looked into the meadow and, in their own way, assessed the risks of attacking the two girls. They didn't smell threatening – on the contrary, they smelled very much like a good meal. This pack had moved into the area after a series of confrontations with the Darlehu farmers nearly thirty miles away. There had been thirty-two wolves in the pack but the Darlehu

had killed nine of them before using fire to drive them from their high mountain valley. The wolves had found that Dorelar or Darlehu were a far easier prey to hunt than most, as they were so slow when they tried to run away. Only sheep were easier to hunt but they always came with someone with a bow or a spear to protect them and, frequently, the pack had expended a lot of energy only to be driven off with no meal.

The pack had learned a couple of valuable lessons about the bipeds with whom they shared the forests and meadows – particularly the ones that smelled more than their favoured prey. The strong-smelling humans tended to be bigger, stronger and less willing to run away than the smaller, less smelly ones – which also tended to taste better! Slowly the wolves lined up along the tree line, facing and partially encircling the two girls who were maybe eighty yards from the tree line.

Ano moved his attention to focus on the two girls. He thought he knew who they were but, at that distance, he couldn't be sure. Keeping close to the trees, he moved down the slope towards them. He wasn't spying on them but he did want to find out who they actually were. For some reason, he nocked an arrow and partially drew his bow. He found it more comfortable to carry his bow like that and, with wolves in the area, he also knew it could also be the difference between life and death. He got close enough to hear only the very loudest shrieks of laughter from the two girls and to work out who they were – Aliyah and Terin, her younger sister. To his horror, he also spotted three scraggy-looking 'somethings' on the very edge of the tree line off to his left. He was too far away to shout a warning and far too far away to run to their aid.

The two girls noticed that the twittering of the birds in the trees behind them had stopped and, for a reason she will never fully fathom, Aliyah just knew that this was a bad sign. She stood up and turned to face the trees. She couldn't see anything that looked dangerous but scanned the trees several times with the nagging feeling that something was wrong forcing her to be vigilant. Then, the first wolf made its move.

The alpha male was a brute of an animal. Nearly three feet at the shoulder and with a massive head – and the set of jaws to match! – it presented Aliyah and Terin with their first view of one way to die in the forest. They had heard about lambs being taken by wolves but had never actually seen one – or realized the fragility of their own existence in the face of a true predator.

Aliyah pulled Terin to her feet. “Get behind me!” she said and pushed her sister behind herself – using her own body to shield Terin from the gaze of the wolf that stood no more than seventy-five yards away. A second, third... fourth, fifth and... sixth wolf appeared out of the trees and merely stood gazing at them. Aliyah was shaking with fear and Terin was whimpering softly behind her, certain that this would be her day to die.

“Can we run fast enough to get away? Can we get home safe?” Terin was obviously terrified and, by not answering her sister's questions, Aliyah knew that she would understand that the answer to both questions was ‘No’!

Ano drew his bow fully and aimed at the closest wolf. He had never even considered a shot at this range but he couldn't get close enough without alerting the wolves to his presence – and possibly precipitating the attack on the two girls. Even had they been strangers, he couldn't just watch as the wolves killed them but knowing who they were put pressure on him to at least do his best

to rescue them. He calmed his breathing and relaxed his shoulders. The bow was held steady in his hand with the elbow of his right arm locked to provide a stable support for the bow. His line of sight was clear, the arrow aligned perfectly with the wolf and the bowstring... and he was completely certain that he could not hit the animal at that range. He released that arrow and, with the fluidity that comes from many years of practice, he pulled another arrow from his belt-quiver and readied it.

The arrow arced above the meadow and sped towards its target. The wolf actually sat while the arrow was in the air and, as it slammed into the animal's shoulder blade, it shattered the bone and drove its metal head deep into the animal's chest. The fragments of bone were propelled at some speed into the right lung and, as the arrowhead ripped through the lung tissue, the muscle of the heart and out of the ribcage on the left side, the animal slumped to the ground with no sound. Another wolf collapsed, still alive but screaming in pain, when a second arrow struck its abdomen. The alpha male turned his head to see why the animals were no longer in position in time to see something completely alien in the sky. The arrow hit the wolf's skull just above the right eye. The path of the arrow was easy to see. It drove down through the brow ridge, through the brain and out of the lower neck in the region of the larynx. The alpha male was dead before his limp carcass dropped to the grass.

The other wolves began to retreat, snarling – mainly in fear – and growling. Ano was running towards them by this point, bow at 'half cock' and ready to stop and loose an arrow at short notice. He spotted a large female wolf walk slowly into the meadow and that was all he needed to know. He slid to a stop on one knee, raising the bow whilst he was still moving. The arrow flew and

another wolf dropped as the arrow killed it. Aliyah and Terin moved slowly backwards, away from the wolves but still completely confused as to who had killed four wolves in the space of a minute or so with possibly the most accurate bowmanship ever seen in that area for many, many years. Ano had another arrow ready as he ran, the bow held in front of his chest ready to aim and shoot if another wolf appeared.

The wolf with a broken canine walked forward and nudged the fallen alpha male. He had challenged the alpha on two previous occasions. One of those failed attempts to dominate the pack had resulted in breaking off one of his canine teeth. Broketooth turned to face the two girls. They were no threat. They looked weak and the strange stick things that had stopped the other wolves carrying out the attack could not be seen so there was no immediate danger. A couple of animals far lower in the pack's hierarchy followed him from the safety of the trees and into the open meadow area. A couple of careful scans of the area revealed no immediate threats except the strange running figure a couple of hundred yards away. It was one of the stronger smelling bipeds that could be a threat if it got closer but, at that distance, it could do nothing to harm them – but a watchful eye on this one would be a good idea.

The snarling quintet of wolves spread across the meadow, moving to outflank the two girls. Aliyah realized what was happening and, in the corner of her eye, noticed someone running down the slope to help them. She grabbed her sister's arm and ran as fast as she could towards the figure. She watched amazed as the man dropped to one knee and, as he slid on the meadow's grass damp from the evening dew, fired an arrow at the leading wolf. The wolf screamed as the arrow pierced its chest and drove

clean through the animal. The figure was now standing and fired another arrow. The arrow pierced another animal's thick neck and pinned it to the ground. The wolf struggled, trying to free itself, unaware that a major artery in the neck was ripped open and was pumping its blood onto the grass. Shortly afterwards, the wolf fell lifeless to the ground. A third arrow was already in flight, catching another wolf in the flank. The arrow didn't appear to do much damage but the slow bleed from the punctured internal organs would kill the animal slowly and, at the end, painfully.

Ano closed the gap between himself and two girls as quickly as he could. The wolves had now broken off and were running back to the trees. A final lucky shot skittled one last animal to the ground, dead with an arrow clean through its heart.

Aliyah ran up to Ano and threw her arms around his neck. Half-gasping for breath and half-sobbing, she managed to say, "Thank you, Ano. Please take us home... Get us away from here!" He slowly disentangled himself from her arms and promised to get them both home safely.

The reception from her father was less than enthusiastic. It took two days before Ano brought back the bodies of all seven wolves before anyone believed him or Aliyah that he had actually killed the animals and saved both sisters from almost certain death.

The change in Aliyah was profound. She refused to go anywhere outside the village unless Ano went with her and absolutely never ventured into the forest alone. Aliyah's father warmed to the boy slowly and, nearly three months after the incident in the meadow, Ano was asked to demonstrate his bowmanship. The challenge was both overt and intimidating. Ano realized that, despite Aliyah's protestations, her father still

flatly refused to believe that this stringy boy had actually been the saviour of his two daughters by his – if they were to be believed – incredible skill with a bow.

A series of small bags of sand were placed at increasing distances along the main trackway through and out into the fields to the west of the village. The furthest was around two hundred yards away. Aliyah's father and the entire village stood quietly as the youth walked forward to accept the challenge. In what was to become an almost legendary event, Ano loosed six arrows in relatively quick succession and, to his own satisfaction, hit all of the targets. The final shot drew a gasp of amazement from the assembled villagers, followed by a massive cheer of congratulations. Aliyah's father turned to Ano and smiled. Aliyah whispered something into her father's ear and he simply nodded.

Ano knew what had just happened and a few short months later, he and Aliyah married under the full moon in the full view of the village and the Goddess.

The two fathers and a good number of the villagers built a small hut for the newlyweds and, in the tradition of the village, the day of their entry into the hut for the first time was marked by a festival and a lot of beer. Ano had grown up since that afternoon and was now a full-fledged 'man' in the eyes of the village – but more importantly he had won the heart of the girl he had secretly admired for some years.

Aliyah had also realized that Ano was the man that she had been looking for – even if he wasn't the tallest, best looking or richest in the area but... he had run *towards* a pack of forest wolves to save her without initially even knowing for whom he was fighting and that was all she needed to know. They lived close to the centre of the village and were frequently seen sitting

together on the small platform on the front of the hut, holding hands in the evening. The couple became the 'children' of the whole village and the first five years of their marriage were as near idyllic as you can get in this environment. Crops grew strong and bountiful. There was always enough to eat with plenty to sell or barter to other villagers no matter how spread out the houses were from each other. Ano's fields were the envy of many as he managed to turn even a poor spring into a full harvest with his constant watering and weeding.

The fifth New Year's Day after their marriage was the day when Aliyah announced her pregnancy and that was just the excuse that was needed for a celebration involving everyone. Sheep were slaughtered and roasted whole, beer in huge quantities was drunk and Aliyah received presents of small toys, blankets and other goods related to the birth of a child. They fell into bed that night completely exhausted but still buoyant from the outpouring of support that they received from all of the neighbours. The following months were a whirlwind of visits from older women who had already had children, to advise Aliyah on the birth or childcare and local men who took Ano to the local tavern to drink to the health of the unborn child. All too soon, the telltale signs of labour began and Ano was thrown out of his own home by a small but determined group of the local women.

Aliyah's screams as her daughter's head and shoulders stretched and ripped her birth canal rang across the village. Too slowly, the infant entered the world. A sharp intake of breath from the assembled village women heralded the baby's entry into the world – with one of her legs misshapen and twisted beneath her tiny body. The women made the time-honoured hand gestures to protect them from the Dark Ones. As they cleaned

the baby before wrapping it in a warm blanket, one of them glanced over at the mother. She was lying completely still with a large blood pool between her thighs and her eyes fixed in the glassy, empty stare of death.

The leader of the women went to get Ano. He alone deserved the right to take this deformed newborn into the forest – to be left to die by whatever means the universe deemed appropriate. Children born with deformity were pariahs in the community. Their twisted limbs were seen as a sign of the work of the Dark Ones as they wove their evil into the world. Children who outlived their mothers during the birthing process were often taken into the forest to die. These children were seen as a ‘Dark One’ – an evil spirit born into the world to corrupt and to infect all around them with their demonic powers. This baby had just done both – she was special and her mere existence would not be tolerated by the superstitious or devout alike. No-one would name such a child; they were doomed the instant that they drew their first breath... if they were even allowed to take it.

Some little time later, Ano entered the small hut and knelt beside his wife’s body. He kissed her gently on the cheek. As tears traced their way over his cheeks, he murmured, “Good bye, my love. May you always sleep in the light of the Goddess.”

This was the conventional blessing for the newly deceased. He took the baby in his arms, looked into her innocent blue eyes and his heart melted. He knew of the superstitions; he knew of the expectations of the women around him and he knew that he could not desert the only link he had with the woman who had been his wife, friend, lover and strength for the few short years that they were together. He also knew that his life would be irreversibly tainted if he did not appear to kill his daughter.

He bent down, took the baby and silently left the building. Heading towards the forest, he frantically racked his memory for someone he knew who could be trusted to rescue his daughter – and he had a very small window of opportunity. Once he was sure that he was not being followed, he turned towards the river and ran. Surely there would be someone there who could be paid to take the child to safety. His sister in M'nsta was his only option but how could he get the baby halfway across the kingdom? He looked along the riverbank and spotted a single small craft – with a merchant on board who could possibly be offered money to take his daughter to M'nsta and safety.

Stepping back into the tree line, he held the baby above his head and addressed the sky. “I name this child Calliyah – for Grandmother, Colleen, then Mother, Aliyah. This child will not be left to die. She did not ask for her deformity and she did not conspire with the Dark Ones to kill her own mother as she was being born. I name this child my daughter and pledge to protect her from the Dark Ones – and anyone else who would harm her.” He held her tiny body close to his chest and whispered, “I promise that no-one will harm you, my daughter, but you must go away for a time while you grow. I will wait for you while you stay with my sister and her husband. Be brave, Little One, and forgive me!”

Kissing her forehead, he wiped a tear from his cheek and he walked to the boat. At first, he could see no-one on board and called out, “Anyone there? I need to arrange passage to M'nsta.”

The boat owner appeared from below. Ano shuddered when he realized that it was one of the Darlehu – stocky, dark-skinned mystics from the other side of the mountains that separated Dorel (Ano's homeland) from Darleh.

“I will take the child to M'nsta,” slurred the Darlehu.

Ano shuddered again. The natural tongue of the Darlehu was a clicking, nasal language which did not allow them to speak Dorel's language with ease. Most Darlehu sounded as though they had drunk many bottles of ale when speaking a foreign language. This one was no different but Ano had to entrust this tiny child to this stranger. The price was agreed – much less than Ano had expected – and, from nowhere, a Darlehu woman appeared to take the child below deck.

“I will nurse her like my own child, Brother, and deliver her to your family. She is not perfectly formed but we will bind her legs to help them grow straight. Unlike you, we do not kill these children. We heal them and teach them to heal others. I do not judge you in the same manner as your fellows, Brother. You want your child to live so we will honour your wishes and carry her to a safe haven.”

Ano thanked the couple and walked back to the hut where his wife lay, waiting for him to bury her. The women had dressed her in a simple blue dress from her wardrobe. Ano took a deep breath and stepped into the hut. He had no idea of the different path that his life would now take as the Goddess was involving herself in the future of his little girl.

The weeks following the short funeral rites for his wife were lonely and quiet but soon his life returned to a more 'normal' routine. The smallholding needed to be tended and the crops needed to be bartered or sold. Soon, he almost forgot the pain of his wife's loss and the anguish as he watched the small riverboat carry his daughter far away. The following weeks were agony as Ano wondered if the tiny child had reached the safety of his sister's home.

Late one evening, a knock on his hut door brought the news that he had been waiting for. The Darlehu river man merely said, "I gave your daughter to the couple in the house you told me. They say they are very happy and they will raise her as their child."

Closing the door, Ano broke down and fell to the floor sobbing for the loss of his wife and, despite her new life far away, the loss of his daughter. He knew that some of his words on the night of her birth were lies – he would probably never see her again.

Far away, across the thousands of square miles of completely natural and untouched forest, a lone rider raced along a deer track beside a river, his cloak flapping wildly in the wind behind him. He clutched the reins with knuckles that flashed white in the moonlight. His eyes streamed with moisture as the wind was driven under his eyelids. Every few seconds he looked over his shoulder, looking for the hooded figure that had tried to kill him a few hours earlier. For at least five miles there had been no sign of the mysterious figure. Slowing his horse to a trot, he breathed a sigh of relief that he had escaped from his tormentor. Saying a prayer to the Goddess, he reined in the horse and sat quietly for a few seconds.

Sliding out of the saddle to stand beside the animal as it rested, steaming gently in the darkness, he scanned the woods around him before dropping to sitting position next to the horse's front legs. His breathing was laboured after the ride and he was relieved to be out of the saddle. He stretched his legs out in front of himself and leaned back to lie flat on the ground. As he did, he thought he saw movement in the tree above him. As he looked, he was unable to discern any real detail due to the low light levels.

He could see the branches waving in the wind and the stars occasionally visible as the clouds rushed across the sky.

What he didn't see in the darkness was the arrow that would end his life as it ripped through his chest and punctured the left ventricle of his heart. The blood loss was catastrophic, causing death very quickly. A hooded figure slid down a rope and dropped quietly to the forest floor. His knife cut the leather straps holding the pouch to the dead man's chest and it was slipped quickly into his jacket pocket. Turning into the wind, he jogged away and into the darkness.

Chapter 2

“Each child is a promise of the Goddess that we will continue as a people and as a challenge to be closer to her example in every generation.”

High Priestess Moxancatl

His brother-in-law, Mod'n, and his sister, Ten'ak, struggled to feed and clean the little girl for the first few weeks due to their complete lack of experience with babies or young children but slowly their skills improved and began to bear fruit. The little girl soon learned the timbre in the voice of her 'father' and would gurgle excitedly when he approached with food or clean clothes. The local townspeople were less than friendly, however, as rumours of her deformity circulated. Their carpentry business began to suffer and life was a struggle for some years. Slowly, the sight of the partially crippled girl hobbling around became less threatening and the adults began to return as customers, allowing Mod'n to regain much of his self-respect. The business picked back up and soon he was a familiar figure in the market place, selling small cabinets and tables to the rest of the townsfolk. The local children were an entirely different matter...

Calliyah's early childhood was not quite idyllic but she was sheltered by her age and her father. Once she reached school age,

things changed. She was different – and had a badly deformed leg and no mother – she was an easy target. Calliyah grew up fast during her first year in school. Bullied daily, she frequently arrived home with bruises and a bloody nose. Sadly for her tormentors, she also grew in strength and cunning. Shortly after her eighth birthday, using the crutches that her father made her, Calliyah made her move. The usual suspects had gathered to torment her but the encounter did not go anything like they had planned. Their selected ambush site was an alley a couple of streets from her home. It seemed like the perfect spot – a large tree blocked most of the view from the road at the end of the alley and there were no low fences so there would be no easy escape from the boys who waited for Calliyah. As they stepped out into the alley in front of Calliyah, she knew what was coming.

Drawing herself up to her full height of at least six inches shorter than the three boys standing in front of her, she stood her ground and taunted the boys. “This is really not a good idea! I’m not going to just stand here while you pummel me again!” She spat at the floor in front of the tallest boy and he launched himself at her, swinging his fist. Calliyah ducked the first punch and rammed her head into the bully’s gut. He folded up, grunting and fell to the ground. Spinning round on her good leg, Calliyah leaned onto one crutch and swung the other at head height – smashing the nose of the second boy as he moved for her.

Through the blood pouring over his top lip, he blustered, “You broke my nose, you little bitch! You’ll pay for this.” The third, however, had decided it was time to retreat while he was uninjured. He turned to run but a well-thrown crutch speared into his back terminated his flight. He fell to the ground, only to be stunned by a kick to his temple.

The bully woke to find he was sitting up, tied to the base of a tree. He struggled to escape but the rope around him was tightly knotted. Calliyah stood over him laughing. "You're not so brave now that you're alone, are you? By the way, that won't father children, will it?" She pointed at the boy's groin and he looked down. With a howl of anguish, he realized that he was naked from waist down. His genitals were smeared with honey and a buzzing from above his head slowly registered.

"You get me out of here... Untie me! I'm sorry for what we did to you. Please let me out of here!" he screeched as he squirmed and struggled against his bonds. As the bees began to drop to the ground around him, he really began to struggle and scream. The first bee sting had him squealing like a pig and struggling frantically. The release of the 'attack' pheromones from the now dying bee caused the rest of the hive to react angrily and they attacked in force. As his agonized squealing rang out through the alley, a small figure limped home with one good leg and one broken crutch chuckling to herself.

That evening, the father of the leader of the gang of bullies rounded up a small group of sympathetic local thugs and barged into the workshop as Mod'n finished off a cabinet for the local temple. His wife was upstairs and, hearing raised voices from below, ran down the stairs – to be confronted by a workshop full of angry men. "What do you want?" she screamed. "Why are you here?"

One of the men grabbed a piece of wood and walked towards Mod'n. Waving the improvised club over his head, he snarled, "We want the little bitch who maimed his son." Using the piece of wood, he pointed out at the 'leader' of the mob. "Your little girl

needs to be taught that you can't mess with certain people without facing consequences!"

The man he had indicated was Marek, a merchant in wool and leather. He was one of the most successful businessmen in the neighbourhood and was generally allowed to do what he wanted. His three sons had also been allowed to run roughshod over other children or, in some cases, their parents. If they wanted to steal an apple or a bread roll from a shopkeeper, they had been allowed to get away with it purely because of the bullying tactics of their father and his employees – or, more accurately, henchmen. As a long-term trader in the area, Mod'n knew exactly who he was dealing with and knew that, whatever else happened that night, his business would suffer.

Mod'n remembered the bullying and Calliyah's tears, bruises, black eyes and split lips. "Leave us alone, Marek. Your little pups got what they deserved for picking on Calliyah. They don't even have the balls to attack another boy! They got pounded by a girl and that's why you're here! You're just pissed off that those sorry excuses for sons got beaten by a GIRL!!" Mod'n picked up a hammer and stepped towards his wife. "Now get out of my workshop and go back to your snivelling little brats!"

At that point, the world unravelled around Mod'n. The man with the wood lunged at him. "You aren't going anywhere, carpenter! We want the kid and we want her now," he growled and raised the wood above his head. Ten'ak dived at him with the intention of knocking the wood out of his hand. The man checked his forward motion but the momentum of his lunge forwards overcame his strength and the wooden spar swung downwards. With a sickening crunch, the wood slammed into the side of Ten'ak's skull, which splintered under the force of the

blow. She crumpled without making a sound and the room went silent.

Mod'n turned slowly to look at his wife's body but, as he stepped towards her watching the blood forming a puddle around her head, a command from the instigator of the mob caused a stampede for the door. The mob ran out into the night leaving Mod'n alone with his wife. A few moments later a bottle of lamp oil flew through the open doorway and shattered on the workshop floor. The firebrand that followed it left Mod'n little time to react.

As the flames angrily consumed the shavings on the floor, Mod'n raced upstairs to grab Calliyah from her bed. It took less than a minute to get back to the top of the stairs leading down to the workshop – and escape – but it was impossible to go further. He turned back and opened the window above the back porch. He slid over the window sill and sat on the pitch of the small roof before sliding off onto the ground. He ran from the workshop as the flames raced up the stairs and into the small room where Calliyah had been sitting in her bed, listening to the argument below that had resulted in her adoptive mother being killed. Mod'n raced through the town towards the docks. He had no money, no plan and no home any more. He turned back to look a couple of streets away, in time to see the flames break through the roof of his home and workshop.

As he stood staring at the blaze, the roof collapsed in a huge burst of flames and sparks – almost his entire life was destroyed before his eyes. He clutched Calliyah tighter to his chest and turned way. He carried on running from the mob that had killed his wife and his livelihood but soon realized that no-one was actually chasing him. The relief was almost physical as it rushed over him. He looked down at the child in his arms. She was wide

awake and the terror in her eyes let him know that she knew what had just happened. “You can put me down, now. I can walk on my own,” she said. “Is Ten’ak dead? She isn’t with us and the house was on fire. She’s been killed, hasn’t she?”

Mod’n put Calliyah down and knelt beside her. “Ten’ak is gone, yes,” he said. “Those men wanted to hurt you and she tried to stop them. She protected you and died making sure that you were safe. She loved you very much!” Calliyah hugged Mod’n with all the strength in her eight-year-old arms and buried her face in his jacket.

“Can we go somewhere far away, please, Uncle Mod’n? I don’t want to stay here,” she mumbled into the leather and, as they walked further into city, she sobbed for the loss of Ten’ak until she cried herself to sleep.

Two weeks later, they sat on the prow of the riverboat as it took them up river – ironically, towards the village of Calliyah’s birth. The crew of five was all from the outer provinces and had no problem with Calliyah’s deformed leg. On the contrary, the two deckhands made sure to play with Calliyah at every opportunity during their working shifts.

Slowly, as the river wound its way through the gorges and rapids well to the north of M’nsta, Mod’n released his grief. He cried for a few hours, mourning the loss of his wife, the business and the house he had spent a couple of months building for Ten’ak. He slept until the following afternoon and, as Calliyah played on the deck above, he cried again.

One evening, the clouds built above them and Mod’n took Calliyah below deck after the evening meal on the deck.

“There will be a storm tonight,” one of the deckhands told them as they entered their cabin. “Stay below deck unless one of us comes to get you. If we do, leave anything you cannot live without because we will only come for you if we are about to jump overboard. Sleep well!” Mod’n chuckled to himself at the deliberate irony and tucked Calliyah into her bed. The storm hit about an hour or so later, announced by an increase in the turbulence around them in the river. The riverboat began to lurch as the storm lashed the water around it. The voices of crew began to rise as the wind grew in strength and the roar of the water crashing over the rocks either side of the river increased in volume.

Mod’n lay on his bed, reassured by the even tone of the captain’s voice and measured responses from the crew. He fell asleep but was jarred back to reality when a huge crash and a shudder ran through the boat. The door burst open and one of the crew just shouted, “Get off the boat,” before he ran back up to the deck.

Mod’n grabbed Calliyah and his backpack before following the crewman. They reached the rail and looked into the river – it was boiling and filled with debris from the riverbanks as the water tore past them towards the open ocean. Mod’n was torn between saving himself and saving Calliyah – either way, the only way off the stricken vessel was into the water. The crew was long gone along with the only lifeboat. Mod’n swore under his breath as he realized that the crew had left them to die, probably without a second thought. He grabbed Calliyah and shouted over the roar of the river, “Hang on as tight as you can!” before rolling over the rail and dropping the fifteen feet or so into the water – which was freezing.

Mod'n kicked his legs to keep them both above water and began to move slowly towards the bank. As he struggled towards the bank, the swirling current continually threatened to smash them against the rocks which seemed far bigger from the water rather than his previous viewpoint from the safety of the deck of the boat. A tree, ripped from the bank miles upstream, sped past them and smashed into pieces against one of those same rocks. The sound of the shattering trunk rang out over the roaring waters and reminded Mod'n that they were still very much in danger. As he thought about how to negotiate the current and the rocks in front of them, barring their way to safety, a smaller tree slammed into his left shoulder, a large broken bough pierced his chest. He died instantly as his heart was pulverized by the broken end of the branch.

Calliyah found herself alone in the river as Mod'n released her and was dragged away by the current. Her survival instincts were now her only hope and they did not fail her. She began to kick her legs and swing her arms, trying to mimic Mod'n as he had swum towards the bank. Progress was slow and her head dipped under the water's surface many times before she finally reached a small muddy area that the current bypassed due to the large rock sticking out into the river – and safety on the river bank. She crawled a few feet onto the mud and collapsed, exhausted. She slept, despite the cold and continuous noise from the river behind her.

The sun rose over a completely different scene. The river was now calm although it was still discoloured by the mud washed into it further upstream. Calliyah awoke in the morning sun; very alone and very scared. She scrambled up the steeper section of the bank to the trees above her. There were no visible signs of

habitation and no clues as to which way to go. She decided to follow the river. She knew from school that people tended to live near rivers because they were was a source of food, water and a way to move around the country. She was nine years old, alone in the forest and had no idea how to survive – and she was partially disabled by her deformed leg. The Goddess would need to walk beside her every step of her journey if she was to live very much longer.

For many hours she wandered in the darkness, tripping frequently and skinning her knees. A faint light through the trees drew her like a moth. The source was a small camp fire flickering in the gloom with a single figure hunched against the darkness and cold. Calliyah moved towards it, stumbling over tree roots and stubbing her toes. She angrily leapt over the roots and strode into the darkness towards the light – and into a sinkhole. A fall of six to seven feet followed, to the accompaniment of a shriek of surprise and fear. Unconsciousness at the exact time of impact on the rocky outcrop that terminated her fall saved her from the pain of the shattered collarbone, upper arm and deep laceration right across her right cheek.

The figure sitting at the fire heard the cry and recognized the sound of a child's scream of fear. He rose and walked into the tree line, carrying a branch from the fire as a torch. He quickly found the sinkhole and craning his neck to see past the overhang, spotted the female child in a pool of blood lying on the overhang. Moving quickly, he returned to his campsite and grabbed a rope from his kit. Tying off one end around a tree, he lowered himself over the edge and down to the ledge. The wound on the little girl's face was deep but was clean and was beginning to clot. He bound her face to protect the wound and checked her small body

for the other injuries that he knew she would have after her fall. He used his shirt to immobilize the injured arm against her chest and tied the arms across her chest to act as a securing point for the rope. He clambered back up the wall of the sinkhole and slowly pulled her up to the top. She was beginning to come round as he laid her onto his sleeping roll. He was grinding herbs for a painkilling sedative when she finally awoke.

She instantly began to cry as the memory of the fall and the pain from her collarbone and arm registered. Her rescuer mixed the herbs with a little water and lifted her head to allow her to drink. The acrid taste made her splutter and push the wooden cup away but her rescuer's hand forced her to drink the remainder of the bitter brew. The pain began to recede and her brain felt a little like it was being slowly wrapped in soft, warm fur as she slipped into a deep sleep. For three days, she was drugged and kept asleep while her wounds were cleaned, dressed and the gash on her cheek was skilfully closed and sutured using three strands of ponytail hair. When she finally woke, the initial bruising and swelling had begun to subside and her curiosity about her strange saviour overrode the fear she felt in his presence. The shirt around her shoulder and arm had been replaced by a bandage made from a bed cover – leaving his bed a little colder than he'd prefer but, in this part of the country, it was still pleasantly warm at night. Winter would have been a different matter and he was glad of the season.

Calliyah sat up on the makeshift bed and looked around. Her head and body was swollen, sore and a multitude of different colours as the bruising became clearer and developed. She winced as she tried to stand and found that her leg was firmly clamped between two carefully shaped pieces of wood and firmly buckled

leather straps. She glared at the contraption around her leg and couldn't understand why she had been shackled with the device. Standing was impossible and that did not help her mood at all. She balled her fist and punched the splint as hard as she could – split her knuckles and spent the next half an hour sucking the blood off her hand.

Her rescuer/captor came to see if she was okay and smiled to himself as the cubs of the 'bright skins' (as the Darlehu often referred to the inhabitants of Dorel) were not usually this focused or full of potential – or as angry at the world. He sat in front of the fire and picked up the pestle and mortar, to grind some of the painkilling herbs for his little charge. She had little idea that he was trying to help her and she was clearly not going to be easy to handle but he did find her annoyance amusing.

The cup that was offered steamed gently in the morning light but she held back. The hand offering the cup withdrew and guided it to the lips of the man who sat in front of her. She knew he was Darlehu from the look of him but had only ever heard about them. He looked funny with his grey hair, dark eyes, swarthy skin and straggly beard that looked like it was half a beard rearranged to cover the whole of the man's chin. She watched as the man drank some of the cup's contents and, as he pushed the cup into her hand, she realized that he was trying to tell her that he meant her no harm.

She took the cup and sniffed at the contents – which smelled far worse than she remembered from the past couple of days – when she was conscious enough to be aware of the smells around her. The Darlehu in front of her was still sitting and looking at her which probably meant that the drink wouldn't put her back to sleep so she took a tentative sip. It tasted as bad as it smelled

but was different from the drinks that she remembered. She drained the cup and looked again at the man near her. He wasn't skinny but he wasn't fat – well muscled but lean was the way she remembered her aunt referring to another man of a similar build. He turned to her and, in his mind, he said, "The drink is for the pain. You were badly hurt and I am only here to help."

Calliyah heard 'te trink is for t'pine. You war bedly hut and eem unly her t'hilp'. She grinned and replied, "You speak funny! Are you a friend or an enemy?"

The man winced at the unintended insult to his language skills but simply replied, "Frent."

Calliyah nodded and motioned for him to help her to stand. He was not much taller than she was but lifted her to her feet with an ease that told her that he was much stronger than her – despite his apparent age.

Thus began an unlikely partnership and friendship that lasted many years. As Calliyah grew stronger, despite the continued presence of the splint on her leg, Taxalat's spoken language improved. She learned that he was a Darlehu shaman and had roamed from Darleh in the south to Dorel in the far north over his many years. He freely gave of his healing skills to anyone requiring them but was very used to the prejudice of some areas – especially Dorel. The majority of people that he met there had been suspicious or hostile towards him. Many had claimed that he was only there to rape their women and kill their children – or even to kill the women and rape the children. He knew what the first signs of trouble were and learned quickly that being able to run further and faster than anyone else was a very good skill – even if it had meant laying tripwires for the horses and, sadly, killing them in the process as they crashed to the ground at full

gallop. He often prayed for the souls of the horses as they had borne him no malice.

He and Calliyah moved south towards Darleh and spent many months growing closer as her broken arm, collarbone and gashed face healed. Her leg refused to heal which caused Taxalatl great concern. Calliyah tried to explain that it had always been that way but just couldn't get him to understand. The herbal drinks he gave her seemed to dull the pain and, at night, allowed her to sleep anywhere and always very deeply. She dreamed of the fire in M'nsta, the boat sinking and watched her uncle as he was ripped away from her in the river – to die as he slammed against a rock downstream. Her dreams were never pleasant but they were mercifully rare.

They always ate well with the forests around them full of game, birds, river fish and fruit, nuts and berries in abundance. Taxalatl was a good cook and was terrifyingly accurate with a bow. Calliyah tried to pull the bow one day but could barely move the string more than halfway back. Taxalatl laughed as she struggled but made her a bow of her own to practise with when they had the time to spend relaxing. Their strange friendship grew over the months but that damned thing on her leg remained and Taxalatl appeared to be finally getting to understand that she had been born with the leg as he found it when she lay bleeding on the ledge halfway down a sink hole. He was puzzled why the Goddess had allowed such a deformity to exist and made a mental note to ask the priestesses when they arrived in Darleh. They would be able to answer him and, probably, they would also know how to fix it.

The archery lessons were going well but Calliyah had still not attempted to hit a moving target. Game birds and rabbits do not

generally sit still for a hunter so she needed to be able to judge distance, speed, direction and – more importantly – the limitations of her own skills if she was to be able to feed herself when they split up. Taxalatl had no intention of making their travelling arrangements permanent but he was acutely aware that, at her age, she would not survive very long at all. His mind wandered back to the priestesses. They would probably take the girl into their care and even teach her the true path of the Goddess or the healing arts he had used on her. He felt better that his beloved solitude would return soon but, in the meantime, this child needed his help – even if she was still a petulant and frequently difficult travelling partner.

One afternoon, Taxalatl devised a training plan to help Calliyah with her bow skills. It involved a few small logs and arrows tied with string so that she would not lose them in the small stream nearby. The logs would be the ultimate moving target as they bobbed along in the water. Calliyah was an enthusiastic pupil, if undisciplined and a little temperamental but she eventually learned not to argue with him and to apply herself to her 'lessons'. It took around three hours before she learned to watch the log she was aiming at closely enough to work out how far ahead of it to aim before she loosed the arrow, where it was going to hit and how she had to control her breathing before releasing her fingers from the bowstring. Her fingers were sore, her leg was sore, her forearms burned and she was definitely a little smelly that day but... as the arrow struck the log with the most satisfying 'thunk' she had ever heard, she was elated. She shrieked her joy and spun to face her tutor with a broad grin on her face. "Did it," she beamed.

As he offered her another arrow, Taxalatl allowed himself a second or so of pride in his pupil before saying flatly, "Agin."

So Calliyah did it again and again... and again... and again until even Taxalatl has to admit that she was actually learning very quickly. That night, she was allowed to go hunting with him which she took as a great honour and she sat quietly while he blessed their bows, arrows and his hunting knife and gave thanks to the Goddess for their prey – their food.

So life continued for many months as they travelled further into the forested mountains between Dorel and Darleh. Calliyah's skill with the bow increased to the point where she was able to take down a flying pheasant at fifty yards with her first shot. Taxalatl smiled to himself as she bounced around, gleefully shrieking her delight at providing their evening meal but blissfully unaware that there would be nothing else as she scared every small animal and bird for hundreds of yards in any direction into hiding at the strange high-pitched noises that she emitted. Taxalatl was beginning to finally see how she could fit into the strict but sometimes brutal training regime in the high priestess's academy but was afraid that her spirit might be broken. He resolved to discuss her future with her... as soon as her celebrations ended.

Some days later, they sat relaxing after a meal consisting of speared fish, bow-shot pheasant and a compote of berries prepared by Calliyah after she had scrambled through the bramble patch to collect them. Her forearms and shoulders were a tracery network of scratches and deeper cuts from the thorns on the bushes but she wolfed down the berries delighting in their sweetness after the savoury succulence of the meat of the bird.

Taxalatl broached the subject of Calliyah's future and the academy where she could learn the healing arts and many other

things. Calliyah asked question after question about the academy, the other girls, the role of the priestesses and, for hours, she made Taxalatl explain how her life would be better in an academy where she would be the only one with her skin colour in a strange country where she was, culturally, a complete outsider. She made Taxalatl squirm in the way that only a precocious ten-year-old girl could before she finally admitted that she would actually like to go to the academy.

“I know it will be hard and I will be an outsider but I know that I don’t want to stay like this forever. You are a good friend and a sort of a father in many ways. I can now do things that I couldn’t do before and never knew that I could. I’ll be okay, I suppose!” She smiled at Taxalatl and sniffed back a tear. She was frightened about what would happen in the academy but she was also certain that, although it had been fun for a few weeks, living off the land as a nomad was not her preferred future.

It took another three months to arrive at the academy, a large and ornate spire towering over a multitude of smaller buildings. Dormitories, classroom blocks, a large refectory and two temples to the Goddess – one for the students and one for the high priestess and the qualified priestesses – made up the majority of the buildings but the smallest building held Calliyah’s attention. A single storey building with very small windows off to one side intrigued her as she walked into the main courtyard. A carved dragon sat proudly over the double doors also carved with dragons and framed by the dragon’s wings, but it was the woman holding the very tip of a dragon’s tail on one hand and a hugely ornate bow in the other that captivated Calliyah. She was tall, willowy and blonde with striking green eyes. Calliyah imagined that she would grow up to be a woman who looked just like the one on

the beautifully painted doors. Her archery skills drew her even further towards this woman. She wanted a bow just like the one that she carried and, imagining herself as a grown woman, she assumed that she would also know exactly how to use a bow like that in any situation.

Taxalatl expected some form of reception from the priestesses but word of the Dorelar girl with her Darlehu escort exploded around the academy faster than anything for many centuries. Virtually every student, novice priestess, the entire staff and the high priestess herself suddenly flooded into the courtyard. Calliyah suddenly felt very small and very, very, very alone!

Taxalatl knelt before the high priestess as she stepped forward to greet the visitors and offered his upturned palms in supplication. "Greetings, my lady, from an undeserving servant who wanders the lands to serve you! I bring a foundling girl as a potential student. She has lost her family and, as far as she knows, the mother from whose womb she sprung is no more. She is bright, spirited, difficult to handle but learns quickly. I implore you to accept this child as your daughter and train her in the ways of the Goddess."

He grinned at the high priestess and, to the horror of the priestesses gathered around, leapt forwards and hugged her tightly. The high priestess hugged him back for a good fifteen seconds then threw her head back and laughed. She turned to the stunned ring of priestesses around her and announced, "This is my brother, you fools! I haven't seen this complete idiot for many, many years then he turns up with a Dorelar girl for us to teach!" She smiled at Taxalatl as he stepped back. "We will take your young friend and we will teach her. She looks strong and, now

that you've finally bothered to grace me with a visit, how can I refuse to grant your request?"

The priestesses were buzzing with the presence of the high priestess's family member and the revelation that she actually had feelings of affection for another person and a very obvious sense of humour! This side of their religious leader was a complete surprise to many of them but a select few knew the 'real' woman inside the robes and behind the pomp and ceremony of her position. She waved one of the priestesses forward.

"Take this young lady to one of the dormitory blocks and get her settled into one of the rooms. Find at least one other girl in her first year with us to act as a mentor and, after I have spent some time with my brother, bring her to me so that I can judge this girl's mettle and talents." The priestess curtsied and, taking Calliyah's hand gently, she led her through the throng towards the three-storey building which housed the first and second year students. The room was airy, light and empty other than a simple cot bed, a small table, a chair and a shelf with the obligatory three candles to light at the three main prayer breaks during the day.

Calliyah carried a very small pouch with her only possessions – a small hunting knife, some herbs in lamb's hide bags and a Darlehu amulet she found on the beach near the scene of the sinking of the riverboat in the storm that killed her Uncle Mod'n. She recognised it as belonging to one of the deckhands. He had been the most fun among the crew and was always tickling her or making her laugh with his funny faces. She knew instinctively that he too had died in the river so the amulet became a reminder of his unrestrained friendship and acceptance. She had no clothes other than those she stood in and, despite her best efforts, Taxalatl would absolutely not let her keep her bow! She sat

desolately on the cot and began to wonder if this was the right thing for her when a Darlehu girl appeared in the doorway.

“Are yo t new gull?” she said, with the usual thick Darlehu accent and the odd pronunciation of Dorelar.

“Yes,” replied Calliyah, “I’m Calliyah but you can call me Cally if it’s easier.” She smiled at the new girl and waved her into the room.

“My nem es Tanaxtli,” said the Darlehu girl. “I hef bin her for fife munt but et es may home now!” Calliyah grinned at her use of language and offered her hand. Tanaxtli gripped it and smiled back.

So began seven years of training, student pranks and damned hard work learning the Darlehu recipes for a myriad herbal remedies, salves, potions, treatments, ointments and poultices. Along the way, however, there were a few incidents that bear relating to more fully explain the route by which Calliyah returned to her genetic father – without actually knowing that would be her destination.

In a small building on the main road to the south of M’nsta, the innkeeper turned to face the few customers in the bar room and called out for any more orders before he closed up for the night. The inn was almost empty with only a couple of his regulars – ‘good old boys’ – with too much time on their hands nursing a flagon of ale each and brooding about the injustice of the law which made them go home to their empty homes now that their children had left for the city and their wives had long since died. The only other person was a quiet, hooded man in the corner. He had hardly spoken, hadn’t even responded when offered a free flagon in exchange for conversation with Solan and Barth – the two old men who seemed to live there.

Solan heard a noise and looked up. Ebol, the innkeeper, was nowhere to be seen but a strange groaning came from the other side of the bar. Looking over the end of the bar, Solan found the source of the groaning. Ebol was lying on the floor with a short arrow, twitching, as it protruded from the bloodstain that spread across his chest. Solan turned round to call Barth but he was sitting bolt upright – staring down at the short arrow in his chest. It was around two inches to the right of his left nipple but about an inch higher. Unlike the one in Ebol's chest, this one was still twitching as Barth's heart was pumping his blood into his chest cavity from his torn aorta. In a short time, this arrow too stopped twitching and Barth joined Ebol in death.

The pouch that he normally carried around his neck was gone... So was the hooded man who had been sitting in the shadows.