



HINANE

BEHIND AN INDIGO VEIL

Rizél De'Lano

Hinane: Behind An Indigo Veil

Written by
Rizél De'Lano

eBook Edition

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FOREWORD

An Amazon Warrior Princess that became Queen of the Tuareg...

Hinane: Behind An Indigo Veil is a historical action adventure set in the 5th century, about a warrior fugitive princess Hinane, based on the legend of Tin Hinan, the remarkable woman who founded the Tuareg nation of Northern Africa.

Beautiful, tall, powerful and mysterious, as a young and robust warrior, but inexperienced in all else, she fled from a certain death, venturing from Tafilalt oasis in the Atlas Mountains in Morocco, to Ahaggar mountain in modern day Algeria, struggling to find acceptance in her new home.

With determination and courage she advances to be the first and most famous queen (Tamenokalt) of the Tuaregs, a spiritual leader and irresistible matriarch, ruling with honour, authority and conviction.

As queen she established a kingdom in the Ahaggar mountain of Algeria. Even though with much interference, she still managed to unite the Tuareg nation with a legacy so great that even today, 1560 years later, the two million Tuaregs (blue people of the desert) still call her 'Mother of Us All'.

Her story deserves to be told.

This book is based on legendary facts of queen Tin Hinan as orally handed down through many generations by the Tuareg tribes of Northern Africa.

Today, festivals in Algeria are still arranged in her honour.

CHAPTER 1

The white stallion whizzed through the forest, his hooves a thunderous rumpus on the pathway lightly covered with short cedar shoots and spiral needle clusters that fell from the dense canopying trees.

The cracked barks and branches along the way became just blurred variations of green and brown textures as the horse raced up the steep incline, climbing higher and higher up the mountain as if the weight of its rider had no bearing on his performance at all.

Hinane hunched down with her face almost level to the stallion's neck, her mind vigilant, her body alert in steering the animal with fine balance and skill perfected by years of instruction.

The fast pace and wind rushed a flushed smile to her cheeks and lips, her thick dark brown hair tinted with golden strands, tangling in strings behind her. A crimson fringed warrior skirt was shifted high up on her thighs, exposing the spiral shaped henna tattoos on her legs, with leather greaves tied up to just under the bend of her knees.

Dark tanned leather guards covered both wrists up to her elbows and a cuirass of hardened leather lined with silk moulded to the shape of her small pointed breasts protected her from the whip of the bowstring.

The lynx caracal, running up ahead, sensed the heightened thrill of its hunter and increased speed, zigzagging through the dense foliage layers in between the trees. The cat glanced anxiously from side to side for any chance of escape, the black ears pointed sharply upright with the long hairs on the tips waving backwards in the charge.

A flock of Moussier's Redstarts took fright from the sudden disturbance and startled in abrupt flight from where they were feeding on berries in a bush. With a svee-svee-tweet, the birds brushed past the lynx and Hinane laughed at the cat's panic.

Lunja, dressed in leather-plated jerkins and similar type of skirt and tattoos as Hinane, tailed from a short distance. Although the one following, the belt around Lunja's waist ignited with the sun's reflection from the precious metal and stones, clearly marked Lunja's superiority over Hinane.

But her status did not mute the excitement which gleamed on her face, or the pride that glistened in her hazel eyes when she prompted the colt to keep pace with the rider and horse ahead of her. She watched closely with much interest when Hinane drew the charge to an end, closing the distance between her and the cat with rapid strides.

Hinane lifted and whirled a slingshot above her head in circular motions, then released it exactly at the moment the projectile, an iron ball the size of a date knotted in a looped strap, was in line to the target. The sling whistled through the air, knocking the animal in the nape of its neck, crippling it slightly, but it still loped forward.

With one hand, Hinane hauled the bow from her back and picked an arrow

from the gorytys quiver case strapped to her shoulders. She dropped the reins, knocked the arrow in the bowstring, drew and aimed while still in perfect balance on the stallion with her legs clamped firmly around his barrel.

She fired the arrow straight, fast and controlled, sinking it deeply into the soft hide of the cat near the right shoulder blade. It split a rib then worked its way into the lungs and heart.

The lynx crushed into the earth, tumbling and rolling forward, rose back onto its paws for a few slow paces, then with no energy left, slumped into the dust. Hinane raced in next to it, bent over and scooped it up by the shaft of the arrow, keeping it in hand with the cat's weight pulling slightly on her arm until the horse stopped on her command.

'Finally,' exclaimed Hinane slightly out of breath and dropped the carcass over a low lying branch nearby.

As per their custom, Lunja blew on a ram's horn, trumpeting the victory, the sound echoing far into the mountains, bouncing back from the cliffs in reverberating tones.

She listened to the fading sounds for a while then halted the colt next to Hinane with a satisfied grin, 'Excellent manoeuvre daughter, I trained you well.'

Hinane slid from the stallion's back and with a, 'Gratitude mother,' rested her head against her horse's neck and caressed him. The short white, grey and light brown hairs that all combined shone white in the sun chaffs that cut through the branches, tickling on her cheek.

She whispered with affection, 'You always test a fine creature Burn, no faltering, not once dishonouring your master.'

Lunja gazed upon the display of affection with a small smile then foraged around, inspecting the terrain, 'I take this a good spot as any other for setting up camp?'

Not waiting for an answer, she led her golden chestnut to a shaded spot among the evergreen shoots of the cedars, the spicy-resinous scent of the wood prickling in her nose while she tethered the horse to a branch.

Hinane followed her lead, fixing Burn next to the chestnut, took the waterskin from the saddlebag and swallowed the liquid to soothe the burning of her dry throat. She handed it to Lunja who reached thankfully for it. Hinane squeezed on the bulging pouch, splashing a burst of water into Lunja's face in playful gesture.

Lunja wiped her face with teasing scorn, 'When will time show your feminine side.'

'Ah, like that's gonna ever happen,' snorted Hinane.

Lunja beamed at her with a soft glow in her eyes while Hinane took the bedrolls and overnight kit from the saddlebags to arrange their camp.

Hinane was the only child spawned from the only man who ever owned Lunja's heart, still does, even though he had been dead for many years. She helped Hinane prepare while her thoughts travelled far back to when she was the same age as Hinane was now, twenty-five.

Lunja was born in 380AD in the city of Oran, close to the ancient land of Hespera, which was located in north-western Africa within the marsh of Tritonis near mount Atlas in ancient western Libya.

But now it's just a stone desert. A vast area between Egypt in the east, the big seas and Mount Atlas in the west, bounded in the north by the Roman Mediterranean shores, and in the south, hooked in by the deadly forests. The land of the black peoples who harboured many curious and eerie things, with the ocean river they call the Austral seas beyond that.

Lunja peered at Hinane who already watered the horses and gathered them fodder. She was butchering the lynx, the carcass hanging from a branch while cutting through skin and flesh with a trained hand and clean eye.

Lunja thought of how much Hinane inherited from her father, his capability in doing almost everything, his bravery, his sharp instinct and shrewd creativity in resolving matters.

It's a pity he was taken from them when Hinane was just a toddler. It's as if history repeated, as Lunja was also raised single-handedly by her Libyan Amazon mother, never knowing her own father.

As a five year old child, Lunja was skilled in fine horsemanship, combat and warfare, similar to those of the Parthian cavalry archers. They were known as the Amazon, but in essence were merely strong and fierce looking women soldiers, valiant, proud and very capable in the art of battle.

In ancient times, the Parthians adopted the Scythian bow, a double curved weapon ideal for horseback with bowshot able to pierce armour and shields, a design which the Amazons espoused.

The Amazon believed the strength of an army rested in unity and practised skilful tricks for combat. Sometimes, they would make as if retreating, or breaking the front, firing arrows back at the enemy from horseback, then would suddenly wheel and attack. And when moving their cavalry and hoplites, they travelled in single file to disguise their numbers, surprising their enemy into defeat.

Besides the curved composite bow, the Amazons wielded the labrys, the forearm-double-axe, various types and lengths of swords, slingshots and spears, but applied most skill in using the sagaris, a single edged axe.

Through the ages, the Amazons became known for their phenomenal cavalry and archery, admired for their range, accuracy, and ambidexterity with the bow and axe.

Thousands of years ago, even before the chariot horse formations of the Huns, Turks, Hyksos or Greeks, they were the first to tame horses, forming a prominent force of mounted warriors and chariots, using one, two, or four horses, displaying great prowess in charging into combat.

In ancient times, the young warrior women served in the army for a fixed period whilst maintaining their virginity. Then only when the years of their service had expired, they laid with men to bear children.

Symbolically, in the act of giving birth, the mother was seen as a human gateway between the realms of the living and that of spirit which was considered physically dangerous.

The elder women formed a nomadic core, supporting the activities of the operational or warfaring warriors, producing food, and manufacturing clothes and armour while the men conducted trade and parented the young.

The retired warrior women, considered wise in their experience outside the strongholds, were in charge of magistracies and affairs of state, giving advice and direction.

Lunja's thoughts were interrupted by Hinane, 'Tell me again about Philo, my father, as I can see, again, he lives in your eyes.'

Lunja smiled softly, 'I told you many times,' she replied and settled down next to the fire which Hinane had already lit. The heart, liver and kidneys of the lynx hung ready on a lance in a branch, keeping it safe from scavengers while waiting for the fire to die down into hot coals suitable for cooking the meat. The remainder of the carcass was bound in a leather bag higher up in the cedar to keep cool overnight.

'I know. But it remains a sweet story of love, one I yearn for also, maybe one day meeting the chief of my heart, the one who would adore me the same way Philo adored you,' said Hinane with reverie glistening in her crystal blue eyes.

Lunja stared into the flames, her face bright with memories, 'He was a noble Greek-Berber from the Western Empire of Rome, a citizen of Carthage. He was deadly attractive, with eyes the same colour as yours and a voice that tingled down my spine.'

Hinane shuffled excitedly, 'More.'

'He was huge and strong. I could never beat him with sword or lance.'

Hinane smiled with a tease, 'Never? Not even as the once famous warrior who roamed the deserts, ridding it of thieves and killers?'

Lunja's eyes glistened with sadness, while shaking her head with a weak smile, 'Philo means, to love, and I fully devoted myself to him. He was worth it. He would never shame me, or let harm befall me, which is how he died, protecting me, us.'

Hinane put her hand on Lunja's arm and gave it a sympathetic squeeze, 'Apologies, no upsetting you intended.'

'You didn't, I don't really mind talking about him. Each time I do, he comes alive.'

They both sat in silence for a while, staring into the coals till it was ready. Then while Hinane cooked, Lunja relived history.

The ancient Greeks described the Amazons as descendants of the god of war, Ares and the sea nymph Harmonia. But the Amazons worshipped Artemis, moon-goddess of the wild and the hunt, Sipylene of the moon and sea, and Athena of the sun.

Greek myths were filled with tales of the Amazons and their exploits, love affairs and combats, stories of beautiful and bloodthirsty female warriors thundering across arid battlefields, depicting them in their art and poetry, all the stories accounting for a thriving nation and handed down to Lunja, and through her, to Hinane.

A few centuries before, the connections between the Berbers and the Greeks were in Cyrenaica where the Greeks had established colonies. The Greeks influenced the eastern Berber pantheon, but by the same token, were also influenced by the Berber culture and beliefs.

Cyrenaica was originally the name of a mythic Berber-Amazon known as

Cyre, who was according to the legend, a courageous lion hunter. The emigrating Greeks named the city Cyrenaica after her and made her their protector along with their Greek god Apollo.

Many of the existing cities in North Africa prospered under Roman rule, including the Carthaginian and Greek colonies along the coast, the Berber tribal centres, the Numidian capital cities, and smaller market towns and villages.

Few of the smaller towns had the facilities to satisfy the whims of a Carthaginian or Roman, so many cities were redeveloped according to a very high standard of Roman principles that would reflect their economic importance.

The Greeks of Cyrenaica intermarried with the Berber women, provoking their men and cultures, and soon Berber tribes started fights against the Greeks. Unfortunately, the Greeks were mostly the victors and some Berber tribes called for the assistance of the Amazons in combat against the Greeks.

By that time, widely spread on pasture, desert, mountains, and seashore, the Amazons were accomplished sailors and inland traders, recognised for their art, textiles and orchards. Therefore, the Amazons also suffered violent raids by the Greeks, as much due to the trade competition in the ports and villages, as their different cultural values, which for one, was Greeks despising a woman's rule.

The Greeks found their initial encounters with the Amazons especially frightening. Not only were they fighting fiercely to defend their homes and their way of life, they also fought mounted or on foot and switched easily between the two, a strategy that demanded much respect. The Amazon practised battle cries in language unfamiliar to their opponents which the Greeks found so disarming they often froze or panicked.

Lunja grinned when saying, 'It's no surprise then, that the Greeks believed the Amazons casted spells on them,' as she remembered fondly how Philo accused her of bewitching him.

Despite repeated attempts and later claims, the Greeks never really scored a clean victory over the Amazons. The Amazons retreated to the mountains and further across the land, camouflaging themselves and survived many other onslaughts, not only by the Greeks, but later also the Romans, the Berbers and other tribes of the forests.

'The Amazon's legacy still lives, and our proud traditions and practices trickled through many generations. Your grandmother instilled in me all the magic and powers of those ancient warrior women, the Kahunas, just as I have passed it on to you.'

Then Lunja blushed lightly, 'But, when I was young and wild, I landed into lots of trouble, all magic and power lessons forgotten, that one incident specifically, in which I met your father.'

Lunja concluded dejected, 'Even though we warrior women are courageous and bold, daring and fearless, defeating men in wars and able to exist and rule without them, I could not minor your father and swallowed much of my pride. But I never lost my dignity.'

Hinane handed her a plate laden with meat, the hearty smell of it steaming in the air. A jackal howled nearby, calling its mate closer in wait for possible scraps.

Hinane smirked at the jackal's futile cry, as around their encampment, no

waste would be found. It was their custom to use all parts of the hunted animal, to waste a fraction, would insult its spirit and that of its maker.

Lunja's mood jumped a few nicks, 'But at least I had some power over him, my beauty and magic, which I also bestowed upon you.'

She stared strongly at Hinane, putting a staid hand on her shoulder, and almost as an omen said, 'Woo men into battle with cunning splendour and craft my child. In love, resist and entice without exchanging yourself cheaply. In trade, find your niche and watch your rear. Do all three, and you'll wield much power.'

Their eyes interlocked intensely, Hinane still slowly chewing on the meat and Lunja earnest in her message. Then, as if harbouring all the secrets of all the seers in the world, they grinned at each other and finished their meal in comfortable silence under soft moonlight with the faint sounds of the creatures in the backwoods resounding in their ears.

CHAPTER 2

Hinane squatted just as the golden eagle's wing tipped down to strike her. The blow missed her by a finger width, the air waves of its cuff brushing softly against her cheek with tiny white and grey feathers fluttering to the ground.

The eagle levelled out and soared higher into the sky, but kept circling above Hinane using its wingspan, the length of a grown man, to catch the rising masses of the thermals. It glided in an elongated loop above her head while piercing down at Hinane.

Hinane watched it with reverence. Graceful beauty, courageous hunter, spiritual messenger, the symbolic characteristics that earned the golden eagle its royal title of king of the birds and majesty of the sky.

The eagle's large olive eyes that occupied most of its cranium, pierced sharply into those of Hinane whilst rotating its head almost in full circle as he rounded her.

The tenacity, fortitude, and imposing presence of the bird have made it one of their tribe's valued cultural symbols. The bird was a bringer of protection, a possessor of wisdom with a special connection to the ultimate creator of all things, lending visions of the future upon those who held a strong connection.

Hinane frowned, and then slowly straightened up from her haunches, and while noticing the brown-grey feathers on the eagle's breast moving in the flight, wondered what caused it to attack her with such rancour.

Whispers of a young girl's voice reached her ears. She tilted her head slightly, and looked through the trees in the woods trying to discern the words and the direction from whence it came.

'Soon the times will change. All the truth, the powers, the immense depths of the skies, the messages of the stars, all of it will be gone. No one will understand

anything and no one will remember...'

The voice darted away and the last of the words were muted by the eagle's bleak cry.

Hinane lifted her gaze towards the cry. She raised her axe higher when the eagle stretched its wings backwards, spreading its feet, and extending its talons. It dived with cannonball speed and came directly for her, glueing Hinane's ice-blue eyes in hypnotic fascination to its own.

The bird was upon Hinane before she could strike the axe. It crashed into her face, the blow of it waking her in an instant.

Hinane's eyes shot open in panic, for a second not knowing where she was till she felt Lunja spread out next to her on the bedroll, snugly covered in the sheepskin blankets that protected her from the early morning breeze. From the sound of her breathing, she was still fast asleep.

Burn biffed a hoof then whinnied. Apprehended, Hinane frowned at the horse as the sound from his throat came nervous and tense. She darted her eyes around camp without moving her head. She saw nothing suspicious, but the hairs in the nape of her neck rose slightly when an owl's cry condemned a warning as it resounded silently through the tree leaves.

Her eyes searched for the bird and found it just above her on a branch about two-thirds up to the top. The desert eagle owl was one of the most revered birds among them, and she pierced into its yellow-orange eyes set in a pale tawny crown streaked by black and white markings. It had a white throat, and a pale tawny sandy chest and belly streaked with black. The owl just stared at her and Hinane looked away, trying to listen for anything that could explain the strange chill around them.

The pink and grey colouring in the east marked the early start of day and Hinane rose slowly from the warm blankets without sound. The hairs on her arms jumped erect, either from the cold morning breeze, or from the sudden creep up her spine.

She closed her eyes, feeling the thickness in the air, sniffing at it in an attempt to identify its source, the faint alien smell slightly pulling in her gut, forewarning that something was amiss.

She woke Lunja softly by her shoulder, and held a finger to her lips, silencing her before she could utter a sound, and with hand signals, indicated they must quickly break camp and leave.

Within record time, they mounted their horses and left on a hurried trot. Then after a hundred yards switched to a fast gallop through the forest on a narrow pathway, not exactly sure what put flight to their hooves, but Hinane rode with a certainty of crawling danger, felt inside her belly.

Lunja felt the impact milliseconds before hearing the whirr of a sling flying. The sling, with iron ball weights tied on each side, hit Lunja about her throat, where it circled around her neck several times, blocking the air flow to her lungs before she could utter a cry. Hinane heard the slingshot's whirr and dull impact. She looked back, reined and wheeled in one motion to rescue Lunja from suffocating.

At the same instant, four Roman slave traders, fitted with plated armour and

steel helmets carrying red plumes, came from out the trees, charging on their horses towards them.

One shouted, 'Seize them!'

With the air-feed to her lungs blocked, the energy drained from Lunja. She tossed the reins, and pulled on the string around her throat, but lost her balance and fell from the bewildered colt. She hit the ground with her left side and shoulder. A painful cry choked-up in her chest, but did not pass her lips. She managed to roll onto her right elbow, and with a determined push, got back on her feet.

Hinane's eyes widened with alarm and she charged in next to Lunja, bent down and scooped her underneath her armpits. She pulled her up, laid her stomach down at her front and wheeled Burn back onto the path, racing away from their attackers.

She loosened the sling from Lunja's neck with one hand and steered Burn with the other. Hinane rode like a discharged arrow, but the distance between them shrank fast with Burn carrying a double load which put them at a slight disadvantage. She quickly glanced back to judge the distance between her and the Romans.

One of them, seeming to be the leader, showing gaps in yellow teeth through snarled lips, was so close she could almost smell his foul breath that fogged in the air.

He glinted back at his mates to sneer a command, his gruff voice echoing through the forest, 'Faster you stupid warts. The young wench will fetch a striking profit in the ports of Tunis. Come on.'

Hinane drew her bow and arrow, turned in the ride, nocked, aimed and released. The arrow left the bow swiftly and hit the one with the gaping teeth in the neck. His eyes flared when the arrowhead pierced through to the other side, dragging with it small bits of flesh as he tumbled from his horse.

Hinane continued the charge with the remaining three following closely on their heels whilst preparing to fire the next arrow. But when Burn stumbled against a rope trap tied between two trees, the two women slumped into the earth with the bow and arrow flying from Hinane's grasp. Burn rose on fours in an instant, standing befuddled while Hinane rolled onto her side, then on one knee searching for Lunja with flashing eyes, her heart pounding faster in her throat.

Two of them reached Lunja before Hinane could. They jumped from their horses and dragged Lunja to her feet. Hinane drew the sword from its sheath on her waist with her right hand, pulled the axe from the saddlebag with her left, and rushed upon them with the rage of an injured lioness, attacking with fierce war cries that brought them to a staggered halt. The two shoved Lunja to the ground and charged for Hinane instead, the three of them engaging into a fierce contest.

Lunja crawled back onto her feet and the third man came for her. She drew her sword, but still puny from the pain inflicted about her throat and lack of sufficient air to her lungs, she was not able to fend him off. After a desperate defence, a few strikes and cuts, she lost her footing and the sword of her

attacker pierced through the jerkin that offered little protection.

The thrust penetrated through her chest one digit from her heart with the blade exiting her torso through her spine which brought Lunja to her knees. Hinane heard the triumphant cry of the Roman when retracting his sword from Lunja's chest. While still fighting her two attackers, she saw the wounded Lunja stumbled to the ground on her back, and Hinane bellowed with wrath, 'You filthy animals.'

With newfound clout Hinane overpowered her two scrappers. She brought the axe down with vigorated force, crushed it through the skull of the one and ditched a strike from the second with a drop to one knee.

From her lower stance, she cut in underneath his armour and buried her sword between the man's ribs, thrusting it deeper to pierce his lungs. She rose to her feet and twisted the blade a few times to ensure it caused terminal damage.

She withdrew her sword, and the blood oozed from the gaping wound underneath his chest shield, flowing down over his pelvic and legs. She leaned slightly backwards, lifted a boot and kicked him over, her eyes smouldering dark with rage.

The Roman who wounded Lunja, witnessed the butchering with wide eyes, then veered, jumped his horse and rode to where Lunja's colt was still standing. He grabbed the reins and pulled the chestnut alongside him in his race through the forest, away from the raging Hinane.

Ignoring the fleeing Roman, Hinane kneeled at Lunja's side.

Lunja gasped for air and words, 'Y-you must g-go.'

Hinane tried to dab the blood pool that formed on Lunja's chest with her skirt, and it stained the crimson fabric to a richer hue. The blood kept on flowing and Hinane hurried to where Burn was standing. She took from the saddlebag the herb medicines and linen strips which she always carried during hunting pursuits. She concocted a herb mixture in haste and gave Lunja a hearty dose of the bitter fluid.

With a dagger, she cut the leather jerkin to open Lunja's chest. She cleaned and bounded the wound and wrapped the sheepskin blanket around her to keep her body warm.

Lunja heaved to draw breath, struggling to talk, 'They'll follow, will... find our oasis. Take the tunnel through t-the caves.'

Hinane already thought of that and nodded with a, 'Save your breath.'

Hinane gathered their weapons and hoisted Lunja onto Burn, settling her carefully on top of his shoulders just behind the withers. She jumped up behind Lunja and rested her wrapped body against her chest with her arms shielding Lunja from a possible fall.

They charged through the forests back to their oasis, the Tafilalt, a three hour journey from where they were now. The Tafilalt oasis was located along the Ziz river, a ten day journey south of Fez across the Atlas, and up until now, served as a protective haven against any intruders.

Hinane loured at the thought of what would happen if the Roman slave trader followed and discovered their home. He would bring troops to raid and plunder

their fields and livestock, burn their tents, capture all that's dear and sell off any creature, human or not, in a filthy port market.

For centuries, slaves were captured and transported northward across the Sahara deserts to trading ports. The practice expanded widely as commerce grew within the Roman Empire, causing a demand for a labour force to produce goods to export to the Mediterranean shores and the Orient. The slaves that were not sold in the Empire were sailed across the Indian Oceans to the Middle East, Persia, and the Indian subcontinent.

In North Africa, and throughout the Western Roman Empire itself, slavery became so widespread that even common people owned slaves, regarding slavery as a natural condition of life that could befall anyone regardless of colour, ethnicity, or spiritual orientation.

But the northern African Berber peoples, who constituted the majority part of Lunja's tribe, were the preferred choice of slave as they harboured endurance, stamina and strength. They were able to withstand the ruthless treatment from masters for long periods of time, taxing each bit of denarii spent on them.

And even though most slaves were mainly used as servants and soldiers rather than labourers or concubines, Hinane recalled many horror accounts of what happened to those sold to other kingdoms. Starvation, rape, murder. Even tied by their necks to trees to serve as leopard hunting bait, and afterwards served up as gutted and bloody carrion for hyenas and vultures to feast upon.

Hinane shivered, picked up the pace and raced through the hills with Lunja sagged into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER 3

The shades of red and purple that mantled the setting burnt-orange sun, tainted the western horizons when Hinane finally rushed into her tented home camp in the Tafilalt oasis.

She brought Burn to a halt in front of a large red-dyed tent made of animal skins and strong fabric. Cedar poles supported the roof structure which was fastened with ropes pegged into the ground.

Lunja was still in a deep slumber and Hinane shouted, 'Yeddes, Takamat,' in the direction of a few similar, but smaller tents pitched a short distance away among overhanging palm and nut trees.

Takamat, a petite scrawny looking girl with big brown eyes set wide apart in a broad open face, ran from her tent with Yeddes, a sturdy man of late twenties, following her closely.

Takamat's eyes widened in surprise upon seeing the lifeless body of Lunja.

Occupied with concern, she searched Hinane's face when she slid from

Burn, 'Princess. What...?'

Hinane cut her short, 'I must get Lunja into my tent, bring hot water and the herb chests.'

Takamat hesitated, pushing her black hair locks behind her ears with wavering fingers, 'What...'

Hinane snapped, 'Do it now. Go,' then looked at Yeddes, 'Help me.'

Yeddes and Hinane lifted Lunja from the horse, entered the tent and carried her to her bed. They rested her on the low mattress made of stuffed sheepskins layered with colourful textiles from Tangiers.

Lunja's face contrasted pallid and lifeless against the purple and orange fabrics, and in deep distress, Hinane dropped to her knees next to her.

Takamat rushed in with a barrel of water and soft linen cloth. She dipped the cloth in the water and handed it to Hinane who quickly wetted Lunja's lips, and wiped the dust and sweat from her face whilst staring at the blood that clotted through the dressings on Lunja's chest, not exactly sure how to proceed.

Takamat, who grew up with Hinane and knew her well, sensed Hinane's indecision and moved to the top of the mattress. She shoved her hands underneath Lunja's shoulders, trying to push her into a sitting position so Hinane could remove the mottled bandages.

'No,' intervened Yeddes, 'Leave it, the crust closed the wound, remove it now and be sure of a swift bleed.'

Takamat obeyed in fret and resettled Lunja on the pillows. Hinane took Lunja's hand, tears brimming in her eyes when Lunja's eyelids opened in small slits, exposing the irises murky with pain and drowse.

'Mother,' whispered Hinane with a hoarse voice.

Lunja drew breath with difficulty, slowly sucking the air into her lungs which responded with a bubbly sound. Yeddes and Takamat shared a quick and anxious look, fully knowing what that sound implied.

Lunja stumbled on her words, 'We've provoked the Romans. They'll... come for you... you must go.'

Takamat frowned, still in the dark as to the cause of Lunja's injuries and asked puzzled, 'Who's coming?'

A short man interrupted from the tent's entrance, 'Yeddes.'

Yeddes was a tall man of common looks, short dark hair, black eyes, dark skinned, but with a strong and kind disposition. He was the tribe's most competent camel shepherd and master of the servants. But over the years he became more than just that to Lunja's household. He was a reliable friend, unwavering in all challenging situations, and a stalwart, which is why he now immediately left to attend to the man.

Lunja's restless stir caused them to pay no heed to the interruption and Hinane brought her ear closer to Lunja's mouth when she whispered, 'Take my sword-belt, it's yours now, the strength... all contained in it.'

Lunja pulled weakly on the richly decorated belt still fastened around her waist trying to free it, but then dropped the effort, too weak to enfold her fingers around the snap.

The tears swelled, blurring Hinane's vision. She wiped them quickly from her

eyes, trying to keep focus while Takamat could not contain the upset wail that escaped her throat.

Lunja continued with much effort and pain, 'Go southeast into the desert... take the camels, leave the horses.'

Lunja's weakening ripped in Hinane's chest, the first recognition of Lunja's looming death stabbing in her heart with every ruthless beat.

Hinane protested softly, 'We won't survive the desert.'

Lunja was losing the struggle to breathe, 'The powers... are all... inside the book... you... can make it... always believe.'

Yeddes rushed back into the tent, 'A forerunner reported. There's a huge Roman slave raider party approaching just behind the Mountains about a day's ride away.'

Hinane looked at him blankly, wondering how they could have followed her since she only took undisclosed paths. But then again, she was so consumed with worry in getting Lunja home, she could have easily led them here, being careless in her haste.

Lunja's voice came soft, 'Take the Tifinagh... my work, yours now...'

Hinane cut in, her voice thick with grief, 'Save your breath...'

Lunja frowned slightly, her face white in trying to put her mind into words. 'Take the medicines... and herbs... your future...'

She gasped for more air, only her lips moved slightly. But Hinane would never know what Lunja wanted to add. Her mother's eyes went dull, her chest heaved and lowered, the last little bit of air escaped her lungs, and then, she was completely silent.

Cold seeped into Hinane. A cry started to crack from her throat and wanted to spill over her lips with an uncontrollable wail that waved through her chest, but no sound came out. She lowered her upper body on top of Lunja's, her head on her chest, her body convulsing into ripples.

Yeddes rested his hand on her back, trying to calm her, but Hinane didn't even notice. The loss tore in her chest and she trembled uncontrollably while tears spilled from her eyes.

Yeddes grabbed her by the shoulders and with force, pulled her to her feet.

He shook her slightly, 'Clasp your sorrow for later. The Romans will be upon us before sunrise. We need you. Now.'

Hinane's stomach churned and nausea pushed up in her throat, the sudden responsibility resting upon her too heavy to bear. She tore away from Yeddes and swallowed the acid taste in her mouth. She ran her hands over her face, wiping the tears away then brushed her fingers through her dark long hair.

She closed her eyes, pressing her index and middle fingers against her lips like she always did when in deep thought. She stood like that for a short while, and opened her eyes the moment when Yeddes wanted to react with impatience.

She lifted her chin, straightened her shoulders and looked him squarely in the eyes, delving for the strength inside of him to aid her.

Then she spoke the order given by her mother, 'We'll enter the deserts, the Sahara, they will not follow us there.'

Takamat wrung her hands in fear, the lines of spilled tears on her cheeks highlighting the devastated look in her eyes.

Her voice trembled, 'But what of sandstorms, the heat, there's no water, we... we will die.'

Yeddes quickly voiced his own concerns before Takamat erupted into another spill of flurry, 'The people will not follow. We don't have enough resources to sustain us through the sand oceans. And who knows for how long till we reach life.'

He frowned and insisted, 'There has to be another way.'

Hinane reached her self-control threshold. Impatience cracked inside of her and she snapped in anger and frustration, 'What else do you propose? I go, and those who want to live can follow.'

Takamat lifted her chin in sad protest, her lips quivering, 'Our lives are here. This is all we know. You and the warriors fought many battles before. You can fight this one too.'

Hinane bowed her head in sudden empathy. Takamat was her trusted friend, but not always of flight mind. And now was not the time to remind her that Lunja was the one who always took the lead in battle. And their activities of late were only against smaller tribal groups, not a sophisticated Roman army. Hinane now stood alone without her mother's guidance against this force, and the uncertainty pulled heavily in her belly.

Her voice lowered, 'I know. But this time the risks are excessive. Go. Gather our belongings. There is no other choice.'

Takamat left with heavy feet and a deep furrow delved in her brow.

Hinane turned to Yeddes, 'Group the tribe, I'll speak to them.'

Yeddes bowed and said, 'And thereafter, I'll load the camels and horses,' knowing from experience that when Hinane took this stance, there's no hope in persuading her otherwise.

When the tent flap closed behind Yeddes, Hinane turned to Lunja's corpse. She sagged to her knees, the brief moments of strength displayed just a few minutes before crumbling into deep sobs of sorrow.

She took Lunja's hand, closed her wet eyes and whispered, 'Divine spirit, mother Tanit, guide Lunja's spirit safely into the world hereafter.'

She opened her eyes, laid her fingers upon Lunja's stiffening eyelids and pressed them closed, 'With respect and in peace, on our way to the deserts, we'll lay your body to rest deep inside the mountain cavern, where it will remain safely guarded from earthly intruders forever after this.'

Hinane removed Lunja's sword-belt, the emblem of their tribe. The gold on it was set into the shape of the golden eagle, the wings tapped with leather and crystal insets, its eyes juttied with large golden topaz stones.

She fastened it around her own waist then took the bracelets from Lunja's wrists and upper arms, the chains around her waist and ankles, and the earrings that decorated her lobes. She put it in a small bag always kept beside her mattress, but would now be placed in her saddle bag.

She closed her eyes, rested her head on Lunja's chest and let her mind go to the years before and those yet to come, trying to derive inspiration and energy

from higher and kindred spirits in intense mediation.

Her father died in battle when she was only five, but she could recall those days as a family unit as clearly as if it played out in front of her right now.

Lunja raised her with a strong hand after Philo died, fearing that the same might befall her and that Hinane might not be able to fend for herself on her own. So she trained Hinane in everything she knew. Especially in warfare, equipping her to defend herself, to be courageous and brave, showing her exactly where and how to derive strength and inspiration from.

Not a day passed that they did not speak of Philo. He was always close, just as she was certain now he was watching over her from a different plane.

Her emotions dragged her soul down and broke her resolve. And Hinane wept.

The sunlight already gave way to the darkness when Hinane finally gathered the strength to step out of her tent into the harsh reality of the present.

The small tribe consisting of a few warrior women, camel shepherds, horse breeders and house servants were bunching in chaos, packing, loading camels, breaking tents, the flickering fire torches lighting the camp in disorderly display. But they gathered quickly when they saw Hinane stepping from her tent.

Two fierce, bold and striking warrior women, Izza and Tala, approached Hinane. They halted in front of her while the rest of them grouped behind them.

Tala, with strong hands on narrow hips blurted with a scowl, 'We cannot leave princess. We must stay and fight.'

The tribe respected Tala with her bulging muscles and weird looking purple eyes, so they roared their support. Hinane lifted her hands in silencing them, irritated because they couldn't fully comprehend the dire extent of the approaching danger.

'I leave, and will only take those who want to follow. The rest can stay and face the enemy, to be captured and sold as slaves in the markets of Tunis.'

The crowd shouted in upset and Tala yelled, 'Has your mother's demise weakened you? Where is your fighting spirit Hinane? We must even the score and avenge her death.'

Yeddes moved in, wordlessly supporting Hinane by standing at her left side, and an uncertain Takamat walked closer to her right.

Hinane gazed at the crowd with a deepened misery spawned from Tala's remark. She took only a minute to fight and control the overwhelming grief.

A feeling of great loss, but also command, settled upon her when addressing them next, 'Thank you all, you've served my mother well. She was a leader of steel blood, she deserved better than...'

The words got stuck in her throat and Hinane lowered her eyes when the tears dammed in them. She pinched the lids to squeeze out the droplets, looked up, then continued.

'Now,' she croaked and cleared her throat, 'I can only offer you a doubtful future, crossing the unknown deserts, not knowing what lies ahead. But it's a chance to stay alive and be free.'

She picked them out one by one with a steady gaze, trying to persuade them to reason.

Then she said with conviction, 'I'll rather die from hunger and thirst as a free drifter than a captured slave. The odds are simply against us. The Romans come in a drove and we are only a few.'

The crowd mumbled among themselves, some shook heads, some nodded, and shouts resonated from the rear of the crowd, 'What of our goats, sheep, cows and our date orchards?'

Hinane raised her voice with impatience, 'Look around. The drought has already destroyed most of what we had. We'll build another home in the lands to the southeast. Nomads that have crossed our paths before talked of fruitful lands with hazelnut, almonds, olives, sweet apricots, oranges, date palms and fig trees. Your favourite spices, cinnamon, rosemary, coriander, pepper and myrtle are found in abundance in far-off lands.'

She purposely mentioned all the stuff she knew they loved in trying to convince them, although she had no idea where these lands were, or if they would ever find any of the things cited.

Then she smiled softly with a last push of persuasion, 'And the gods will guide us, no doubt.'

Hinane looked at their mixed expressions, her own troubled emotions mirrored on the faces before her. She wondered how she could talk with so much assurance when all else was tearing apart inside of her. She dreaded this new responsibility that fell on her without warning, and a nervous muscle plucked in the corner of her upper lip.

But then she straightened her shoulders, inwardly accepting the unavoidable challenge with the confident will and fire inherited from her ancestors, 'Those of you to follow, prepare in haste, we'll leave four hours before first light. The rest, may the gods soothe your journey to the afterlife.'

She turned away, ignoring the sounding protests from the sceptics in the crowd. She walked to Burn where he was fastened to a peg post of her tent, feeding on the fodder and water Yeddes had brought him. She caressed his narrow head between the ears, down over the crest, fondling his manes and neck.

Burn was a Moroccan Barb, standing fifteen hands high. Although the original colourations of the Barb were dark bay and black, it had been influenced by Arabian blood, shading them to grey and white. And Burn, now the colour of light shimmering white and silver, had none of the other Arabic features in its physical appearance.

His thick barrel was indicative of staying power, but his thin legs were not. Therefore, many considered this breed to lack in physical presence. But Burn proved the critics wrong. He harboured great stamina, strength, speed and agility, an amalgamation of bloodlines throughout centuries.

He was a gift from her father, given to her two months before he died. When she looked into his black eyes the first time, Burn was only a foal, and as the years passed, Hinane had grown deeply attached to him.

'Any warrior girl should have a sturdy horse which would be an ally in all adversity, a rock in battle, a companion without falter. A horse is a support without equal,' her father said when handing her the reins, 'Raise him with the

kindness of your heart and the strength of your spirit,' he smiled.

Heavy with fatigue, Hinane rested her head with a sigh against Burn's neck. She closed her tired eyes for a moment, then opened them again slowly when whispering against the softness of his muzzle, 'You'll sustain the journey into the sand oceans won't you? I can't leave you, I won't make it without you.'

She paused when tears formed in her eyes. Her voice broke when she said with a weak and sad smile, 'You're all I have left now.'

Burn answered with a snort and blow, bobbing his head up and down, a low but comforting whinny arising from his throat.

CHAPTER 4

The waning moon and glistening stars threw a dim silvery light over the path that ascended through the peaks. The trail would eventually lead them to the sand oceans, first over this high Atlas mountain ridge, then descending to the bottom on the other side of the range. Hinane hoped the trail would lead them to safety, a hope shadowed by great danger and considerable risks.

Hinane rode on a white dromedary with Burn fastened on a lead rein following her. Spread horizontally on Burn's back was Lunja's corpse wrapped in white linen fabric woven from the fibres of the flax plant.

Tailing shortly after Burn in a single file camel caravan, was a handful of Hinane's most trusted warrior women, Takamat, a few middle aged wives with their husbands and children, some elders and house servants.

Packed donkeys and mules snailed behind, heavily laden with dates, grain, salt, pots, jars, waterskins and other essential provisions, all they could gather in haste. Yeddes and a few shepherds encouraged the animals forward with whip beats and harsh vocal prompting, an approach absent in normal circumstances.

Hinane threw a nervous and concerned backward glance over the column. They must disappear over the peak before the slave traders could spot them. They would be quite visible in daylight even from far below, and she prodded her camel into a faster pace.

She tried not to think of the fate of those left behind. They simply refused to come, even after further efforts in trying to convince them upon their departure. She sighed. There was nothing more she could do. Hinane shrugged the disturbing thoughts and turned her mind towards what needed to be done to keep the ones who did join her out of danger.

Once over the peak, about a league from where they've started the descent from the top, Hinane turned from the main path, the narrow trail ultimately leading through two rocky pitches that towered before a large open platform about the size of one Roman rood.

While Hinane waited for everyone to reach her, she walked to the entrance of the cave concealed behind one of the rock pitches. The opening was totally secluded from open view with overhanging rocks allowing passage for only one person at a time.

Hinane discovered the cavern in her teenage years and since then visited it often. It became a special and sacred place where Lunja taught her much of their ancestors, gods and spirits, traditions, art and writing poetry.

Hinane traced her fingers over the rough walls decorated with figures of their gods and goddesses which she had painted with the lucid visions of a young child full of dreams and hopes. Hence the cave being ideal to put Lunja's corpse to rest.

Hinane returned to the open platform. The rest of the party arrived weak and tired from intense concentration in following the rocky path to the cavern in the dark.

Hinane took what she needed for the burial ceremony from the laden animals, and with the help of two of her warriors, lifted Lunja's lifeless body from Burn. Hinane, Takamat, Yeddes, Tala and Izza carried Lunja's corpse deep into the cave, and after following a few channels and turning some corners, put her down on an elevated rock that extruded from a fissure wall.

They've used the rock as an altar many times before. The grey smoke stains on the wall above the burnt out candles along the sides, the dead flowers and dried herbs scattered undisturbed on the surfaces, all remnants from their last ceremony.

Hinane flicked a hand, indicating for them to leave the cavern, her throat too clogged up to voice the order. She lit the incense and candles taken from her bag and placed them all around the altar, the fragrance of sandalwood and sage whiffing from the heat into the air.

She quickly traded her warrior dress for a tunic of crisp white linen and a two-piece silver moon necklace, a small disk hanging just above a crescent moon with its concave side oriented upward. The white tunic created a mystical look with her tanned arms almost invisible in the soft light and her dark hair a shimmering charcoal crown reaching beyond her shoulders, her blue eyes glistening with tears.

She took the henna ink and painted Lunja's face, legs, arms and hands with circular patterns and the particular shapes of their tribal signatures. Hinane put the same symbols on her own exposed limbs, highlighting the old tints of a few weeks before.

Then, when the henna dried on Lunja's skin, she oiled her lifeless body with olive juice, sweet honey and wax to prevent decay. She mixed it with red ochre to give the body a red tint reminiscent of a woman's womb.

She wrapped Lunja in her favourite caftan, of colourful indigo, red and yellow. A few years before, Lunja selected it with care from a bale presented to her by traders from Morocco. The garb, softly enfolding the contours of her body, often evoked much admiration from both men and women when she wore it around camp.

Hinane replaced Lunja's bracelets and chains from the small bag she carried

with her, and covered her feet with leather soled sandals, tying the threads up to her knees. She ignited the last of the candles to brighten up Lunja's face, went down on one knee and closed her eyes in a whispered prayer.

'Gods of the burning sun, the glowing moon, the shining stars, all the spirits and souls of nature that give life to the universe. I am Hinane, a mortal soul of earth, hear the words of my prayers.'

She swallowed on the lump in her throat, tears dammed behind her eyes, and dribbled through her closed eye lashes. Many minutes passed before she could continue.

'Give Lunja's spirit eternal knowledge beyond death. Give her peace, freedom and reunion with those who have gone before. From you all things proceed, and unto you, they must return. Let our worship be in your hearts behold.'

She got up and gazed fondly upon Lunja's face, then kissed her. She turned and commanded Takamat, who stood waiting at the entrance of the cave, to bring in the rest.

To reach the altar they had to walk the symbolic labyrinth Hinane had imprinted on the rough floor surface a few years earlier. Like the spiral it derived from, the labyrinth represented travelling inward to original beginnings and interior space, and out again back into the outer journey of the soul.

Hinane lifted her hands for the ritual blessing, her palms facing the mourners while reciting the ceremonial prayer to invoke divine protection.

Then she gave the final blessing to those still living, 'Let there always be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honour and courage, mirth and reverence within you. For if that which you seek, you find not within, you will never find it without. Fear not, as the gods have been with you from the beginning, are at your side now, will be there at your end and further beyond.'

Hinane placed Lunja's double-headed axe, the labrys, along her thighs so that its handle rested in her palm. The two half-moon shaped razor sharp iron warheads on either side of the shaft, was the ceremonial sceptre and signature weapon of the warrior women, a status symbol of their courage and strength. It was also a symbol of the female labia, the waxing and waning moons, and the butterfly which was connected with rebirth and transformation.

For thousands of years, across many nations, the labrys symbol marked the entrances to deities' sanctuaries. It carried the meaning that warriors who entered, should learn to use the power within to overcome challenges or discrimination in any form.

Hinane stood with a heavy heart as the tribe crossed over to her one by one, locked their hands into hers, sharing their energies of comfort and support, then left the cave through the labyrinth.

The proceedings brought her father's burial to mind and her hands trembled. When he died, at least she had Lunja. But now, there would be no other to share her pain and help carry her grief. Loneliness nested in her heart.

She closed her eyes and rested her forehead on Lunja's chest. Pictures of the past jumped across her mind and she relived how the Greek soldier killed Philo in front of them without considering the brutal effects it would have on his

wife and small child.

The soldier shoved his sword deep into Philo's heart, thrusting and cutting again and again until life drained from his eyes. The cries stilled on Philo's lips and the blood formed a crimson pool around his lifeless body. Lunja and Hinane looked upon with horror, powerless tied to a post.

Hinane could not recall the exact reasons for the attack. When Hinane questioned her about it, Lunja told how the Greek had made abased remarks towards Lunja with Philo defending her honour.

Hinane knew there were far more gruesome details to the story after the soldier untied Lunja and dragged her deeper into the forest with a soldier at each arm and foot. Her screams resonated through the woods and bounced back from the trees for hours afterwards, but Lunja never gave the exact cause of her outcries. And many years after, it still troubled her sleep and haunted her dreams.

The memory of the tragedy of Philo's death and Lunja's ordeal, merged with the sorrow of now, and the pain of being left alone stabbed deeply into Hinane's chest, similar to those thrusts that killed Philo.

A desert eagle owl flew into the cavern and perched high above the altar on a small ledge, its eyes shining ochre in the candle light, the tawny and black feathers of its chest moving slightly from its flight.

According to their beliefs, the owl was also the guardian and protector of the dead, keeper of spirits who passed from one plane to another, winging the newly freed soul from the physical world into the realm of spirit. Hinane suddenly remembered the owl's cry in the forest just before the slave traders' attack, and she shivered. She should have known.

The owl howled softly with a conclusive ring to it as if rushing her to say goodbye, and Hinane's frail emotions erupted, suddenly grasping the full finality of it all. Her sobs became a lamenting melody when the sun rose over the horizon, the early morning light bathing the mountain range in soft hues of orange, and Hinane finally rose to her feet and dried her tears.

Dressed again in warrior outfit, she stepped into the radiance of the morning sun.

Artemis was their goddess of the moon, huntress of souls, protector of wild places and animals. To her was known the deep places in nature where one could regain strength, and Hinane asked for that wisdom to mantle them when entering the harsh sand waves of the Sahara. Hinane's appearance became solid and sturdy with renewed strength as her lips recited a last prayer to Athena of the sun, the goddess of war and wisdom to aid her along with Artemis.

The faded cry of a golden eagle echoed against the mountain cliffs, carrying the dismal but comforting sound away for miles into the range. Hinane smiled softly, Athena and Artemis had given their protection. Her step towards the waiting tribe steadied with a bit more confidence and optimism, but still heavy with the daunting sensation that the slave traders followed directly on their heels.

And with a last glance towards the cavern entrance and a quick 'Later mother,' she hurried towards the waiting tribe.

CHAPTER 5

All eyes were fixed with terror on the hamada landscape of barren rocky plateaus swelling wide and far to the east. Way behind it in the outlined distance, the ergs, large areas of shifting sand, met the cloudless blue horizon in swarms of heat waves.

Hinane halted the camel at the bottom of the mountain, allowing for a brief recap before entering the discouraging terrain. With the back of her hand, she wiped the sweat from her forehead, wondering that if the heat was so fierce a mere four hours after sunrise, how hot it would become nearing noon.

Nervousness plucked in her stomach and grew firmer when looking at the group following behind, fatigue straining their movements, their eyes fixed anxiously upon her.

Hinane's gaze returned to the vast deserts before her and frowned deeply in thought. What would Lunja have done?

She would have consulted the wisdom of age, then waited for self-inspiration and acted with careful consideration. She turned to Yeddes a few paces behind her with Takamat inert and anxious next to him, sitting unversed on the camel.

'Is there any man who knows anything about the Tinariwen?'

Yeddes glanced backwards and walked his camel to an old man in the back of the group still a short distance up on the ridge. The man's face was fully covered with wrinkles marking each year spent in the ruthless sun, his skin parched and dark.

Yeddes exchanged a few words with him and returned to Hinane, the man following slow-footed.

'This fellow traded with his father through the deserts to the south and north since he was a juvenile. He says he knows little, times have changed, but will tell you all he had committed to memory.'

Hinane nodded and waited for the old man to reach her, scrutinising him thoroughly with a frown, not remembering seeing him before. Actually Hinane never paid much attention to any of the elderly or ordinary folk in Lunja's tribe. Her life consisted of hunting, combat practising, and enjoying the carelessness of youth. Lunja and the warriors filled her day with the rest of the tribe being nearly non-existent to her. Until now. And Hinane wished now she paid more attention.

As he approached, she worried that their future might depend on this frail looking old man. But she shrugged the agitation in her neck when he halted close enough to talk.

They exchanged the accustomed greeting, Hinane asked him a few questions to test his wisdom, then they inspected the desert before them in

silence. The magnitude of it dampened the atmosphere between them, and as the minutes dragged, the full force of their dilemma dawned like a guillotine overhead. Hinane's uncertainty deepened, her hands trembled, but she steadied them into clenched fists and a firm bite on her jaw.

The old man broke the silence first, speaking in an ancient Tamachek dialect, 'These regs, these rock pavements will be hard to traverse. The sharp jagged pebbles and stones will bite into hooves and feet.'

He took a breath, her silence prompting him to continue, 'The days will be extremely hot causing severe sweat, sometimes along with hydration or heatstroke. The nights will be very cold from low humidity and cold winds.'

He paused, then said with a shaky voice, 'It's a hostile, deadly place.'

Hinane moved her shoulders slightly in light irritation and impatience with his theatrics, 'Give me something I can work with, old man.'

He quailed from the sudden scold and retorted, 'There is some food. The desert lark is plentiful, but not easy to catch as they camouflage in the soil, their feathers of the same colour. The eggs in their nests lay concealed in a tuft of grass against rocks, sometimes five eggs in a nest.'

Hinane shook her head to bark at him again, but then after quick consideration let him continue, maybe he would eventually utter something of importance.

The old man hesitated when observing Hinane's expression firming with frustration. His eyes searched for help towards Yeddes and Takamat, but they stood hopeless against his quandary.

He stuttered, 'The addax desert dweller goes in herds of twenty to two-hundred. But they only come when the rain comes and only at nightfall. We can use their skins to warm us and the horns as weapons.'

Hinane nodded slightly, suddenly ashamed of her intolerance. The old man dwindled on his feet, tired from the long passage and he needed water and food not scolding. Hinane slid off the camel, took him by the arm, sat him down on a rock and gave him water from her waterskin.

He gulped thankfully then carried on, 'The small fennec fox feeds at night, preying on small rodents, rabbits, insects and lizards. When animals die, the lappet-faced vulture comes scavenging, and we may find their eggs in small crags.'

Hinane gazed across the arid land, 'Water?'

The man shook his head, a hopeless glow in his faded brown eyes, 'Only when it rains, then small pools form. And if there are heavy rains, stream channels like arroyos and wadis form, but disappear quickly.'

'Oasis?'

He looked over the barren lands with a slight head shake, 'Some succulent plants here and there but with little moist. Only in the regs will we find an oasis, also depending on which way we go.'

'Southeast,' she said while looking in that direction.

He nodded, 'We'll find a couple between here and the Ahaggar mountains.'

'What about clans?'

'Mostly the freemen, the Amazigh and different tribe-branches of the Berbers

who substituted urban life for drifting through the desert with their livestock. They live scattered. But the area is so vast we might not even spot them.'

He grew silent, as that was all he knew. Hinane touched his shoulder with a soft, 'Thank you,' and turned to Yeddes .

'Let's rest for a bit. Check our foodstuffs and report how long we can survive on what we have, count the mouths to feed, plan for small rations, but still enough to endure.'

Yeddes nodded.

'Check the animal fodder and strengthen their hooves.'

Yeddes moved swiftly to fill out her commands.

Takamat followed Hinane's bleak stare over the hard sand gravel, exposed bedrock outcrops and pebbles with flint sharp edges in between.

Hinane walked to Burn with worry etched on her face. The terrain would be callous on the animals and those on foot. She wondered how much of it they would have to suffer through before eventually arriving on soft sand dunes. From here they can see it far in the distance, but to guess was difficult.

'Hinane,' said Takamat hesitantly.

Hinane kept quiet. Growing up, servant and mistress together, they were well acquainted, and Hinane knew exactly what burdened Takamat.

Hinane heard the sharp panic in her voice when she spoke again, 'What if we don't make it?'

'What if we stay?' Came Hinane's cool answer.

Takamat's eyes echoed their pickle.

Hinane knew she had to be stern and could not afford Takamat's state of mind to rub off on her. It would weaken her resolve and dim her thoughts.

To tame Takamat's anxiety she ordered, 'Ask the old man what type of plants are found in the desert.'

Takamat nodded, struggled down from her camel's back and walked to the frail figure where he remained sitting on the rock where Hinane had left him.

Hinane pulled on her leather cuirass, the sweat underneath it itching on her skin, the fabric not suitable for this heat. She inspected her weapons while fiddling with the sword-belt around her waist, still getting used to its weight. She jumped on Burn and steered him along the crags on their left.

Her eyes darted over the mountain range that towered high into the sky, expecting to see their perpetrators appearing any minute now between the two high stone pitches at the top. Since they had left their home, there had been no sign of them, but she sensed they were there and couldn't stall too long.

As she gazed along the ridges, a golden eagle approached from over the pinnacle. It grew larger as it darted in from over the lower lying cliffs, soaring with magnificence. Burn uttered a powerful whinny as the bird circled lower and glided in a large loop high above them.

He resembled the eagle in her dreams that morning of their attack and she watched it closely. She searched for the wisdom and protection she expected to find in the bird's eyes when it closed in and rounded her a few times.

She felt the slight tension stir in Burn, but kept him in check. The eagle flew along the cliff range towards a large stone formation, then back to where Hinane

was waiting. Then back again to the stone configuration.

Hinane rode to the stone and halted with surprise, as from a much closer angle, it resembled a prehistoric structure, the monument of Mzora, the best known megalithic monument in the northwest, composed of a circle of megaliths surrounding a tumulus. According to the ancient teachings, the Mzora monument could be the tomb of the mythic Libyan king Antaeus, the giant son of Poseidon and Gaia, who lived in the interior desert of Libya.

Hinane doubted that this was the one and the same, but nevertheless felt her spirit soar when recognising its likeness.

According to the legend, Antaeus was a half giant who ferociously killed in wrestling matches, collecting skulls to build a temple. He was known to Lunja's legion as Änti, assiduously strong as long as he remained footed within mother earth, but once lifted, became as weak as any other man. Heracles discovered the secret of his power and, holding Antaeus aloft, crushed him with arms locked tightly around his chest. Heracles forced the air from Antaeus' lungs, broke his ribs and squashed his entrails.

The myth of Antaeus was considered by the Amazon as a symbol of spiritual strength which accrued when resting faith in the immediate circumstances. It might not be Änti's tomb displayed here, but what it symbolised was important, and Hinane's lips lifted into a grin, 'Thank you.'

She veered Burn back to her people, faith now a bit stronger lodged in her heart, but the caveat twitch in her gut still moved her to act in haste. Yeddes and Takamat stood waiting when Hinane jumped from Burn.

'Report quickly,' she said with a tone which lifted Takamat's mood and bulged Yeddes' chest.

Yeddes was quick with his account, 'We are thirty-four all together and will survive about twenty-one days with what we brought with us. That includes feed for the animals.'

He hesitated, 'But we will run out of water before anything else. Maybe seven days.'

Hinane tilted her head slightly in thought, 'The animals' footing?'

'All strong and protected to tolerate normal gravel surfaces, but not the sharp rock pikes.'

Hinane nodded slightly and ordered, 'Get Tala and Izza,' and turned to Takamat, 'What's the count of the Scythian root?'

Takamat frowned without understanding, 'The liquorice roots?'

The liquorice root was known to adjust blood sugar, deliver quick energy, maintain stamina, and, 'To retain water in the body,' she said loudly. Then turned with a quick, 'I'll check,' and ran off just as Yeddes, Izza and Tala approached.

Hinane called after her, 'And check the parsley and thyme.'

Parsley had been used for ages as an excellent source of energy, it's also a diuretic for fluid retention, and it contained potassium for sore joints and muscles. Thyme calmed the nerves and strengthened the lungs, all the elements which could aid them in their pursuit.

Hinane turned her gaze towards Izza and Tala. They wore the same type of leather cuirass outfits as Hinane, the distinct fashion of Lunja's warriors. They

wore python-skin boots, with swords fastened to their sides and daggers fixed firmly to their boots.

Hinane turned to Burn, took her weapons from the saddle, handed the reins to Yeddes to water him and refasten him to the camel. Burn needed to be spared as long as possible.

‘Tala, Izza.’

They stood quietly during the discussions, waiting impatiently for their orders, and now quickly jumped to attention at her address.

‘We’ve hunted together as children, we trained in concert, we are warriors.’

They nodded.

‘Do you stand with me on this day?’

They nodded again.

‘How many bold warriors are among us?’

Tala answered with a quick, ‘Including us three, only nine. The others took flight elsewhere, accompanied by their male mates when we left Tafilalt. Cowards,’ she added with a scowl and frown.

‘Are you all equipped with the standard weapon outfit?’

‘Yes.’

Hinane ran her fingers over a two-edged sword, checked the sheathed daggers and lead-ball slings. She counted the arrows in the leather gorytys quiver case and with a right hand lifted her prized labrys axe, the cedar wood grip carved and burned in spot patterns.

Izza and Tala lifted their own axes in keen anticipation, eager for what’s to come. Hinane smiled as the two were never seen without their axes, their personal comforts and joys, and never far from any conflict or battle.

Hinane lifted her arm high above her head and swung the axe in a circle motion twice, then held the heavy weapon horizontal in front of her towards Tala and Izza, the weight of it not seeming to be a burden at all, the muscles of her forearm bulging as she clenched it tighter.

By taking this stance as customary for warriors just before battle, Hinane symbolically took charge, naturally filling her mother’s boots.

Her voice trembled at first but then steadied in controlled decree with grace and courage, ‘Will you pledge your allegiance with me now and hereafter, even when our path ahead is clouded with doubt and peril? Will you take second command and act as my generals?’

They voiced in union, ‘Yes my queen,’ their beautiful features in earnest expressions. Tala had the look of clans from the far-east, dark upward slanted eye shapes with purple specks in dark grey irises, so steely and cold, it made enemies flee. Raven black hair reached her narrow hips and muscles embossed upon all parts of her tanned physique.

Izza was tall and slim with caramel hair tied in a knot high on her crown. Her hazel-yellow eyes were more candid than the ice-cold stare of Tala, but when aggravated, the fire in them evoked chills down opponents’ spines.

They lifted and swung their axes in the same fashion as Hinane did, and held it out to meet their commander’s axe as their custom dictated.

The half-moon heads locked into each other and they shouted in union, ‘May

courage brace our hearts and the gods put fire to our spirits, may we walk this wary path with insight and valour. May all strangers we meet become allies, and may those who wish us dead perish at the tips of our swords.'

They walked closer to each other and lifted the axes into a pyramid above their heads, the blades still interlocked. Each of them dropped on one knee and stooped to a bow, 'And in this vow, Athena of the sun is our sentry and protector.'

Yeddes cut in with a sudden, 'They are here.'

CHAPTER 6

'How many?' asked Hinane with tense breath as she raised from her knee.

Yeddes shook his head, 'Impossible to tell. We only saw a few cross the pinnacle. There could be many following.'

'How long before they reach us?'

'Maybe two hours, they are still high up.'

There was no more time to waver.

'How many horses Izza?' Hinane enquired in haste.

'You told us to leave them all behind my queen,' the honoured title delivered with ease and reverence.

'I did?' Hinane's face creased as she remembered repeating Lunja's orders before they had left. She balled her fists in frustration, silently cursing her bewildered judgement of that time.

Izza grimaced, 'But we could not part with our horses. How else would we exercise our powers with grace?'

Hinane grinned, thankful for their obstinate nature, 'I'll ignore your defiance this time. How many?'

'Five horses including Burn,' Izza's eagerness lit her face and made her eyes sparkle, battle lust sprinting through every vein.

Hinane's mind jumped about, first wondering how she overlooked the horses in the column during the night, but then dismissed it as an unimportant fact and rather searched for insight.

In general, Roman slave traders were trained in the war tactics of the Byzantine and Western Roman empires, therefore not easily fooled or beaten. With just nine warriors, five horses and unskilled household folks, their standing appeared dire.

It's already a miracle that they've traversed the entire length of the middle Atlas, along the skirts of the higher Atlas, crossing the Saharan Atlas totally unscathed. But their luck was running out and she needed to ordain her scattered thoughts into feasible commands.

The many cliffs and rocks permitted an ambush ploy, but the Romans might

anticipate such an attack and primed for all occurrences. Hinane rejected the idea as she had no way of telling how many there were, and to uphold such a fight with her insignificant sum of warriors would be suicide. Then Hinane tried to visualise how the Romans would approach and attack.

Upon seeing them from the top, having rushed down through the mountain passes, the Romans would charge into the open lands below at an incredible speed trying to ride them down. They would be armed with bow, javelin, swords or maybe scimitar, but the combination of horse, archer and heavy cavalry were a deadly mix to those on foot and the slower camels.

The midday heat lingered like a thick mantle over them, sweat trickling in small streams underneath Hinane's garments, the stuffy air muffling her thoughts. Her subjects stood tensely in wait for her orders which strained her nerves.

She straightened, shuffled her shoulders, and shook her head slightly in trying to shed the numbing effect of the heat on her mind. She delved deeper into her mind, trying to draw out Lunja's tactic resources also deeply rooted in her own intelligence to devise their actions.

When her thoughts were clear, she beckoned Yeddes, 'Take leather straps and swathe the hooves of the camels, donkeys and other animals. Then take the young, old and weak, put them on camels, find a suitable leader and send them into the desert. Tell them to keep eastwards. Make sure they know we'll find them and not to panic. They must go quickly and not look back, but tell them to remain visible in the open vistas.'

Yeddes nodded in understanding and Hinane continued, 'Group and tally the rest of the strong and those I can employ. Then report back to me.'

Hinane dug into her wits searching for the higher messages from Änti's tombstones, 'Cut them off from their strengths, take away their power.'

Hinane turned to Izza, 'Find rope and bring the horses.'

Then she swayed to Takamat, 'Take the herbs and concoct the same poison I normally apply for hunting, but much stronger.'

Takamat ran to find the donkeys which carried the goods before they left for the desert, her sprint an odd scamper of dangling arms and legs.

'Tala, find all the thorn spikes and the small hunting chutes. Assemble the warriors, make sure they have blowing horns at their sides and arrows dipped in tallow.'

Hinane scrutinised the hills looking for the best spot to set the first harass. Her eyes followed the descending path from top to bottom, the Romans not yet in her sight from this angle.

Izza is the first to return. Hinane examined the horses, 'Manufacture thick leather boots for them,' she ordered and inspected the ropes while Izza started the process with skilled hands. They have done this often before on hunting parades to choke their approach, stalking their prey without sound. But in this case it would protect their hooves from the sharp edges of the jagged stones, and any spikes that might make their way into their path.

Tala arrived at Hinane's side with the other six warriors, all fierce and strong women combatants, armed and ready. Yeddes followed with a couple of men,

not quite of battle substance, but at least they appeared to be brawny and responsive. Takamat returned with the poison brew in dried shell calabashes.

Hinane gazed upon the small group standing in wait for her orders, the low number of warriors a heavy concern in her stomach. She took a deep breath and ran a hand through her hair before speaking.

'There is no time for lengthy tactic talks. So give your unbroken attention.'

They stood unaffected and she carried on, 'I know most of you are not skilled in combat, but keep a strong heart and clear focus on your given tasks. Stay in the present. Do not think of one's you've lost or left behind, and do not fret about the path into the deserts. Keep your minds here and now, focus on the fight.'

Their faces were stern and apprehensive but they listened attentively.

'We don't have the numbers, but we have strategy and spirit. Your choice was to follow me to freedom, and now you must be prepared to fight for it, even die if it's due.'

Hesitation sprang upon their faces and Hinane continued quickly, 'You have no other choice now but to focus on the outcome, your freedom. The fight is right here, in the chest,' she tapped a fist on her heart. 'Be impeccable in your actions, be ruthless, do your best and let the spirits and gods decide the rest.'

Hinane lifted her axe to her side, 'Your own will is the most powerful tool which can direct your acts and sway the result. Your own will can prompt astonishing feats.'

She voiced the words but inside she was also slightly unsure of it. She paused so her words could sink in then motivated them further, 'Your own will to live is what will make us succeed, even when the odds show we might be conquered.'

Hinane lifted her axe and shoved it above her head, 'Your inner will to fight makes you invincible and unconquerable.'

She brought the axe down and with no time to wait for further response, Hinane gave the line of attack, 'Tala, take two men, the spider spikes and the small hunting chutes with calabashes. Dip the spikes and little arrows from the chutes, layer the poison on thick. Hide one man behind a high outcrop back on the path about a quarter way up.' Hinane pointed upward in the path, more or less where she wanted the man to be stationed.

'Stay out of sight. Leave him there and charge him to shoot the Roman's horses one by one as they pass, aim for their hands. Make sure you have enough arrows, one for each horse. He must not be discovered.'

Tala nodded and waited for more orders.

'Take the other man and leave him lower down, concealed with another set of chutes and poisoned arrows with the same task. I repeat, they must stay hidden until it's safe to come down after all of the culprits have passed. I guess, or hope, they are merely a scouting party, therefore, our men must come down before the big forces approach.'

Tala shifted her weight from one foot to the other, her right hand on the sheath of her sword, impatient to set off, 'Got it.'

Hinane continued, 'Scatter the thorn spikes soaked in the poison a little further down all along the path, almost at the base of the hills. Span the rope

across, right at the bottom, where they would enter the flat surfaces. Set it tight to catch the horses where chest and leg join. Make sure the ropes are not easily seen. Then return to my command at once.'

Tala nodded and Hinane put her hand on Tala's shoulder, 'Go with speed, stay out of view.'

Tala selected two men adequate for the tasks and disappeared around the first hill.

'Takamat.' She jumped when her name was called and looked at Hinane with rising panic.

Hinane's face softened a little and said gently, 'Can you do something brave for me? Can you gather your wits?'

Takamat nodded, throwing a glance towards Yeddes. Her lips quivered as her gaze met his, he nodded faintly. She straightened her back and squared her shoulders, trying to find the courage. She blinked at Hinane, 'Yes my queen.'

'Take a blowing horn and walk all along the escarpment to the north. Stay concealed but in earshot. As soon as the raiders reach the bottom, blow on the horn as loud as you can. Can you do that?'

She nodded, swallowing nervously, and Hinane shrivelled at the idea of her friend getting caught. Takamat was no warrior and woven from delicate fabric, she won't be able to fend for herself. Hinane prompted, 'Stay hidden, you hear. Your life depends on it.'

Takamat whitened. Yeddes closed in and took her elbow in support.

Hinane turned to him, 'Yeddes you do the same but along the ridges to the south.'

Yeddes bowed.

Hinane smiled weakly with encouragement, 'You can do this, be bold will you,' and without waiting for an answer, threw a glance towards the hills to see how far the enemy lines were.

They approached faster than what she had hoped for, their line appearing in view unbroken and it was impossible to tell how many. She turned to Izza and the other warriors while Yeddes and Takamat scurried away towards their positions.

'We are nine warriors with five horses and a few men on foot. The enemy might be many. Their strengths are their horses, strong body armour and unknown numbers. Follow my instructions directly with no deviations.'

They drew closer as Hinane crouched to sketch the battle plan in the sand. Tala, with her previous tasks promptly delivered, rejoined them as they stood ready. Hinane quickly brought her up to speed, and they mounted with little time to spare before the raiders would be upon them.

Hinane rode alone on Burn, but each of the other four horses had a rider and pillion. Izza and Tala rode a little back on either side of Hinane, and the other two horses flanking their sides to form a triangle.

They trotted into the stony desert, following the big group Yeddes sent on their way, now just a small patch on the horizon, but still very visible to their followers on the slopes.

When at a distance on the rocky terrain, Hinane halted and wheeled around,

watching the enemy approaching. They have passed the two men hidden between the outcrops already and the poison from the tiny arrows would take effect soon.

The front lines entered the area where the thorn spikes were tossed, cutting deeply into the horses' hooves. The animals squealed, whinnied and leaped from pain, hurling their riders into the air.

Their outraged cries reached Hinane's squad in an echo as they tried to calm their horses. But the animals were uncontrollable, hurling over rocks and stones, trying to rid the blights in their hooves, trying to scatter away. The lines behind them caught up but the injured horses and men barred the narrow path and their progress was slow.

As soon as the clearing surfaced, they drove their horses in wild outcries and came charging down the last hill, just as Hinane had anticipated. The spanned rope across the path caught them just as they appeared at the bottom and they tumbled to earth in wild disarray. This was the signal Hinane was waiting for and she yanked Burn around, charging away from them into the desert. The following Romans jumped over the injured horses of those who were in front of them, and came charging towards Hinane.

Yeddes and Takamat were on close watch and their horns bellowed suddenly, the sound reaching far and wide. It echoed throughout the hills and threw the chasers into confusion. Some stopped, frantically looking in all directions, trying to discern where the noises came from and what the cause of it was.

Hinane placed the extra men Yeddes had brought her on several positions hidden behind the outcrops. The bulk of them discharged burning arrows into the confused scouts, setting their saddles aflame. The rest prepared slingshots with iron balls which they set off into their helmets, knocking them over.

As Hinane had hoped, the ones who did manage to clear the series of obstructions followed her with enraged minds which clouded their judgement. Now significantly thinned out, and without thinking ahead, they charged through the dust storm which Hinane's squad had left behind.

Hinane waved the signal and the five horses jumped into different directions to divide the enemy. After about a hundred paces, the pillion warriors jumped from the horses and took cover behind big rocks while the ones at steer carried on with the charge.

The moment the chasers came passed, following each of the five horses in their different paths, a warrior emerged from their hiding place. By kicking up dust and blowing on horns, they made the enemy believe there were more than just one. Some of the Romans halted in confusion, their horses now starting to suffer from the poisoned arrows inflicted by Hinane's people higher up on the descent.

Hinane's warriors waited no longer and turned bow and arrow to them, the flint sharp points piercing through the Romans' strong body armour. The battle cries of Hinane's warriors roared on high pitch throughout the cliffs in language or meaning unfamiliar to their rivals. The Romans found the sounds so disarming they froze and panicked.

The warriors took their axes and charged into them. Some Romans wheeled and followed Hinane and the other four horses. Hinane and the others fired their arrows backwards in the charge as they retreated.

But there were not many left and soon Hinane blew the order on her horn to spin around and charge back into the Romans with lifted axes. They smashed into them, swinging their weapons high and fierce, cutting into skulls and body parts. Most of their horses, now heavily drowsed from the poison, buckled and slumped into the dirt.

Upon charging in on the Romans, the memory of Lunja's attack and consequent death awakened in Hinane's mind, she snapped with grief and the pent tension that built from that day when Lunja was killed.

She jumped from Burn and screamed, then started to butcher Roman and animal in outrage, avenging her mother's death in a crazed fighting frenzy. But before she totally spun out of control, Tala stepped in and blocked her lifted arm before she could strike another time.

Tears ran in streaked paths through the dust and blood that clung to Hinane's face, and Tala said softly, 'That's enough. They're dead.'

Hinane recoiled, slightly embarrassed by her uncontrollable outburst as her senses slowly returned. She gazed across the battlefield and fighting warriors, slowly absorbing reality, her throat dry and scorched, 'The others need us.'

She jumped on Burn and ordered, 'Group the free warriors, meet me at the mountain's foot where we left Yeddes and Takamat.'

Hinane rushed back to help kill what were left of the rivals at the foot of the hills while Tala and Izza aided the other warriors who were still fighting on the flat surfaces between the rocks. They took care of the foes with bow, axe, sword and dagger, a fight that lasted only a few minutes and then returned to help Hinane.

By now the horses were all down in the dust and most of the Romans were either ablaze or speared. But a lot of them were still standing, getting the overhand on the unskilled men Hinane had left at the bottom of the pass.

She whispered encouragement to Burn, he whinnied and gained pace. Hinane loaded an arrow while charging towards the closest group. Even from a distance, she hit the target right between his eyes, then redirected her charge, aimed for the next one, drew and fired, killing them off one by one. Izza and Tala with the other warriors came charging in and followed suit. Within a short time, the Romans were defeated.

Hinane rode through the battlefield, searching through the wounded bodies for ones still alive. She recognised four of her own people dead among them. The loss stung in her heart, but they did better than expected. They've won this battle, but Hinane knew to act swiftly as there might be reserves following the scouting party, if this ever was one.

She ordered her warriors to kill the still breathing enemy with sword thrusts through their hearts, and to fetch Yeddes and Takamat from their posts. Hinane rode up the mountain to find the two men they had left stationed there, and brought them back to where the rest waited.

Her eyes darted over the dead, the fierce battle rage in her heart making way

for sadness and gloom.

She took a deep breath to compose herself back to command, 'There is no time to bury the ones from our tribe, let the gods and the vultures take care of them.'

They were too tired to protest and followed Hinane on her command to retreat into the desert, trailing the camel and donkey spoor of the convoy Hinane had sent before them.

Most of them were on foot which made their advance slow, their progress burdened even further by discouraged and brooding thoughts. They were leaving one danger to enter the depths of another, and yet, Hinane felt the excitement of the unknown tucking in her belly.

The sun dived lower, the dusk started to cover the sunlight, the heat dwindled and a cold breeze followed them deeper into the twilight.

If not found and buried, the soft winds would eventually blow dust over the vulture clean picked bones of the dead they had left behind, the thought a jarring metaphor in Hinane's mind.

She had departed her old life as the daughter of a respected Amazon queen, to enter a new life of becoming queen herself. And even though heavily burdened by grief, hazards, risks and threats, the approaching deserts still held a strange and compelling thrill for her.

Her eyes searched through the hills for the golden eagle which did not come and loneliness plucked in her chest. But she still straightened in her saddle with determined will and kept her eyes fixed on the horizon.

CHAPTER 7

'Izza.'

Izza heeled her horse and rode to where Hinane lingered, her eyes fixed on the group far up ahead, now almost invisible in the dusk.

'Ride forth and order them to wait so we can catch up. Is your horse still able?'

Izza nodded and set onward. They grouped just as the sun went down.

'We'll camp here,' ordered Hinane and slumped from Burn. She was exhausted. They had been on the move since midnight and needed a rest before entering the unknown vastness of the deserts.

They set up a small camp, red-dyed skin tents upheld with cedar poles fastened to the ground with ropes and pegs. The small nomad tents formed only a temporary overhang shelter, but still allowed enough protection against the cold and wind.

Yeddes tended to the camels, donkeys, mules and horses, inspecting them for any damage or injury inflicted. They were lucky, or just smartly prepared, as the animals proved still good for the impending journey. With a bit of rest, fodder

and water, they would be just as capable as before. On Yeddes' instructions, the servants repacked their stock for a smoother passage and for emergency items to be found in an instant.

On Hinane's orders, no cooking fires were lit to stay undisclosed from scouts' eyes. She told some of the older women to bring dried sheep and goat's meat from the reserves and prepare rations with millet and salt cakes as the evening meal.

Takamat dished out the Sythian root, a dosage for each for the next couple of days. Together with the salt cakes, the root will preserve the water levels in their bodies to maintain fortitude and stamina through the forthcoming barren terrains. Yeddes offered camel's milk in calabashes which servant girls served. It was a staple food for many tribes, rich in fat and protein with healthful properties and curative powers obtained from a selection of plant sources that made up the camel's diet.

With some substance in their bellies, the silence in camp grew thick as each was left with their own thoughts. Hinane relived the day and silently mourned Lunja, Philo and the ones who died, angry for not being competent enough to prevent any of it.

She shuffled around with unease. Her life was now about survival and responsibility, instead of the carefree certainty and comfort the Tafilalt had provided. And slowly the uncomplicated life she dreamt of before became a mere illusionary speck in the recesses of her mind.

She leaned backwards on her sleeping roll and gradually let the air escape from her lungs, trying to relax the tense rhythm of her heartbeat.

She stared at the stars above so vivid and clear against the black sky, as if thousands of holes were cut into a black fabric with sharp light shining from behind through each opening, some big, some small, some just a misty haze glowering softly against the darkness.

The grandeur of the Atlas mountain range was silhouetted against it, almost as the fabric had been left uncut along the bottom edges. The ancients have described the Atlas as keeping the heavens above the earth. But tonight the heavens were far removed from her solace, a place unimaginable in her troubled mind.

The skies always had a profound effect on gazers, a certain intimate connection between man and a god, between mortal and immortal. For Hinane, it felt as if being right in the centre of the universe, the stars rotating slowly in a sphere around the northern star Polaris, while the earth and its inhabitants stood witness to rounding forms. Since studying the stars with Lunja and other astronomers, Hinane had always tried to understand her place within it all, but suitable answers were still absent.

A quarter moon peeped from over the mountain range, and as it rose higher, threw a silver hue across the arid landscapes, bathing it in a soft glow of faint shadows and light, and with it a shiver of hope shone through.

Soft tunes of the lotar flute broke the dreary silence into soothing peacefulness. Made from the hollow bones of a predatory bird, the lotar was held sacred among them as its tunes, they believed, cured depression and

soothed indifference.

Played by most in their tribe on several occasions, its melodies have often erupted Hinane into a state of ecstatic prose, but tonight she sat quiet, just listening silently to the sweet calming sounds that stilled her mind. She closed her eyes and fell into a deep sleep.

A shrill scream pierced from afar into her dreams, slowly pulling her back to awareness, the interruption forming a frown on Hinane's brow. It was still dark and her eyes took a few seconds to adjust to the poor light.

'Get off me,' shrieked the old man a short distance from her. He was the one Hinane had spoken to earlier that day, seeking advice about the deserts. The grey-head was hitting at a huge yellow fat-tailed scorpion on his leg trying to shake it from him, his caftan waving up in a flurry. The insect got upset, fought back ferociously and stung the old man in his calf.

Hinane ran to his aid, but shrivelled with knowledge of the outcome when seeing the already swollen flesh around the sting. This was one of the deadliest scorpions found with the most potent venom, death came quickly for the weak, young and the old. The scorpion scurried from the old man's leg onto the sand and disappeared into the darkness.

Hinane ignored the scorpion and opened the wound with the dagger always carried in her waist. She tried to free most of the toxins with the blade before it spread, but it had already inflamed red and blue over the entire calf. The old man whimpered at the sight of his leg. Then desperately shouted a curse at the absent scorpion with wind-milling arms and spit flying from his lips.

'Keep still,' snapped Hinane.

Takamat came running with the medicinal herbs and washed the wound with a mixture of aloe juice and honey. But she knew from experience there was nothing that could save him, or provide some sort of comfort. She knew the pain would follow, and she gave him a mixture of herbs to brace his mind.

The camp was now in full commotion and Hinane thought it good to charge their advance, even though they had only been resting for a few hours. Since it was still dark and a few hours to light, they could cover a substantial distance before daylight would bring waves of scorching heat.

The old man was raised and fastened on the back of a camel and left with a waterskin. When the caravan moved forward on route, Hinane rode to his side trying to squeeze him for more facts on the deserts. She relentlessly prodded him regardless of his deteriorating state, with more concern for the survival of the majority than the demise of one.

The old man weakened fast and eventually fell forward without answering anything to satisfaction. He clenched his stomach, trying to ease the cramps in his belly and started to vomit. Hinane bent and peered into his hazy dull eyes, realising his vision had already become blurred and wobbly. He struggled to focus and blinked his eyes, sensitive to even the little light reflecting from the moon.

Only then did a sharp pang of sympathy jotted through Hinane. She stopped his camel, slid off hers, and called Tala to her aid. They lowered him to rest on the ground. He was now salivating and with much agitation, pulled on his robes,

murmuring uncontrollably, then fell into anaphylactic shock.

Hinane sagged to her knees beside him and took his hand in hers, closing her eyes in silent prayer. The last respect she could pay was to ease his transformation with the protection of their gods.

When he choked on his own tongue, grasping for his last breath, an unexpected tear popped from Hinane's eye. She quickly wiped it away and rose to her feet when the others crowded around them.

'Yeddes, get a few men and dig a grave.'

When they all had a chance at the shovel in closing the shallow grave in the rocky surface as a last service in respect, the light touched in the east. After a quick piecemeal of dried figs and dates, they continued towards the sandy dunes.

Along the way, Takamat and a servant collected scattered shrubs, prickly pear cactus, desert holly, and brittlebush. The prickly pear was useful in two ways, the pad of the cactus served as vegetable, and the pear as fruit.

The desert-holly, a compact, rounded shrub with a white-scurfy skin and brittle leaves with serrated edges, was covered with a thick short hair mat which gave it a grey-green appearance. Apart from the hair blanket over the leaves acting as an insulating layer to trap any moisture in the air and to reduce the amount of water lost to dry air, Takamat did not know what other properties it harboured, and she felt excited about the prospect of learning more. Any new plant meant that a new treatment for an ailment might be discovered, and a small contented smile plucked on her lips that thawed the gloom of the old man's funeral.

The brittlebush's flowers resembled the sunflower, only in miniature form. The yellow flowers were disk shaped on long bare stems, raising several finger-widths above the mound of white leaves with a dark yellow-orange to purplish whorl mound.

Takamat took a stem and squashed it between her fingertips. It secreted a clear resin, a viscous substance which could be used as a glue or gum, moist at first but hardened as it dried. Takamat frowned slightly, her mind already searching for ways to analyse its properties.

'Everything alright Takamat?' Hinane's voice made her jump. A wide smile lit her face as she held the stem higher for Hinane to inspect.

'Yes. I just wondered what uses to find for these little florals.'

Hinane smiled back, thankful that Takamat's mind was occupied elsewhere. Hinane wiped the sweat from her upper lip and temples, thinking to have her warrior outfit exchanged for something cooler before dehydrating.

'Takamat, when we take another rest, find me something appropriate to wear in this heat, will you?'

Takamat nodded with a pleased posture, the request a familiar comfort just like before in the Tafilalt.

At midday, Hinane ordered a halt for a couple of hours and sent Izza and Tala to scout the area up ahead. They reported that, at their current pace, they would enter the ergs by the afternoon of the next day. Hinane grouped the tribe and gave instructions on how to prepare for the worst conditions when traversing

the soft sand dunes.

But when they finally entered it, Hinane knew her preparations fell short in many ways. She fixed her eyes upon the windblown dune fields, wondering how they would ever navigate through this large area of shifting sands that changed shapes within hours.

Hinane beckoned Yeddes, 'Get an able person to mark the route, I want to chart our journey. Tell her to count the dunes as we pass them, how many paces each dune more or less cover, first up to the top then down and in-between.'

Yeddes frowned, 'How would that help, they change with the hour.'

Hinane agreed, 'Yes, but it is to mark distances more or less.'

Yeddes nodded and selected a young girl for the task, leaving her after giving instructions on how to record her findings on scrolls.

It took them a while to get used to the loose hot sand which sluggish their progress. It was only the camels with wide feet that moved with no strain, their heads lifted high and unfazed as they sailed across the dunes.

During the first couple of days, they encountered several tortoises and fennec foxes that served as a welcome sport for the hunting-hungry warriors. The fox was the only carnivore living in the desert able to survive with very little water, according to the dead old man.

Their kidneys were adapted to restrict water loss, their extensive burrowing caused the formation of dew, and they would receive moisture from the food they eat. The thick fur on the soles of their feet insulated against the hot sand and afforded excellent traction. Their thick sandy body-fur insulated them from the cold desert nights, which also reflected the heat during the day.

After five days of traversing in the scorching heat, the warrior scout who was dispatched each day came speeding back.

'Oasis,' rolled from her lips as she arrived in earshot, 'Oasis.'

They accelerated their movements and only stopped when Hinane signalled the order behind a large dune a short distance away from the unexpected retreat.

She glanced sideways at the group, 'Stay here. Tala, come with me.'

She slid from the camel at the base of the dune and climbed to the top with Tala at her side. They fell to their chests just before the pinnacle, crawling further to the top to remain unseen. Hinane's sharp eyes screened through the palms, small springs and wells.

A movement caught her eye and she followed it thoughtfully. They could be welcomed here, openly and pleasant, or be received with hostility and antagonism, it's difficult to tell. But from their carefree activities below, the people seemed harmless and Hinane decided to go in.

They ran back down the dune, took the camels and with orders shouted to the rest, rode to the oasis.

When they entered the valley at the nearest spring with wild beating uncertain hearts, people stopped and stared with closed expressions. Hinane suddenly realised they might be just as wary of her and Tala as they were of them. She forced a generous smile to her lips, and waved friendly greetings to all they passed.

Their faces immediately crumbled, offering the same friendliness towards her as she did to them. She sighed from relief, and when reaching a well, slid off the camel and casually took the waterskins from the saddle to demonstrate harmless intent.

When approaching the well to fill the bladders, she cursed at the long tunic Takamat made her wear. It was far longer than what she was accustomed to, supposedly to protect her bare legs from the scorching sun, but it constantly tangled around her ankles and Hinane found it most irritating.

She must design something more suitable for high temperatures and practicality, flitted through her mind whilst filling the skins with water.

'Welcome,' said a soothing, comforting voice and Hinane swung around, looking down into the hazel brown eyes and wide grin of the short plump man who spoke.

CHAPTER 8

Hinane's lips quivered following the short man's kind words. After the hardships of the past few days, his unexpected friendliness threatened to break her resolve. She swallowed the sudden weakness, straightened her spine and coiled her lips into a smile that melted the iron specks in her eyes into a gentle deep blue.

'Gratitude,' she said with a bow.

Hinane's eyes skimmed the oasis, 'Mind if we share in the provisions here?'

'The oasis provides enjoyment and shelter for all those passing,' he said whilst returning her bow with a wide grin on his swarthy face.

He wore a chiton, a white woollen tunic very similar to those favoured by the Greeks in the Roman empire, with tanned leather sandals covering his chubby feet that showed from underneath the garb. A broad bracelet, made from iron and copper with a foreign emblem imprinted on a flat circular iron plate, graced the wrist of his right hand.

Hinane turned to Tala, 'Collect the others,' and returned her gaze to the man when he spoke again.

'Tonight we'll have a feast, please join us?'

'I am grateful for your generosity. I would, however, like to know the identity of our host first,' japed Hinane.

He burst into laughter, 'Off course, forgive my absent mind. I am Amalu, a camel, sheep and goat shepherd, nomad of the deserts from the freemen clans known as the Imazighen.'

He slightly paused when seeing the confusion on her face and explained further, 'In singular form the Amazigh, but generally known outside the empires as Berbers.'

Hinane pretended she knew what he was talking about with a slight nod,

courteous bow and a quip, 'And I am Hinane, courageous warrior and newfound queen of my weary eclectic tribe.'

Their eyes locked in amity, an immediate mutual liking established between them.

'Come, let me direct you to a fitting place to set your camp close to a cool spring to rinse the sweat and dirt, clean and fresh enough to lift the spirits.'

They followed a pathway along palm and date trees to where lush wreaths of palm fronds tangled together which would provide enough shade and shelter for all her people.

Amalu explained where she could find all else they might need and concluded, 'I will send for you at sunset.'

Hinane nodded with a smile, but her eyes were fixed on the water, and when Amalu left, she took the chance to bathe before the rest would arrive. She stripped the foul clothes from her sweat ridden body and walked into the spring naked, the cool water reviving and stimulating, dissolving weariness from her limbs and clearing cobwebs from her mind.

And later, when the scorching daylight made way for a pleasant nippy evening, she was as fresh as the Tribulus herbs that bloomed after a desert's rainfall, sitting in light hearted communion with the others in Amalu's camp.

Amalu poured tea into a small tea cup, poured it from the cup back into the pot, swirled it a couple of times and poured it back into the cup once more. He turned to Hinane sitting on his right and handed her the cup with a small head tilt.

She took the sociable offering and took a sip of the sweet substance. She smiled with a nod and passed it to Takamat on her right who would in turn pass it to Yeddes, Tala, Izza, the other warrior women and some of Amalu's family, all sitting in a circle around the fire.

The everyday cooking and attending to children activities in the camp resounded in the distance, with soft tunes of drums and tambourines jovially darting in the air.

'Your camel man here, Yeddes, filled me in on your misfortunes. You are brave and lucky to have come so far unscathed,' Amalu's face carried a mixture of inquest, seriousness and sympathy.

Hinane gazed into the flames and nodded slowly with a little sigh, 'It was exigent,' then lifted her chin to meet Amalu's eyes, 'But, from what I've heard, the worst is yet to surface, and sure as daylight, we have to bridge this sand ocean to find a new domicile.'

Amalu nodded thoughtfully, 'I imagine the best would be to go southeast to the Ahaggar mountains, known to us here in the oasis as the Hoggar, although I don't know it very well.'

Hinane nodded in remembrance of the dead old man mentioning the same place, but before she could say anything Yeddes interrupted eagerly, 'Can we settle there?'

Amalu lifted his shoulders, 'Many tribes are already established there. But the area is big, the seasons mild and the mountains afford ample resources, meat, plants, water.'

Amalu filled another cup with tea and sent it off to his left.

Hinane's brow furrowed slightly, 'Is the land claimed by anyone, a ruler perhaps?'

'Like I said, I know not much about the place, except that people settled there to much satisfaction.'

Amalu's face suddenly turned sombre in the orange hues of the firelight.

Hinane immediately sensed his falling mood and enquired worriedly, 'But?'

'It is about fifty days travelling there, assuming that you take the right path off course. This oasis won't provide enough provisions to sustain you all the way. Even if it could, the restricted number of your pack animals would not suffice. The Tinariwen retains a deadly monotony and if you don't carry enough supplies, you might not reach the Hoggar.'

He paused and then added with a shoulder shrug, 'Wish I could provide someone of my tribe to show the way, but none is equip and merely part of my meagre household.'

Yeddes asked with concern, 'Is there no other water?'

Amalu nodded slightly, 'There are a few small wadis along the way, but if you take the wrong trail, you might miss them entirely. There's only one big oasis like this one, maybe slightly bigger, just before reaching the Hoggar. If you can reach it, you'll survive as it's only a short stretch towards the mountains from there.'

He shook his head in thought, then murmured inattentively with a deep sigh, 'May the god almighty protect you.'

Hinane scowled in an instant upon hearing his whisper and asked quickly, 'God almighty?'

Amalu's belly shook lightly in a guilty fright, and ignored her enquiring response. He returned to his ritual of serving tea, dismissing her query with a wave of his hand.

Hinane detested being brushed off like that, but Amalu was their host and she didn't want to prompt the issue towards possible discomfort.

She vaguely remembered a preacher coming to the Tafilalt before, speaking to Lunja of an almighty god with a son named Jesus Christ and a spirit of a holy ghost. Was Amalu referring to this man?

At the time, Lunja waved the preacher's campaign aside as a mere myth, a fabrication based on legends of many gods that walked the earth planes before, and even offered proof to the preacher that it had been so.

Amalu interrupted her thoughts, 'According to words falling from passing lips, the terrain at the Hoggar is diverse. Some places harbour arid volcanic rock and other parts are lined with cypress forests filled with wild game and lots of olive trees. And water, lots of water, with little streams forming high in the mountains, then flowing to the thriving oasis of Tamanrasset at the foot of it.'

Takamat spoke for the first time, her voice soft and dreamy 'Sounds like paradise.'

Yeddes glanced at Takamat with tender affection. Hinane caught their silent interlude with a smirk, wondering when these two were going to openly acknowledge their affection for each other. Takamat would love to wed and start her own brood, and Yeddes would dotingly fill that role.

Tala asked briskly, 'You said wild animals roam free, typical for the hunt?'

Amalu nodded, 'The animals are pests to the herders, dangerous and untamed, and not easy to manage.'

'The best reason to sport hunts,' sniggered Tala with cheery eyes whilst pumping Izza in the ribs, 'What say you?'

Izza bellowed, 'Of course what else.'

'Well then,' Hinane butted in before the two warriors got out of hand, 'It sounds like the ideal place. We will leave as soon as we've regained our strength and stocks.'

Amalu's servants brought them eghajira, a very sweet, thick beverage consisting of pounded millet, dates, and goat cheese mixed with water. After that, Amalu signalled the servants to bring in tahrict, which was a selection of sheep brains, tripe, lungs, and heart. The meats were rolled up on oak sticks and cooked on embers, served with barley and pounded dry vegetables made into a sauce.

From the generous meal Amalu provided, Hinane recognised and appreciated his goodwill, as these were dishes served only with big celebrations. After eating she declared thankfully, 'Much gratitude, light and blessings Amalu.'

He smiled and clapped his hands. A group of musicians, who were waiting for this signal, dashed closer with their instruments, ready to perform. The sounds of ancient type violins, the rebab and kemenja, pierced through the air with drums adding a primitive tempo to the vibes. The drums were simple wooden barrel shapes, festooned with carved patterns and strings on the sides which, when pulling the goatskin tighter over the opening, changed the sound bouncing from it.

To both the Berbers and the Amazon, music not only gave pleasure and lifted spirits, but it also preserved a long line of history written in songs. Lyrics told stories of ancestors, their love affairs and battles, accounts of their deaths and celebrations of rebirth.

And with music came dance. So Izza and Tala jumped up and followed the rhythms and tempos, stamping their boots into the loose sand while pulling the rest of the group to their feet to join in their pleasure.

Although dancing was one of Hinane's passions, she did not join the revelry tonight, disquiet kept her anchored next to Amalu. She remained deep in thought till the music stopped and most had left for the night. Amalu, maybe only out of respect for his guests or good health, Hinane couldn't tell, still looked perky.

'Tell me about the Imazighen Amalu,' she started cautiously, not knowing how to approach the true matter of her unrest.

Amalu kept his eyes fixed on the red-blue flames that played low on the coals. He shifted for more comfort on the woven pads on which they took their seating when the evening had started.

'My ancestors were from Numidia, a Berber kingdom from about six hundred years ago which covered mostly northern and western Africa. It later became a Roman prefecture, no longer in existence today.

'The name Numidia was first applied by Polybius about seven hundred years ago to indicate the territory west of Carthage, including the entire north of the

Sahara as far as the river Mulucha west of Oran.

‘The Berbers were also called Libyans by the ancient Greeks, as Numidians and Mauri by the Romans, but mostly now we are called the Amazich, meaning the free nomadic men of the deserts. Throughout the centuries there had been many strong Berber-led and populated kingdoms and cultures, existing together in various regions of northern Africa, often warring among themselves. Some carried white skins like you, and others dark skins like me, so there was never really a unified Berber empire or definitive colour so to speak.’

Hinane handed him water to wet his throat, eager to know more.

‘The Amazich are fiercely independent, following grazing grounds for livestock along routes that lead far into arid areas, living a completely separate life from other tribes or urban centres.’

They sat quiet for a few moments while Amalu gathered his thoughts. Hinane took her chance, ‘What did you mean earlier by saying, may god almighty be with you? We, our tribe and ancestors, know of many gods. Which one did you mean? What gods are you offering allegiance to?’

Amalu smiled gently, the soft warm glow from the fire suddenly reflecting brightly in his eyes.

‘Whoever your god is at the time of your specific need, Hinane. It is not for me to tell you which gods to worship.’

Hinane knew he was evading the subject, and didn’t want to press too much. But then, after some quiet moments without further prompting, he continued, the iron disk on his wrist catching the glimmer of the fire when he prodded some coals to flame higher.

‘What I can tell of interest, and which may affect you one day, is that the northern parts of Africa are currently divided in the beliefs of the Catholic Christians and the Donastis Christians, each one wanting to convert as many followers as possible. Ancient pagan customary beliefs might hold no place soon.’

A quick frown jumped to Hinane’s forehead, but she held her tongue for the moment as she carried no knowledge of the subject.

But her curiosity got the overhand and she asked, ‘What do you mean? I have no quarrels with these men or their gods, nor do I support any of their beliefs. They do not concern me.’

Amalu sighed, shook his head and told her what he knew.

In the year 312AD, the Donatists broke with the Roman Catholics over the election of Caecilian as bishop of Carthage. In 316, the bishop Majorinus had been replaced by Donatus who gave his name to this schism. He was banished in 347, died in 355, and was widely regarded as a martyr, thus being granted the epithet Donatus the Great. Although his writings were destroyed by his enemies, it was well-known that he was a vigorous leader, a man of learning, intelligence, integrity, wisdom, passion and oratory.

Around 396AD, Donatism was at its peak with over 400 bishops. Optatus, the then Donatist bishop of Thamugadi, joined forces with Gildo, the imperial appointee in Africa, in a revolt against Rome. But invasion forces were assembled, Gildo’s army retreated and Optatus was executed. Roman rule was

restored and the Catholics re-emerged under the leadership of Aurelius of Carthage and Augustine of Hippo.

Augustine became an influential figure and wrote scriptures against the teachings of Donatus. But it was Aurelius who placed Catholic bishops in many Donatist domains, and gradually converted inhabitants to the Catholic churches, with some Donatist bishops also transferring allegiance.

The Donatist movement was at the time under the leadership of Primian of Carthage, Emeritus of Caesarea and Petilian of Constantine. Their resilience, determination and courage ensured Donatism would survive.

In 403, the council at Carthage decided on a policy of persecution due to continued resistance of the Donatists. But these measures had not been implemented before the emperor Honorius issued an edict of unity in 405. The law banned Donatism and prohibited their services and teachings. The Catholics confiscated their property and exiled their clergy. The death penalty was never used, but severe beating and torture was.

‘But both these sects were of the Christian faith?’

Amalu nodded.

‘And they all worshipped the same god, this Jesus god, and his parent almighty god?’

Amalu nodded again.

Hinane was confused, ‘Why stand divided when supposed to be united under the same god? Why take from each other, removing all dignity and valour? How can their gods allow it?’

Amalu was astonished at her outburst. He was not accustomed to a woman speaking her mind on religious matters so freely, but said nothing when reminding himself that Hinane was still young, inexperienced and from a place hidden from the civilised world, and still had lots to learn.

Hinane took a deep breath and urged Amalu with an apologetic hand wave and a prompt to continue.

By 410 it was clear that persecution had not been effective in suppressing Donatism. A Catholic delegation requested Honorius to convene a conference in Carthage to settle the conflict. The emperor agreed and sent Marcellinus as his mediator. As was expected, the outcome was declared in favour of the Catholics, as Marcellinus was a friend of Augustine, so persecution continued.

But Donatism was far from being obsolete. The Catholics made progress in banning Donatism in the cities, but the countryside remained loyal to Donatism. They resisted in various ways, which sometimes led to massacre and death.

Hinane threw her hands in the air from disbelief, and let them fall back on her knees with a loud slap. But this time Amalu was undisturbed and kept going.

‘In 422AD, fourteen years ago, Augustine launched a determined campaign to reunite the churches throughout northern Africa.’

Hinane couldn’t contain herself and interrupted, ‘Can’t this Christian god speak for himself? How is it that he needs men to speak for him in church buildings? And what if these preachers have agendas? Who says they convey the message from their gods totally right? Can these gods not speak to each of their followers directly, in any place, anywhere?’

Amalu watched her closely with narrowed eyes, not sure what the true cause of her outburst was.

Hinane swallowed on her dry throat, wet it with water, and grew curious from a new thought, 'What caused the split between the Catholics and Donatists in the first place?'

A little embarrassed, Amalu answered, 'Well, basically, the split centred on the status of traditor clergy. The Donatists argued that traditores could not be reinstated without being re-baptised and re-ordained to take office, claiming that rituals performed by these un-ordained traditores were invalid.'

'And the Catholics believed that lapsed clergy could perform rituals such as baptism as long as they followed church ritual. The issue was complicated because it was not only Roman Catholic bishops who were suspected of being traditores, some Donatist bishops were also suspected of the same, in contradiction to their sect's basic teaching.'

'And for these minor reasons they take life from each other?'

Amalu said softly, 'It's all about survival of each one's cause, which each one considers being true.'

Hinane considered his words with thought, 'And now? What's the status of their quarrel?'

'They're still belligerent, but the new Arian Christian faith, brought by king Gaiseric and his Vandals in 429AD claimed the demise of Saint Augustine six years ago in 430. So there are now three different sects in dispute.'

Hinane shook her head, 'I do not know these Christian gods, nor do I care to know more. I am sure they have good intentions, regardless of all the troubles they seem to cause among followers and believers. But from what you told me now, I can see no love, reverence or respect for all living things among the people who follow him, or them.'

Amalu whispered, 'In this world there is very little love my child.'

Hinane carried on softly with a hopeless nod, 'Maybe, but I have set my trust and beliefs in all the spirits I know. The ones who had always been at my side, the gods I see clearly in everything around me, the sun, the moon, stars, earth, the rivers, the ones that whisper in my head, teaching about love and respect for all of creation, and the one in my gut that always guides me. I only have to follow it and my heart would remain pure.'

Amalu nodded in agreement, sighed, got up and put his hand on her arm, 'I know. Keep your faith, follow your heart. There would be many more teachings, masters, prophets, gods and beliefs to come. And no one can ever tell for sure which one is most just. Thus, we can only trust the voice in our stomach, that one deep inside that always speaks the truth, no matter what others advocate.'

A sudden pang of distrust jotted through Hinane with Amalu's words, not for the truth contained in it, but for the contradiction it caused. What did Amalu believe? Earlier it seemed he favoured the Christian gods and now he supported her beliefs.

Takamat appeared in the dim light of the dying fire and cut Hinane's thoughts short, 'Hinane, are you ready to retire, it's very late?' she said with shimmering eyes, her hands wrung into each other, Hinane sensing that she wanted her

attention.

They bid Amalu a goodnight's rest and walked to their camp.

'What troubles you so Takamat?'

'Not troubles me my queen, but excites.'

Hinane lifted her brows, waiting for an explanation.

'I found malum punicum.'

'What?'

'Pomegranates.'

'Oh' replied Hinane, 'Why don't you just say so instead of babbling Greek.'

Takamat giggled, 'The Romans named it, malum which means apple, the usual denomination of a fruit, and punicum, meaning from Phoenicia or rather from Carthage.'

'You have found new informants did you not?' teased Hinane, pleased for the lightness in their conversation as opposed to the grave one with Amalu.

'There's more,' Takamat chuckled, 'I also discovered Magaria trees that bear nutritional fruits the size of dates and of light brown colour. Amalu's daughter told me that when it's dry, it's pounded and formed into little cakes. And tomorrow she will show me how to make them.'

They walked with small talk and light jests shared between them, Takamat with springs in her feet and Hinane with worry in hers. She now had an additional terror to consider, a threat which might one day be too big to conquer. A new god and his quarrelling followers.

But for the immediate moment the deserts presented a bigger threat and finding a new home, an even greater challenge. The Hoggar was far removed from cities with their preachers and false profits. Hinane pushed the matter aside to a far corner in her mind whilst listening more closely to Takamat's chaffering.

As if Amalu picked up on Hinane's troubled thoughts, still sitting next to the fire where he kept still after Hinane's departure, he whispered whilst looking at the symbol edged in the artefact on his wrist, 'The world as it once was would never be the same. How long, I wonder, would it take?'

And later in her bed, even though she tried to shun the troubling thoughts, the conversation with Amalu lingered in Hinane's mind.

She was taught that the human mind was not capable of understanding a form of god-consciousness superior to their immediate gods. Therefore, all human efforts to imagine the characteristics of an ultimate and supreme god were a total waste of time.

Hinane believed that there must surely be some ultimate creative source, but she did not pray to it. She rather prayed to the gods closer to home, those she could feel and see in all around her. She believed in the vital forces that were stored in metal, wood, stone, water, the human body and the food that they ate.

During that night, Hinane dreamt of that same strange symbol on Amalu's wrist, the sign that resembled an anchor overlaying a cross that lay at an angle from top left to down right. Her sleep became troubled and morose, not knowing what Amalu's role was in all of this and why he was bearer of that mark.

But when she woke the next morning, her mood was light and carefree.

It was a great day with a big oasis to explore. She shot up, got dressed, and

looked for Takamat to prepare their morning meal together.

She grouped her warriors for sparing exercises, documented the plants and herbs Takamat found, read from the Tifinagh, the book her mother had left her, gathered all the supplies the oasis could spare, and planned their way forward.

Regardless of all sorts of strange gods plaguing earth and heavens, she had much hope and dreams for their future, although their immediate travels were laden with worry.

CHAPTER 9

'What is your idea with counting the dunes Hinane,' asked Izza when Hinane returned from inspecting the chart with the girl who was put to the task.

Hinane and Izza rode together in front of the column with their eyes fixed worriedly on the sand stretching far and wide.

'Feeling it's the right thing to do, maybe just a way to try to stay in control.'

Izza nodded her understanding and looked ahead in deep thought, the lines above her eyes signs of a hounded mind. So far their only navigators were the sun, moon and stars, and counting the dunes was a strange occupation in trying to keep their wits.

The sand plateau before them was layered in undulating dunes, resembling ocean waves frozen in a short moment of time, then gradually changed into other forms. Since they had left the oasis seven days before, they encountered a variety of dunes. Some were crescent-shaped, produced by strong winds blowing across a level surface. Others were parallel to strong winds that blew in one general direction. Then there were transverse dunes that ran at a right angle to the constant wind direction, and star shaped dunes with several ridges that spread out around a point.

Although daunting and quite overwhelming for the others, observing the changes was fascinating to Hinane, and now and then, like now, she pulled slightly on the camel's reins to speed up the pace, eager to move over the next dune for another marvellous display.

The camel moaned and Hinane smiled. She had grown accustomed to these desert ships as some in the tribe call them.

'Izza, did you hear some of the elder servants say last night that camels were nearly fifty million years old in their evolution, and, like horses, were as small as cats at first. By twelve million years ago, several types evolved to this species we are using today,' said Hinane in forced light-hearted elation, trying to change Izza's sombre mood before it rubbed off on the others.

Izza snorted, 'I can't believe that. These huge animals once as small as a cat? Which cat, the lion maybe?'

'They said the camel species, with the majority being dromedaries with only the one hump, first came from the very far west then crossed to the far east

about three million years ago. It only reached Afrika about two thousand years ago.'

Izza shook her head with disinterest and shrugged her shoulders. Hinane continued, inwardly amused at Izza's cynicism and could not help to pull on the strings that kept Izza irritated, 'Yeddes said camels can travel the desert for two weeks without water, slowly losing weight. And upon finding water their large stomachs can carry as much as fifty waterskins.'

Izza didn't answer.

Hinane continued, knowing full well she was annoying Izza with information they all knew since childhood, but Hinane hoped to divest Izza's crankiness with useless conversation. It was hard enough to deal with the constant disapproval of the tribe, and having her closest warrior in upset, was unfavourable.

'Their bodies' temperature changes according to the conditions, low when it's cool and high when hot, and when they're thirsty, transpiration drops to zero.'

Izza mumbled something impossible to hear and stopped her camel to fall in line next to one of the other warriors behind them. Izza was not one of learning, rather action and sport, not really caring for phenomena of living organisms and Hinane almost always turned everything into a lesson.

Hinane smirked, but as her gaze roamed the area, doubt yanked in her stomach. Will they ever get through this, she wondered with a slight pull in her gut.

Hinane felt the stare before spotting the eyes where they peeped from over the next dune. The small black coral eyes looked at her curiously, the long tongue flicking from its mouth in staccato increments. The lawran, desert monitor lizard, was standing on his hind legs, monitoring the caravan's approach.

Hinane wondered how it survived so far from everything, but did not query its cause or appearance for long. She drew a bow and arrow from her quiver, knocked it, aimed, pulled and released. The lizard was almost as long as Takamat but hitting it took no real craft or skill.

The arrow pierced through the reptile's heart, and it rolled down from the top of the dune towards her. Hinane jumped from the camel and shouted for a servant to help her. The lizard provided sweet succulent meat and was a welcomed addition to their mundane diet.

Izza reined her camel next to the reptile and grunted, 'Not much effort with this one was it,' the cynicism riddling her features while she rode forth.

Hinane frowned with a sigh. Her warriors were getting bored and frustrated, the minimal nutrition and heat affecting their nerves and esteem.

An ice cold wind swept over them that night. Amalu explained why it was so hot during the day and cold at night. Dry desert air was incapable of blocking sunlight during the day, the heat reaching the ground directly, and as soon as the sun had set, the desert cooled quickly by radiating its heat into space with nothing to capture it.

After their meal, when all have retired for the night, Hinane and Takamat stayed seated with robes wrapped around their bodies, trying to benefit from the last bit of warmth the fire coals provided.

Takamat fiddled with the robe, watching Hinane with despair, then finally said

directly with some scorn, 'The people are anxious about our future, this hellhole you led us into.'

Hinane looked up with a sigh. She was expecting the onrush but still had no surety to offer, 'What do you mean Takamat? We all heard Amalu, we're on our way to the Hoggar, how can they be anxious?'

'But are we following the right direction, the right path?'

Hinane looked into the coals, 'I have no absolute certainty, you know that.'

Takamat panicked, 'You mean, you have no idea?'

'I did not say that.'

Takamat's voice piqued in tone, 'But we cannot travel blindly for days in the wrong direction, we... we'll perish.'

Hinane's irritation started to show, 'Take hold of yourself Takamat. It's all we can do for now, to follow the direction Amalu has specified, even if there's nothing that proves we are following it correctly. He did say the route is monotonous and repetitive. You have to keep the faith Takamat.'

Tears welled into her eyes, 'Faith in what?'

'Our training, the voices from our ancestors, our strength, the guidance from our gods, and me.'

Takamat wasn't convinced, 'I was told many have died crossing these deserts. And those that did survive, talked of evil spirits streaming down in black clouds to haunt the living, chasing the gods from their shields.'

Hinane lost it, 'Where did you hear this nonsense? There are no evil spirits, there is only that which one creates, and what one believes another created. And since when do you believe in the stories and spirits of other nonsicals?'

Hinane lowered her voice when guilt for the outburst towards the susceptible Takamat settled in, 'The time spent with the old servants proved no good. Stay away from those negative wrenches. That's an order.'

Hinane stilled her heart and said softly, 'The gods will always be with us, it's the only hope we have. You must trust it, you must keep the faith.'

Takamat drooped her head and nodded vaguely, 'Yes my queen.'

Hinane got up, shook the robe from her shoulders as if wanting to shed the title of queen, not wanting it, not deserving of it. She walked to Burn and whispered fondly in his ear while brushing him with long loving strokes, a deed she performed every night. Burn always gave her the strength and courage needed to lead the tribe, as if deriving a sort of mystic gratification when feeding on his energy. She fed him a dhurra cake after brushing him, a delicacy at this stage when their foodstuffs were running into reserves and she hoped nobody saw.

During the early hours of dawn, she woke from a rough pull on her shoulder, 'Wake up Hinane, wake up,' screamed Takamat.

Hinane looked at her in a drowse.

'Something terrible, a camel spider, chewed on Menna's leg. Come quick.'

Hinane shot up and ran after Takamat to where they crowded around Menna who moaned terribly from pain, her face contorted into distorted features.

'What happened,' Hinane prompted.

Tala spoke first, 'I woke from the whimpering. Menna was crying in her sleep.'

I saw movement under her blanket and lifted it. The spider was gnawing on her calf. When it saw me, it got aggressive and came for me. I ran from it, but it still came towards me fast with high jumps. When I was a distance away from the camp, I killed it with an axe,' she pointed calmly to where the spider's remains were lying in the sand.

The spider, as big as a rodent with long rubbery legs, was cut in half. The yellow puss that spurted from its light sandy colour body, splattered around it in a sticky mess.

Yeddes stood hands on hips, shaking his head, 'The camel spiders' venom numbs the flesh of the infected area so its prey can't feel its gnawing.'

Takamat shrivelled where she fiddled with the medicine herbs which she grabbed in haste. She cleaned the wound, and gave Menna something to dissolve the pain.

The group mumbled, the dread spreading like a building abscess between them. Hinane turned away, knowing she would have to draw more strength from the gods to deal with what's coming. She bulged her chest and walked to Burn.

She mounted without saddle, trotted back to the group, 'Disinfect it properly, the heat will eat at it quick, we might have to remove the limb. She's one of our strongest warriors and will survive. Make sure she's comfortable for today's trek.'

She pulled the reins, Burn bucked from residual energy built up from not being ridden that often, and charged over the dune out of sight.

Athena was her preferred goddess and the one Hinane gravitated towards the most. Athena was her archetype more than any other. Although Athena was also the goddess of war, she was one of the most benevolent sun goddesses, strong, fair, and merciful, and Hinane needed her strength and guidance now.

When she returned, her tribe stood ready to move on with dark faces and agitated movements, but she ignored it and ordered their start.

During the following days, Menna wrestled with severe fever, but it was difficult to tend to her on the move. Yeddes manufactured a litter, fastened with long struts at either side of a camel's saddle, dragging it along behind the train. Takamat and a servant walked at Menna's side trying to tend to her. But after four days of decomposed flesh reeking in the air, Hinane and Takamat had no choice but to amputate the leg, five fingers' width above the knee.

Menna was furious when finally recovering after a few days of suffering from fever, swarming pain and daze. But Hinane ignored her outbursts and insults, understanding that from losing a limb, Menna was transformed into a fuming menace and it would take a while for her to calm down, however a lingering anger would forever remain.

Suppressed rage was a good quality for want of a ruthless warrior, and Hinane planned to use this to her advantage one day. She smiled with satisfaction but not without empathy.

On the twentieth day of traversing the long, drawn out Tinariwen, strong winds howled over the dunes, whipping up sand grains that bit into their flesh. They covered their faces with veils, the angst shining in their eyes. The sandstorm lurked on the horizon and they were petrified of its might. They moved slowly, dragging their feet through the sand, heads lowered, fighting

against the force of the wind, all eyes fixed with terror on the sand curtain that floated closer.

Finally, Hinane charged, 'Lay the camels down, take from the tents what you can and cover yourselves. Leave enough air inside to breathe, keep your eyes closed, fill your ears with clothes and don't get up until it's over. Cover all holes,' her voice darted away in the airstreams and most didn't hear the last of it.

When the sand curtain reached them, they were unprepared for its force of destruction. What was not fastened, was gulped up in its breath and blown far away, and spat out across the sand waves in disarray. Sand crept in everywhere, their eyes turned red from the dust and it became hard to breathe. They became disoriented and most suffered from hyperthermia.

After a few long hours, it was finally over and those that survived crept from underneath the thick sand blankets. Two of the servants and three children suffocated and were pulled to one side, the tribe forming an irate circle around the corpses.

Vultures appeared from nowhere and circled above them. Hinane was amazed at their knowhow and speed of surfacing. They probably followed the storm knowing that there would be a feast laid out for them in its slipstream.

Hinane looked at the suffocated bodies and balled her fists, steeling herself for the wrath that's to come as all eyes turned accusingly to her, as if she was the one whipping up the sandstorm.

The golden eagle's cry reached her ears and she quickly looked up, searching for it above her. It chased the vultures and circled protectively over the dead bodies.

For Hinane, the eagle was the sign that Athena was always watching. Faith simmered through her and stirred her courage alive, which brought a broad smile to her lips.

'How can you smile at a time like this,' screamed Menna abruptly, her hand shaking uncontrollably on the wooden crutch that supported her.

'Where's your compassion?' she literally spat the mocking words and her eyes shone a hard topaz brown.

Hinane just glared at her. As a leader, she did not want to lose the respect of her tribe, letting Menna get away with her disrespect uttered loudly and shown so visibly. But Hinane fully comprehended the reason for her outbreak and paused with clenched fists.

The warriors gawked at them, Tala and Izza standing with folded arms without any expression, waiting for Hinane's response. But it was the supporting uproar from the rest, siding with Menna, that pushed Hinane to act.

Hinane eyeballed Menna directly and demanded through gritted teeth, 'Walk with me,' and turned to Yeddes .

Menna shrieked, high on emotion, her voice dripping with sarcasm, 'How? With only one leg, thanks to you,' the insult pierced through Hinane, but she ignored her and gave Yeddes his orders.

'Set up camp, get the men to help you prepare a proper funeral. We'll burn the bodies. Rodents, snakes and lizards will find them if we bury them and vultures will scoff them if we don't. They deserve better than that, prepare a

burning stake.'

Yeddes nodded grisly.

Hinane turned back to Menna and approached her with a determined step. She picked Menna up, her hands clutching around her rib cage, threw her over one shoulder and carried her to the top of the highest dune where she flung her like a millet sack on the sand.

Hinane took the effort up the steep dune for two reasons, to tame her own anger, transcending it into physical strain, and the other, to speak to Menna out of earshot. But the others still moved closer to follow their squabble, curious of the outcome.

They challenged each other with fire in their eyes, Hinane's breast heaving from the effort in the heated air, her throat burning. Menna was livid and humiliated.

Her words reached Hinane on high pitched hysterical notes, 'Is this your idea of a free life, the one you've promised us? You wanted us to follow you, but now look where we at,' Menna waved her arms about, 'Look around you, this... this ocean of hell leading to our deaths, it's all around, it's never-ending... it's... haaaaa...'

Tears bubbled from Menna's eyes and streamed down cheeks with the screams.

Hinane's anger melted and pity pinged through her, 'Staying also meant a certain death.'

'It's better than a slow death in this heated hell,' cried Menna, her pale unattractive face now even less appealing than normal.

She surely was not pretty, but strength, character and honour ran through her veins, which were far better and useful attributes for a warrior than even a leg, but she dared not say that.

'Slavery, Menna, is worse. Did you ever see what happens to those captured?'

Menna shook her head, not wanting to listen to any reason, 'We were strong enough to overpower them.'

'There were too many of them, nothing was certain,' explained Hinane in a soft tone.

Menna's breathing slowed and became calmer as she spoke, 'But we are warriors, we have powers.'

Hinane smiled softly, 'Yes we have, but we are also human and limited in what we can do,' Hinane paused with a deep breath, 'And sometimes one needs to know when to stay and when to go.'

She sat down next to Menna, the others stayed in earshot, 'We did what we had to. And now, we've come so far and have to continue. What else is there to do? If you have a solution, I would like to hear it.'

Menna kept quiet and after a few minutes had dragged passed, she shook her head without proposing another way forward.

Hinane put an arm around her shoulder, 'We have no choice but to move on. And you along with me.'

Menna nodded, wiped her tears, shuffled her bum deeper into the sand, one

long leg stretching booted and one short bandaged stump peeping from underneath the short tunic.

Hinane stood up, looking at all who've followed their conversation, and spoke with a certainty she did not feel, 'I will lead you to safety, even if it's the last thing I do.'

Izza stared at Hinane, revolt still flickering in her eyes. She turned and walked back to camp, not entirely sure herself what niggled her so. Tala kicked into the sand and walked away, the rest followed with suppressed mumbling and mixed emotions, but none of them could further argue the point to a better solution.

Hinane sat down again, sighed softly and combed her gaze through the dunes, not nearly feeling the confidence so courageously displayed a minute ago.

And when she spoke again, her voice croaked, 'I'm sorry about your leg. I did not exactly extend my full compassion before.'

Menna didn't answer, just stared ahead, tears still whelming and flowing.

After a long silence Hinane said, 'I will fabricate a substitute, stronger and sexier than ever before.'

A smirk broke through Menna's tears.

They watched the rest of the sunset in silence, Hinane in gratitude for surviving another day, searching for courage for the next, and Menna confused, battling to work through her turbulent emotions, attempting to understand her misfortune.

But both were oddly at peace when the sun finally disappeared with a dazzling display of orange, blue, and red ribbons on the skyline. Izza, Tala, and two other warriors stopped next to Menna with the litter. They loaded Menna on it and carried her to below without a glance towards Hinane.

Hinane followed at a distance to where Takamat was waiting for her, 'I've prepared your meal Hinane, come and replenish your strengths.'

Hinane was thankful for her friend's thoughtfulness. After a quiet meal and birdie bath, Hinane sat on her pad in a short night frock while Takamat brushed her dark hair that reached to where hip and leg joined. Takamat brushed with care and affection, something they didn't get much time for lately, and since there was no water, the brush at least helped getting rid of the dust.

Hinane's beauty was breathtaking in the candle light, but she was oblivious of it, sitting with eyes closed, enjoying the pampering that seemed so misplaced in the middle of their predicament.

Takamat asked quietly, 'We follow the eagle?'

Hinane's lips curved upwards in a tick, 'You see it?'

Takamat nodded, 'It singles you out with its eyes each time it circles.'

Hinane nodded and comforted Takamat, 'Yes, it's showing us the way.'

'How can you be sure?'

'The eagle is our lynchpin totem. It's the spirit of freedom, the symbol of perspective, carrying our prayers to the heavens. The bird brings the messages Athena sends me, to endure, to believe.'

Takamat said carefully, 'You miss Lunja?'

Hinane sighed, 'Every day. She was all I had,' and smiled weakly, 'Except you of course.'

Blood rushed to Takamat's cheeks.

Then just like when they were kids sharing secrets, she stumbled excitedly on her words, 'I have something to tell you.'

'Tell me then.'

'I love Yeddes . And he loves me.'

Hinane swung around and looked at Takamat with feigned surprise as she long since suspected such, 'That's wonderful. About time you two admit it.'

Hinane got up fast, trying to hide from Takamat the sudden touch of sadness in her heart, and fought the tears building behind her eyes.

But Takamat already saw them shining, 'What's wrong?'

Hinane looked at her hands and shook her head, 'I really hope to find love one day like you and Lunja. It must be magnificent.'

Takamat giggled, 'It is. And you'll find love also, you'll see.'

Hinane smiled at Takamat's naivety and envied the simplicity of her heart, 'Let's hope for it.'

But later in bed, Hinane could not shake the daunting feeling that love, as she wanted it, might escape her. She closed her eyes and a sense of predestiny filled her with melancholy, a feeling of unease and disquiet pushed up from her feet.

CHAPTER 10

Yeddes stood with worry, Hinane waiting for his account, 'We have water only for one more day and food for three.'

Hinane took a deep breath. She had been contemplating their worsening situation for days now, delving deep into her mind for solutions and trying everything to generate extra water and food. But all they could find were scuttling ants, the occasional mongoose and chameleons.

Rain was nowhere in smell or sight, and if they could find any half-buried stones, they turned it over before dawn so dew could condense on it. She made canvas traps to capture the tiny dew drops, but it was not enough to build reserves to sustain them at all. They stopped watering the camels three days ago and she supplicated silently for them to survive.

According to Amalu's instruction, Hinane reckoned they still had ten days to go before reaching the oasis, and so far, found none of the wadis he spoke about.

Hinane searched for the eagle which followed, or rather guided, them the past few days. Then she saw him a distance off, a black dot against the blue skies above, and she relaxed.

She fed it scrapes from her own plate every night so it wouldn't disappear in search of prey. At night he sat perched on a pile of furled ropes next to her tent, and at day, she followed its flight, staying strictly on its directed course. Her gaze kept locked on the bird, seeking for answers which never came.

She turned towards Yeddes, 'Distribute what's left evenly. We'll continue and find a way. Then order our advance.'

Yeddes watched her with doubt. She turned away from him, not wanting to get into a pointless debate as every question had already been asked and every despair already addressed. Frequent emotional eruptions were still common, but Hinane ignored most of it and tried to even out any upsurges with a composed attitude.

Later that afternoon, following the eagle diligently, the wind blew stronger with a disheartening sand twirling in its wake, and with it, settled the grave memory of the last sandstorm.

But this time it didn't bring a sandstorm, it brought flying scorpions. The insects used the wind to glide over the dunes which made them look like flying, and came towards them at a speed not even Burn would beat. Panic fluttered in Hinane's stomach, her own terror mirrored on the faces around her.

If scorpions were left alone and not disturbed, they, like serpents, were harmless and rarely attacked. Getting in their way, however, made them think they were harassed and forced a spontaneous reaction. And they were directly in their way.

Hinane quickly identified the direction of the wind and at once signalled an advance to a dune towards the scorpions against the wind, but higher up the ascent. Hinane hoped that they would glide past them without colliding.

Most of them missed the gliding threat, but those who moved slowly, did not escape the clash. Hinane spun on her heels and hurried to their aid. Although this species was not really poisonous and their stings harmless to humans, it was still terrifying to watch multiple scorpions crawl over bodies and she rushed to their screams.

The warriors followed her lead and helped to rid the victims of the pests. However, in the warriors' minds they did not constitute being pests, but food, and they managed to kill quite a large quantity with their daggers. Scorpions were loaded with proteins, juices and fats which would sustain them for another few days and Hinane smiled thankfully.

On the third day without sufficient water, a mere mouthful at morning and evening for each, an older member of the tribe stumbled into the sand, totally fatigued and dehydrated. Hinane loaded him in front of her on her camel, feeding him bits of the Sythian root and salt cakes to preserve the rest of the moisture in his already parched body.

The heat was severe, sunrays scorched down, the horizon riddled with mirage visions. They became disoriented and disillusioned, hunger gnawed in their bellies and their tongues were glued to their palates, their saliva thick and gluey. But there was no sense in slowing down, the longer they took in getting to the oasis, the more of them would die, so Hinane persistently kept the pace.

Later one afternoon, the golden eagle circled a few times above them and

then flew in an eastern direction while squealing. Hinane and Takamat were the only ones acknowledging the bird and smiled hopefully at each other. Hinane steered after the bird, but the fagged tribe had no sense of the slightly altered course.

Each day, Hinane and Takamat concocted an herb brew and forced them to take a dose every morning and afternoon. Without anyone knowing it, Hinane used an ancient technique to pass over a supply of energy each time when giving each person their herb dose, by putting a hand on their shoulder or arm. With this Hinane directed the flow of her own will to strengthen their minds, carrying the thought forms of suggestion. Hinane voiced the suggestion afterwards to enhance its power, 'You can survive this.'

Hinane knew the results were most powerful if her vocal suggestions were made with the aid of a mindful and physical stimulus, like her encouraging touch together with the herb medicine.

Days and nights blurred into each other and they stopped counting the days, but Hinane pushed forward relentlessly, driving, motivating them to keep going.

One afternoon, from afar in the distance from out the west, an enormous black cloud approached. It rumbled closer like a whirlwind, dangerous and daunting, throwing shadows far and wide across the arid landscapes.

The group stopped and looked at it in horror. One of the older slave women squealed, 'It's the evil spirits. Your bird has led us to the evil spirits.'

Hinane's eyes threw daggers at her, 'Shut your mouth your stupid wrench,' and bellowed to all, 'Get down. Use the camels as shelter. Cover your faces. Do it now.'

They scrambled for cover just in time when swarms of locusts overwhelmed them, the whirr of their wings deafening in their ears. The insects infested all over them and they covered their ears trying to block the terrible noise. It continued for only a few minutes, but the episode was enough to shock their hearts into beating frenzies for hours afterwards.

When the insects were gone, Hinane walked to some of the dead ones that lay scattered in the sand. She held one up for all to see, looked at her people who faltered back to their feet, and with a mocking manner, faced the woman who shouted at her, 'Your evil spirits old woman turned out to be a gift from our gods.'

It was normal for locusts to die in their thousands in flight, Hinane didn't know how or why, all she knew was they received help. She scowled at the tribe and shouted, 'Let your fears not consume you again.'

Takamat picked up a few locusts, bit on one and lifted her brows in amazement, 'It's rather good.'

They gathered the insects in heaps and crunched it between their teeth, the juices from their soft insides quenching thirst and hunger.

The moon looked much larger and closer that night when it threw a silver glow across their camp. It hung in the heavens like a huge iron disk and Hinane felt she could almost trace the craters on it with a finger. The moon was full, just like tonight, every twenty-ninth day, and she noted them down as beacons to mark their route. But for her, it also served as a light anchor that gave her hope.

She sat cross legged a short distance from the camp and sent prayers of gratitude and worship to the gods. She listened for more guidance when she came out of the serene trance, but all she could hear were the lifted spirits inside camp and the wind howling faintly around her earlobes.

Her mind was quiet, filled with peace and stillness. She breathed in slowly and relaxed. Then she saw it. A desert rose was glowing in the soft light only about three paces from where she sat, and she wondered how she could miss seeing it before.

The desert rose was rosette formations of the minerals gypsum, calcite and barite with sand inclusions, looking like flowers that have turned to stone. The petals were crystals flattened on the crystallographic axis, fanning open along characteristic gypsum cleavage planes.

Hinane had never seen one before and she was dazzled by its beauty. To Lunja, the desert rose constituted examples of the power of the shaping forces of wind, water and pressure. As Lunja told her once excitedly, it was something that could never die as it was formed with sand and minerals that grew rock-solid and hard over hundreds of years.

Seeing one was a rare occasion and Hinane called Takamat, ecstatic to share its rare beauty with her friend. They were like little girls dancing around it which enlivened their moods likened to a feathery breeze. Afterwards they fluttered into and around camp, trying to encourage the others into better moods, hoping to make the rest of their journey more pleasurable than the days past.

Their elations were restricted to that one night only though, as it took them another four days of hardship in the heat, wind and sand before spotting the outskirts of the oasis Amalu talked about.

It was the one before the Hoggar, before the lush Tamanrasset, but it was big and offered more than enough to replenish their reserves before entering the last stretch to the Ahaggar, the other name the Berbers gave the surrounding mountain range.

They picked up their pace with vigour and enthusiasm. They had filled their waterskins from a small wadi spring they'd crossed the day before, and Hinane suspected then already they must be close to a bigger water source.

Hinane saw the snake waiting in the soft sand too late, and stumbled upon it before hearing it. Its c-shaped coils rubbed together which produced a grating sound and Hinane recognised it instantly. It was only as long as her outstretched forearm, but it still lurched powerfully at her ankle, its body rising from out the sand cover.

The snake's stout appearance was chilling, the head was broad, flat and distinct, covered from the neck with keeled scales. Its snout was short and wide, and a supra-ocular horn grew above each small eye which was set well forward.

The snake only scraped slightly against her leg then fell back on the sand. It used its angled and serrated lateral scales in a rocking motion to bury itself again till only the eyes and nostrils were exposed. Hinane smiled, as to her, a snake symbolised transformation and shedding of old skin. It was a new beginning for them, and her heart sang as her eyes feasted upon the upcoming layered lines of Acacia trees.

The Acacia was covered with protective spines and Tamarisk shrubs with small needle-shaped leaves. Its feathery racemes of small white and pinkish flowers welcomed them as they entered. They lingered there twenty one days before feeling strong enough to re-enter the desert.

The areas between this oasis and the one at Tamanrasset were flat and featureless, lacking any landmarks or repeated sand forms. It was filled with Lycaon dogs, big ostriches and addax which they frequently hunted.

On occasion, they crossed temporary and shallow salty lakes with low bottom gradients. Wind stress moved small lake waters over far distances, and when these small lakes have dried up, a salt crust or layers of hard subsoil encrusted with calcium-carbonate were exposed. These flat areas of clay, silt, or sand encrusted with salt, were known as a playa or a sink, remembered Hinane from Amalu's talks.

With enough food and water, and with lifted spirits and backing from their gods, Hinane felt strong and confident again to confront anything. But when they finally entered the rocky highland region, with the Hoggar massif stretching long and wide before them, doubt pulled in her stomach and a million questions roamed in her mind.

She scanned through the hundreds of towering monoliths of volcanic rock topped with a series of plateaus strewn with stone-forests. These forests consisted of rock formations that resulted from sand-laden wind erosion. And the steep sided valleys were shaped by lake and river fluvial actions formed throughout thousands of years.

This magnificent, beautiful display robbed them from words and breath, leaving them only with awe. But it was also intimidating, threatening, and cold rocky fingers clutched around Hinane's heart, only to release its grip again when the eagle approached with a reassuring cry and the excitement of the unknown fluttering in Hinane's stomach.

From a high cliff, Atisi, a tall Amazigh with dark toned skin, strong arched nose, well-formed lips set perfectly in a strong jaw and astute sapphire eyes, rested his hand on the hilt of the broad sword that hung in its sheath from his hip. He wore a white robe with black veils draped around his head and shoulders. His eyes stormed with mixed reflections when gazing at the small caravan below that approached the Tamanrasset oasis.

The eagle that circled the caravan cried again. It echoed through the cliffs and Atisi turned his gaze towards the bird, irritated by its shriek which plucked on his nerves. The eagle circled the woman on the white camel in the lead with the silver horse following on its rein.

The group following her was small and of no significance, and yet their appearance captured a strange premonition in his chest and he frowned. He turned away, mounted his black horse and descended the mountain ridge in careful, thoughtful strides.

CHAPTER 11

The oasis stretched invitingly before them in the low-lying valley, gloriously refreshing after the monotony of the bland desert and they kept staring at its magnitude in trance. They approached with mixed feelings and thoughts, not exactly sure what to expect.

They did not cross a living soul yet, except for the lush palms, cypress, wild olive and myrtle which grew beside the gueltas, travertine dams, and small waterfalls all along their passage. But Hinane sensed that someone would certainly be on the watch for new visitors, even though obscured from view.

Although she was covered with dust, she made a proud and imperial figure on the white camel while inspecting the surrounds with darting eyes and alert mind.

Still fastened on the lead rein, Burn whinnied as if to natter about the enticing sweet smell of water and green fodder lingering about. Yeddes and Takamat rode slightly behind Hinane with the warriors a little further beyond. The rest of the caravan followed in a trail, waddling and chattering with a pleasant mood.

Although all seemed tranquil and harmless, Hinane still rode with a stern face and watchful eye, being on the alert for any misfortune. But the further they moved into the lush sanctuary, the more she relaxed. The atmosphere around them remained calm and friendly, and the muscles in her shoulders loosened.

After scouting the oasis thoroughly, Hinane's face finally crumbled into a broad grin when they approached a wide open spot.

With a sigh of relief she said to no one in particular, 'I find this spot ideal to replenish dusty souls.'

Yeddes' voice ringed with a cheerful tone when stating, 'I'll prepare our base at once.'

He made his camel kneel and slid off, yelling orders of 'unload,' and scouted for shaded areas under tall palm trees most suitable for setting up tents. For how long they would stay here remained uncertain, but for now he would make it as comfortable as their previous home had been in the Tafilalt.

Takamat looked towards Hinane and said softly with wet eyes, 'You kept your promise.'

Hinane smirked, 'Of course I did.'

Hinane pulled on the rein so the camel would kneel and she slipped from its back. She walked to Burn, fondled his nozzle then encircled her arms around his neck, her lips to his ear, 'Thank you my rock and might,' she kissed him, the fine hairs on the folds of the soft silver hide tingling in her nostrils.

Burn bobbed his head, whinnied and hoofed into the ground with his right leg, and from where she still sat on the camel watching Hinane, Takamat could swear Burn was grinning. She shook her head with an affectionate smile, and walked the camel to where Yeddes and the warriors were carrying out their duties.

Eager to explore the territory, Hinane saddled Burn and rode towards the cliffs. She followed a path higher up into the mountains to get some perspective

of where they were, or rather what was in the region, she thought.

She was in awe of how rugged and barren rocks managed to look so regal and magnificent, as if each crack and spike were chiselled with careful precision and metrics.

When crossing a waterfall with waters tumbling into a cool pool below, she thought it to be identical to a heavenly plane. She stopped Burn near the edge, and walked closer for an eye-taste of the inviting tarn. The adventure jolted in her belly, convincing her to strip naked and to dive into the cool freshness of the pool from the high ledge. The cliff wasn't that high and she was certain the act would be of little risk.

Normally, Hinane would feel or sense any unfamiliar presence before seeing it, but the sapphire eyes raking over her body went unnoticed when she undressed. When all her dusty clothes laid at her feet, she closed her eyes, faced the sky and marvelled in the sensation of the hot sun blazes pricking her skin. It was almost as if she was totally carefree without any concern or errands. She celebrated the brief moment of freedom with a shriek of laughter and a stretched out dive to below.

Fear for her recklessness pulled in the stomach of the tall man watching her. He quickly extended a hand as if to prohibit her from jumping, but then checked himself. He quietly watched her bathing and swimming in the water, and when she rose from the pool with the sparkling droplets clinging to her, he thought she was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. Unlike the women of his tribe with their plump and swarthy physique, she stood proud, totally unashamed with smooth tanned skin stretched tightly over taut muscle.

He felt the slight pull in his groin when his gaze fell upon her rounded breasts. He followed the muscles over her abdomen, down towards the cleft between her legs. The feeling it erupted inside of him forced him to quickly avert his eyes and turn away. When Hinane was fully clothed, he waited for her to climb back up the cliff to where she'd left her horse.

She mounted and rode higher up the mountain towards a platform almost at the top. Absorbed by the splendid view, she jumped from Burn when he halted on her command. She gazed down at the settlements far below, which were now in clear view from this angle, and she could see now why they did not meet anybody on their way in, as most of the tawshets were built mostly on the other side of the mountain range.

She spun around when hooves trounced on the rocks behind her. The intense but sincere stare of the gentleman on the black mare bored into hers, and her heart hammered against her ribs from sudden tension, not knowing what to expect.

She quickly threw a glimpse towards her weapons still fastened to the saddle, judging the distance to cover if need be, then glided her eyes back to his face looking for any signs of his intent. Her eyes followed his bronzed features, over the lines etched on his forehead, the arched nose, the high cheekbones and strong jaw towards his lips. She looked back into his eyes which sparkled with a deep blue friendliness, a faint muscle pulling his lips into an upward curl while jumping lithely from his horse. He moved slowly towards her, his hands far

from the sword hilt on his hip, and Hinane decided he was no serious threat and stood anchored.

He turned towards the crag and waved a hand over the scenery far below them, 'Striking isn't it?'

Hinane nodded, but asked, 'Who are you?' Her voice a little more abrupt than intended.

He answered calmly, 'People call me Amezwar. I am the chief of my tribe, of which there are many inhabiting the entire Hoggar.'

'An lhaggaren, a noble then?' She sponged from Amalu's knowledge which he shared around the fire that night that now felt so long ago.

Amezwar bowed in answer.

'Where's your clan?'

He straightened, only a head length taller than Hinane and gestured to below, 'At camp and duty where they belong,' his eyes teased.

She frowned and pulled her lips into a line, 'Were you following me?'

'Yes.'

He did not offer any explanation and fell silent while staring over the landscapes. Hinane followed his gaze over the different homesteads, the tawshets, some a great distance apart, and others set more closely together.

The comfortable silence between them, the quietness of the high altitude and the soft breeze caressing her skin, calmed and centred her. She frowned a little when realising the man's presence had a strange calming effect on her.

His voice interrupted, 'I followed you to request your attendance tonight in celebration.'

Hinane was curious, 'Of what?'

Amezwar sighed patiently as if tolerating a small child, 'It's our custom to invite new visitors to the Tamanrasset for celebration, to welcome them, to embrace them with good intent, music and food so they feel at home.'

Blood rushed to Hinane's cheeks in response to his manner, and she sniped, 'And if we were corrupt?'

The smile on his lips broadened and Hinane was regretful of her fiery response which displayed a lack of self-control.

'I'm sure I can handle molest from a handful of women and a few slaves.'

'Servants.'

'Pardon?'

Hinane waved the issue and picked up his challenge, 'You look big and strong enough to succeed,' she weighed his solid shoulders and sword hand with an eagle eye, then grinned, 'But never underestimate sir.'

Amezwar bowed with an intriguing smirk, 'I would hate to find myself in combat against you. I'm sure you're a fine match for any warrior, no matter how strong his nerve.'

Hinane's mood lifted and suddenly she felt young, buoyant and teased, 'Any lurking reasons for combat?'

He followed her jest and playfully lifted a brow in a haughty manner, 'Depends on your behaviour tonight.'

He suddenly turned his gaze towards the sun, as if calculating its position, then

turned abruptly, mounted the black mare and looked down at her, 'Since you did not offer your name, I will call you Tin Hinan, in our language it means, she who comes from afar, because from judging your attire, you haven't seen a decent bath in weeks.'

Hinane's lower jaw dropped, embarrassed by not introducing herself and the name being so pertinently close to her real name.

She bowed in recognition of the honour which made him smile with affection, a notion that displayed his lips in a perfect loop, 'I will send for you.'

He reeled his horse before she could accept or decline. The mare charged away, their exit quite impressive and very much controlled, as if he hated being out of proper conduct, thought Hinane with light lines of concern between her eyes and a fixed stare upon rider and horse as they disappeared around the corner. He somewhat made her feel inadequate, and at the same time comfortable and safe, Hinane not exactly sure of the reasons why, which annoyed her.

She took it out on Burn and miffed loudly, 'And who gave him the right to name me?'

The incident made her realise she would have to steel herself for any event, not just for battle, but for all relations. She needed to exercise more self-control and prepare for more appropriate behaviour. The future suddenly felt complex, and self doubt niggled in her belly.

But as she descended the hill, she digested her discontent, and when finally reaching level surface, she sped Burn over the rocky terrain, with the wind in her dark hair and on her face clearing her mind from any misgivings.

But that same nagging sensation returned when approaching Amezwar's tawshet that night. They followed his envoy towards the red-dyed skin tents that looked festively spread out amidst the foliage with the dying sun rays tinting the green leaves into flickering illume.

The group's spirits soared when entering the tawshet's confinement, immersed by laughing children running about, husband and wife teams preparing meals over open fires, servants scurrying around fulfilling their duties, and goats grazing in between the settlements. The atmosphere was light and homely, filled with laughter, elation and soft melodies.

They came to a halt in front of a large imposing crimson and white tent, much bigger than what Hinane had ever seen. When Amezwar stepped from the entrance, a broad smile was on his lips without cracking the lines on his forehead. He threw his arms wide open in a warm welcoming gesture and a little bow, 'Welcome honoured guests, welcome.'

Hinane gaped at his features, he was the first person she'd ever seen who could smile with a frown. Or maybe the lines on his forehead were edged there from years of disquiet and concern. Unwarranted sympathy for him groped in her chest and she softened.

He led them to a lounge area where they, following his lead, plunged down in rich comforts with colourful low pads scattered about low tables laid out with apricots, almonds, dates, olives, meats, cakes, wine and tea.

Amezwar gestured that Hinane should sit next to him, and threw an

appreciative glance towards her bare legs when she shuffled comfortably on the pad. Hinane traded her desert tunic for her customary warrior dress and crystal sword-belt in which she found now the power and control, depicting strength, courage and honour laced with femininity and feline energy.

She sat down with a thank you nod and polite smile, while the rest, Takamat, Yeddes, Izza, Tala, Menna and the other five warriors, each found a place along the sides of the table. Since their battle with the Roman slave traders, the warriors fell into devout custom in remaining at her side, unless Hinane ordered otherwise.

Takamat was never far from her ever, and Yeddes considered it his duty to be the right-hand of his queen, therefore always in her shadow. The rest of the group who survived the journey, were only a handful of men, women and household servants who remained at their camp, and according to Hinane, not important enough to be included in matters of politics or festive unions.

Yeddes gave a deep long bow towards their host before sitting and said with reverence, 'Thank you for the honour.'

Yeddes and Amezwar, upon meeting earlier outside the tent, immediately took treaty in comradeship despite their difference in status. From this Hinane learned that Amezwar was not one that regarded rank higher than character, which melted any further doubts about him.

Amezwar clapped his hands, two house slaves which he referred to as *iklan*, rushed closer, and with a lift of one finger from Amezwar, filled their cups with apricot wine. Whiffs of sandalwood, lavender and jasmine lingered in the air and Hinane felt her muscles unwind with feelings of safety and cosiness engulfing her. She shook her head slightly to keep her mental sharpness in this entrancing haven of luxury and harmony that contrasted so sharply against their endured hardships.

Amezwar turned towards Hinane when she spoke contentedly, 'The desert nomads talk of the Hoggar as a safe place with many clan settlements. Are you the ruler of them all?'

'Not quite. There are about a dozen clans, with each totalling more or less four hundred people, we call them *tawshets*, some call it *ettebel*, made up of several family groups, led by their collective chiefs, the *Amghar*.'

He paused till the server had filled his cup with wine and his plate with sweets and dates, then continued, 'Lots of *tawshets* come together to form one confederation, known in this region of the Sahara as *Kel Ahaggar* with a leader or king known as the *Amenokal*.'

He leaned slightly closer to Hinane, finding her natural scent most pleasing, 'I am only a chief, an *Amghar*, of my own clan, the *Aghbula*.'

Hinane was ensnared, eager to know more. 'So who is the *Amenokal* of the *Kel Ahaggar*?'

Amezwar hesitated and Hinane sensed a touch of acrimony in his voice, 'The *Amghar* is in constant disagreement of who is supposed to take reign.'

Izza mumbled with disdain, 'Politics!'

But her interrupt didn't upset anybody, they merely laughed and smiled at her.

Amezwar continued, 'At the moment we are ruled by Atisi,' then he frowned, 'Not a nice man. He is one motivated only by power and assets,' then his face suddenly lit up, 'But let's not spoil the evening with affairs of state.'

He saluted them with a cup held in the air, 'Let's celebrate you being in our midst and may I wish you a long and fruitful stay.'

They rejoiced in his toast, answering, 'You honour us,' almost as if from one mouth, then continued the festive meal in light-hearted conversation.

Amezwar watched Hinane with much interest. She felt his intense stare and brought the fruit to her lips with an unfamiliar coyness. A sudden recklessness took hold of her and excitement ran up along her spine. She was unsure how to handle this new sensation, but she liked the thrill and darted her eyes over his bulk.

It's the first time a man displayed a personal interest in her so keenly and it scared her a little, not knowing exactly what or how courtly affairs were conducted. Hinane never endured male attention or sexual intimacy before, but her situation had changed. She was a leader and queen now, she could take what she wanted.

She frowned a little with thought, she might have to follow some sort of altered, more suitable or acceptable protocol for her new environment, the ways of their customs might be frowned upon in the Hoggar.

Even though she was absolutely certain that what she felt now could not have been the type of love she sought, she knew her life would be laced with sexual interactions, as it were for all warrior women as their custom. She needed some skillful knowledge about the subject, and decided to consult Takamat urgently for direction.

Amezwar felt her eyes lingering upon him. He was flattered, but also a bit self-conscious as he hardly encountered anyone of her stature before. Judging by her dress, behaviour and warriors who respected her, she was obviously a woman of importance. Although he knew not much of her background or their customs, he sensed she was a figure of ordinance, self-sufficient, her own person and would not tolerate orders from a man.

Hinane phished, 'Is it custom for an Amghar to host his guests without the company of his wife and children?'

Amezwar averted his eyes from Hinane's, 'I have yet to find such an addition to my household.'

Hinane prompted more, 'And is it also the custom not to invite other Amghar to welcome new visitors?'

'You set up camp closest to my tawshet, which made me the responsible host.'

'But surely it would have been polite to invite other chiefs to join?'

Amezwar disliked her noticing his hostility in this regard, but he wanted to have her company to himself at first, getting to know her more intimately, as if almost claiming her and her mystique before the others.

He redirected the conversation with competent skill, 'You brought a new-fangled species with you? The dromedary?'

Hinane was astonished, 'You don't know it?'

He smiled patiently, now growing accustomed to her candid childlike responses, 'We are goat herdsman mostly. That's what we primarily do here in the Hoggar, along with breeding horses. And you came with camels and almost no horses. I'm just curious.'

'The man to consult about the camels would be Yeddes ,' smiled Hinane to flick the attention away from her unease, again caused by her lack of restraint.

Yeddes followed their conversation and eagerly fell into a deep and lengthy discussion with Amezwar on the subject of breeding camels.

Thankful for the break in the sensual tension between them, Hinane took the chance to marvel in the luxury displayed so gracefully around her. Then she inspected her own small clan around the table. She took much pleasure from their jubilation, yet tinged with some despair. Compared to their imposing host, she had nothing to offer members of her clan.

The feeling of inadequacy roosted in her chest and she bit on her jaw. She would have to build them a similar empire. Hinane frowned upon the strong ambition impulse that suddenly surfaced, not exactly knowing where it came from. But she liked the thought of building a wealthy clan, an empire, and she smiled inwardly.

She analysed her followers carefully. Izza, tall and lithe with her long caramel hair and blunt hazel-yellow eyes similar to that of a cheetah, is a ferocious warrior and her best ally. They sparred as kids, grew up together in joy and mischief, shared many adventures and Hinane couldn't imagine building an empire without her strong and logic reason.

Tala's cold stares with purple specks in dark grey irises, terrified many rivals into aborting their pursuit. The upward slant of her eyes and stark black hair told the story of Han forefathers who roamed the Far East. Her form bore evidence of physical strength with bulky muscle and permanent tattoos carved and inked on both her ankles.

Hinane looked at Menna with her light brown hair and crooked smile, for the first time in months laughing happily with her peers. For the moment Menna forgot she had only one leg, and Hinane decided tomorrow would be the right day to manufacture the promised replacement. Thus far, she had been very patient with Hinane's undelivered pledge.

In the past, Menna proved her loyalty to Lunja and Hinane recalled the battle at the slopes of the Atlas when she fought fearless and brave. Menna would never pass as being striking or beautiful, but she was a rock in adversity. Her one leg would be a hindrance in battle, but she would still manage a good fight.

Hinane's gaze darted over the remaining five warriors, Siman whose name meant two souls and who whipped up terror and fright upon anyone laying eyes upon her for the first time. A very tall stocky, sinew muscled warrior of unknown origins, although Hinane suspected her to be from the dark south. She had black eyes and tightly curled hair, the only one about them with pitched black skin almost shining purple.

Tayri was physically the weakest of them all with a tiny build, light hair and brown eyes. Her features were magnificent though, and she employed the talents others refused to exercise. Such as luring men into her bed and slitting

their throats without a single thought, hesitance or pity. Her history made Hinane's entrails coil, an abusive Greek father and timid mother gave her a rough start in life, but it made her stronger.

Then there were the twins Bahac and Damya, also of swarthy skin, but not as dark as Siman, much lighter with a coffee tint. They had clean shaven heads, earlobes pierced with iron and copper rings from top to bottom. The same ring designs were draped around their necks. They were quiet and reserved but their black eyes never missed anything, and in times of distress, they were sentries of facts Hinane would sometimes overlook.

Hinane could not help but giggle when looking at the daft Kwella who always delivered much opportunity for laughter. Hinane was never sure if it was deliberate or objective, but whenever she was around, nothing was taken seriously as everything presented gave Kwella an opportunity to banter.

Kwella was gorgeous with long white hair, huge emerald eyes with a body endowed with curves and soft feminine bumps. She always drew a lot of attention, and whether conscious of it or not, always acted foolishly. This manner fooled adversaries into thinking that she was weak and harmless, but powerful muscles hid beneath the soft flesh and quick wit sharpened her eyes.

Hinane nodded satisfied, her warriors had iron running in their veins. The teachings of Lunja leaped to mind and Hinane could clearly hear her voice, 'A true warrior woman is an individualist. She's magical with refined tastes and manners whose worldly task is to sharpen, yet disguise her cutting edges.'

A furrow formed on Hinane's brow. Battle skilled they were for certain, but some improvement was needed in areas of refinement and disguise.

'A goat for your thoughts,' Amezwar's voice ripped her back to reality. Hinane looked at him with a haze shield in her blue eyes. A radiant smile, to excuse her absent attention, jumped to her lips that tilted his heart.

'Sorry what?'

Hinane never learned proper etiquette, thought Takamat with a sigh when Hinane's loud response reached her ears. Hinane was a warrior of superb quality but she lacked skill in more delicate areas. She would have to instruct her mistress properly, especially here where proper decorum would become essential.

Yeddes caught Takamat's eye, and for the moment Hinane's lack of manners was pushed back into her mind. Takamat became totally consumed by the flame in her groin, ignited there by Yeddes' heated glare.

'I wondered what occupies your mind so?' repeated Amezwar to Hinane.

'Forgive my rudeness,' said Hinane and directly followed with a discussion involving the oasis and its community.

She peppered him with questions till it was time to take their leave, and for the first time in months Hinane slept deep and peacefully without harassing dreams.

CHAPTER 12

The first seven days after their arrival were mostly spent on setting up their village camp and finding food. They worked with limited supplies and creatively improvised to make it as comfortable and homely as possible, which was not really much different, or more elegant, from their camps during the journey through the desert.

Hinane compared their dwellings with Amezwar's settlement, which left her with a stabbing dissatisfaction. She walked with her lips pressed into a thin line, a furrow between her eyes, and a short temper. When Hinane's brooding mood became too unbearable, Takamat put firm hands on her hips when they again crossed paths at the entrance of Hinane's tent, the look in her eyes saying it all.

Hinane picked up on Takamat's thoughts that there were far more immediate and important things to worry about, instead of moping about. She sighed and tried to shrug the feeling of inadequacy from her mind.

The next day, Hinane, Izza and Tala took their first opportunity to hunt. The vast surrounds contained a large number of reptiles, crocodile, tilapia fish, barbary sheep, dorcas gazelles, roan antelopes, caracal cats, wild ass, ostriches, oryxes, jackals, fennec foxes, waddan and cheetah.

They returned with six antelope carcasses, broad grins on their lips and wild excited eyes, the ram's horn bellowing from afar so those in the camp could know of their winnings. Since then, every night, the tribe feasted on large quantities of animal protein, trying to replenish the starvation of the previous sixty days in the desert.

Because very little rain fell in the region, with sometimes high and extreme temperatures, the landscape allowed only a few vegetation species, but it was plenty enough for their purposes. Oat grass, date palms, orange trees, olive, magaria and fig trees were useful for the tribe, and eragrostis and alfalfa grass conveniently served as hay crops for the camels.

The tamarind tree, with a spreading crown, feathery evergreen foliage and fragrant flowers, yielded hard yellowish wood and long pods with edible brown tangy pulp that could be eaten fresh or cooked with rice and fish. But the rest of the vegetation just adorned the scenery, oleander trees, thorny palms, cypress and acacias. Some herbs such as artemisia, thyme and tribulus grew wild and Takamat jumped with pleasure each time she found suitable elements for herb recipes and remedies.

Yeddes excitedly reported that *cornulaca monacantha*, which only bloomed after desert rainfalls in other Sahara regions, grew in abundance here and were very much favoured by the camels. He grinned with delighted satisfaction when talking about how the green growth presented the most perfect conditions to expand his camel herd. Yeddes had already started training a few men to shepherd the camels, and set up a large and secluded encampment where they would care for them.

All the animals survived the journey and Yeddes described, in detail, twenty dromedaries and six mules in his breeding records. The five horses were

housed in a separate constructed camp where they could roam around, feeding freely on scrubs and grass.

Very early on the twenty first day since their arrival, Hinane ordered Yeddes to saddle the white camel for an exploring trip through the different tawshet settlements. She did this for two reasons, to showcase the imposing dromedary which the local goat-herder tribes knew very little about, and who may become interested in acquiring stock from Yeddes later on, and to elicit a certain reverence from onlookers.

Hinane realised quickly from Yeddes' tellings that it was important to make a rightful stand in this community from the start, to become known as a strong tribal entity. The evidence of affluence, such as the likes of other tribes, was severely lacking in her case, and she had to use what she had. The camel would show community and fellowship, whereas a lively horse like Burn may indicate opposition and enmity.

Menna and Takamat accompanied her, with Kwella rushing to join at the last minute. Kwella was curious to see what pleasures and entertainments the community offered and she mounted a camel with eagerness.

Although she would have preferred to ride on Burn, Hinane made an imperial figure in her polished warrior dress as she rode forth. The leather greaves covered her shins from ankles to knees, the upper parts of her sun-browned legs showing the newly painted henna tattoos effectively. A white skirt and apron contrasted sharply against the dark leather cuirass vest which was tied together in her sides, and the bow and quiver case filled with arrows fastened to her back.

Leather arm shields, which normally protected her arms from the bowstring, were worn today more for effect than for its practical use. The belt on her waist sharply reflected the sunlight, and the axes and javelins glittered where it was fastened behind the saddle.

Takamat looked timid and plain next to Hinane in an ordinary ankle length light blue frock, but her face gleamed serene and friendly, which made her appear far more approachable to common folk than Hinane did.

The tread of the camel was uncommon to their seating, and Menna and Kwella rode discomposed, not enjoying the ride. Menna's brand new leg, manufactured from the hard yellowish tamarind wood with the help of the entire clan, was fastened with leather straps to her upper thigh. Yeddes secured it tightly to the saddle so it would not dangle about. Since it was only completed three days before and she had only been wearing it for two days, Menna was self-conscious and remained quiet, but fully alert.

According to Amezwar's tellings, the Imazighen, the forefathers of the Berbers, had been in the area for thousands of years, expanding to here from an eastern origin along the southern rim of the Mediterranean. The Imazighen were traditionally nomadic, but those stationed here spent most of their time in the Hoggar region for its abundant grazing, which left no need to move around looking for better pastures.

The Hoggar confederation, the Kel Ahaggar, consisted of several tribal tawshets. Each tawshet was made up of different family units and was governed

by a council. One member from each family unit sat on the council board with one chief elected, who represented their specific tawshet at each confederation council meeting.

Their family hereditary was matrilineal, which meant their descents were traced through the female line, but not matriarchal as in the case of the Amazons, where a female was both the family head and a title, traced through the female line.

Their community social structure was based on a hierarchical system, vassals were protected by the nobles whom they served, with the nobles' status levels based on descent.

Amezwar told her at their welcoming fest that they were pagan, but some of them harboured superstitious fear with sometimes irrational behaviour not consistent with pagan reasoning.

They slowly moved through the settlement. Each tawshet had a little market, consisting of souqs laid out with colourful displays of textiles, foodstuffs, sweets and supplies. Women everywhere bagged salt and crops, carried water or wine jugs, their offspring obstructing their feet while playing and laughing about.

Hinane neared a stall where women were weaving kilims, a tapestry with a distinctive appearance, a wide variety of stripes and geometrical patterns such as triangles and diamonds, a repertoire of drawings different for each tribe. Kilims were mostly used in place of saddles when riding horses, with vivid colours of red, orange, green and purple weaved into various patterns.

Hinane's eye caught the fine tattooed dots on the faces of the Berber women and she waved with a friendly smile when passing. They returned the gesture with some surprise, not accustomed to any friendliness shown by nobles.

'I like it here,' said Takamat. 'The people are sociable and walk with self-worth.'

Hinane sensed the homecoming nostalgia of her friend and hid a smile, always the homemaker and carer, she thought fondly.

In the next souq, men were kneading hides and watering goats while stealing glimpses of Hinane as she came past. She sat up straighter, lifted her chin with a superior lip-curl, publicising her disinterest in common men and her disgust of their eager gapes.

A goatherd walked his goat across the path, skirmishing in a foreign Tamazicht dialect, reprimanding the animal with wind-milling arms as if the animal could understand every word of his scorn. But the goat turned a deaf ear and pulled stubbornly on its rein. The yank pulled the goatherd over some bags in front of a stall selling barley, and he fell against a huge pile of bags.

Kwella saw the dilemma and jumped from her camel to prevent the barley sacks from collapsing. But it was too late, the goatherd was already buried underneath the pile when she reached him. Bystanders laughed, but the man was not amused and screamed and shouted at the goat with high pitched annoyance when Kwella pulled him to his feet.

She gave the goatherd a slap on the bum, 'Show some respect and humour man, the animal has its rights too.'

The bystanders applauded Kwella, or rather shouted their approval. But they

were more motivated by her silver-white hair and bulging curves unlike they had seen before, and especially not on such open display. She acknowledged their admiration with a theatrical bow, which raised another ovation as the cleft between her breasts fell into full view.

Hinane enjoyed the comical exhibit but then said more seriously, 'As you were... I want to visit all the clans, see what else they deliver. From their markets it seems we have much to scout, but first we need to accomplish their language.'

The people in the Hoggar used a different dialect of the Tamazicht tongue as what was spoken in the Atlas, which they called Tamashaq. Since they were relatively homogeneous, Hinane could understand a fair amount but a lot went past understanding. A large amount went misinterpreted and she often pulled with slight irritation on the camel's reins.

Usually different tribes and their dialects communicated without proper mutual understanding, which was exactly the reason for Lunja's own additions and development of the Tifinagh alphabet. The oldest dated inscription of it was done by their ancestors from about 200BC, and Hinane intended on developing it further, maybe even distributing it among all the tribes here, she thought.

The Imazighen probably represented the physical type of the ancient Phoenicians or Semites, but the veil which only the men wore here was new to Hinane. The veil, mostly from black fabric, totally concealed their faces, leaving only slits for the eyes and nose-bridge. Apparently this facial covering originated from the belief that it warded off evil spirits and protected them from the harsh desert sands.

Taking on the veil was associated with the rite of passage to manhood, boys starting to wear it when they'd reached maturity. The veil was also highly connected to rank, power and authority. Nobles wore it higher and tighter, slaves were unveiled and the more inferior lieges, the looser the veil. Around women, the veil was also worn higher and tighter. In conversation, most of their meaning was derived from body language, with particular attention paid to what their eyes revealed.

Their skin colour was more difficult to describe. The skin of the nobles was seen to be of a very light brown. The mixed bloods, known as amrani, had a dark brown skin colour with very dark brown or black eyes. Their hair was black, straight, wavy, or tight curls, and although those with lighter skin also had dark hair, some had grey and green eyes or brilliant blue like that of Amezwar.

In one of the tawshets on the far outskirts of the settlement, they stopped to replenish their thirst and hunger at a tavern stall across the pathway from a metal worker's cubicle.

A tall man with long grey-white hair that reached to his waist, was busy casting an iron sword in a mould in front of a furnace. When he looked up, stirred by their presence, the man's eyes caught Hinane's stare and held it. Straight away his thoughts jumped into her mind, 'Your mind is right open my child, beware of trespassers.'

Hinane frowned in a fright, and closed her mind in an instant. It is the first time a foreigner's mind spoke to her's so directly. Thought transference was a practice limited to only between Lunja, Takamat and herself.

She scrutinised his light brown face that did not match the aged look of his grey hair. His faded blue eyes pierced into hers and after a few seconds had passed, she opened her mind again upon his summons.

They call me Yattuy, which means the tall one. Hinane transferred her name and asked for the intent of his intrusion into her thoughts. His answer came in a wad of information which she stored to consider in depth later, as Takamat pulled on her arm, gesturing it was time to go.

They arrived back at their camp late noon, with Takamat chattering all the way back and Menna and Kwella in high spirits. They were content, more knowledgeable of their neighbours and satisfied that their new home offered a promising future.

But Hinane still had no solid idea as to how she would care for her tribe other than what nature already provided. If she wanted to be recognised in this confederation as an accredited and powerful noble of her own tawshet, with assets and status equal to that of Amezwar, she would have to improvise a lot.

She sighed when sliding from the camel and handed the reins to a shepherd. She walked to the edge of their camp and looked at the sun that was laying low on the horizon. Her thoughts flitted back to Yattuy and she narrowed her eyes in concentration. What he channelled into her mind matched with some of the writings in the last pages of Lunja's book.

His thoughts unruffled now from the wad he placed there, and she intercepted each idea cautiously. The one most translucent was saying, 'Transmutation of metals and minerals is your resolution.'

In Lunja's book she read about the workings with gold in ancient Egypt which was assigned to a priestly class centred in the temple of the god Ptah at Memphis. Ptah was the patron of smelters and goldsmiths, his temple was goldsmithy, and his priests were distinguished by titles such as Great Wielder of the Hammer, and He who knows the Secret of the Goldsmiths.

The practice was based on doctrines involving matter, form, and spirit, and Lunja wrote down formulas for the preparation of silver, gold and other precious stones. The words, 'there is just one kind of matter, only in different shapes' were underlined in the book. But until today, until receiving input from Yattuy, she had no idea what to do with that information. Hinane intuitively recognised to keep an open mind and eye in future towards anything relating to this knowledge.

She didn't see the eagle for days and when it circled above her just before the sun disappeared, she knew that whatever the meaning, it was significant and worth her attention.

The eagle flew straight at her. Instinctively she held out her arm and it perched on her hand. She smiled when she pierced into its eyes, they were shining a deep olive brown-green, and for a split second she imagined seeing Lunja in them.

She shook her head in staccato movements to clear her brain, the movement causing the bird to take flight again. Hinane didn't feel this calm and collected in days.

CHAPTER 13

When Hinane was not out with her warriors, she spent time with Takamat expanding the Tifinagh alphabet, writing literature and poems, and engaging in games, song and dance with the other women of different tawshets.

This part of Hinane's life was just as important, if not more, than any of her other activities. By engaging, was how she could win the favour of many of the clans. Lunja once advised that one should always ensure the goodwill of one's neighbour, as this was where to find allies and strength when needed.

One of her favourite tawshets to visit was Amezwar's. Hinane knew she was totally accepted here as the tribe members recognised she carried the high favour of their chief. She often visited to relax and interact, like now where she held their attention with spellbinding verse.

Hinane sat on strewn cushions on a carpet with Amezwar's tribe symbols plaited into it. The tarpaulin tent covering them was weaved from white yarn that blocked the hot rays of the sun, bathing them in a pleasant shadow with a light breeze feathering upon their skins. Behind the communal structure, a short distance from there, children played, ran around and laughed.

Takamat sat on Hinane's left side with several women from different social classes forming a circle around them. Most of them were dressed in caftans with stripes and geometrical patterns.

Hinane traded her warrior dress for a short tunic, and the look she emitted was one of angelic eminence. The women sat fascinated in her presence, hanging attentively upon her lips as she recited a poem.

Her voice was enchanting and her eyes sparkling, fully enjoying the spell and might she wielded.

'Shattered by ruthless encounters of life, my soul bears down painful and strife.

But voices call from far and wide, with no place for my losses to hide.

And inward I'll go once more deep, to discover in here lies all I could reap.

My soul searches in places it has been before, to become who I want to be and much more.'

Her voice took on a softer nuance with the next part and they leaned closer.

'There's no dilemma left that I can see, I just need to choose who I prepare to be.

Let go of the past, the hurt and the pain, take up the challenge, it's time to live and laugh again.'

They applauded her ecstatically. Dasin, one of the tribe's elders said in awe, 'That's beautiful. Will you teach us to write like you?'

Hinane shuffled for a more comfortable position, smiled affectionately and bowed her head, 'That I will do for certain,' she pointed at Takamat, 'Takamat and I will also teach you the Tifinagh as written by the peoples as far as eastern Libya...' Hinane's eyes widened, dramatising her next words, 'Libya, the land close to the big fat river that snakes down into the belly of the vast forests where cannibals and monsters thrive and eat people alive.'

The women 'ooohed' and 'aaahed' and then giggled joyously, chattering excitedly among them of the prospect of learning something new from a far off exotic land.

Lalla, one of Takamat's favourite acquaintances, got up and refilled their cups with pomegranate juice. But before she could refill Hinane's cup a child came running in, screaming on a high pitch, the angst white on his face with tears running down his cheeks.

'Lalla, Lalla, come quick,' he called, 'There's something wrong with Idir.'

Lalla dropped the jar. The red-purple juice splashed across the carpet, but she took no heed and rushed off after the child into a nearby tent. Hinane recognised the severity of the child's terror and followed Lalla with some of the other women on their heels.

A child of about twelve years laid on a low mattress covered with white cloth. He was clutching his stomach, curling and gurgling from the pain with sweat drops gleaming over his face and skinny limbs.

An anxious young woman knelt next to him, holding his hand, trying to wipe his forehead with her other hand.

Hinane looked at the woman, 'You're his mother?'

She nodded fretfully, and Lalla answered for her, 'This is my sister and Idir, her only child.'

Hinane tried to straighten him out, but the boy howled from pain. She turned to Takamat, 'Get the medicines.'

Takamat spun around, and disappeared through the tent opening to fetch it from Hinane's saddlebag.

Hinane turned to the mother, 'What's your name?'

'Nella.'

'Tell me what happened?'

Nella mangled her hands together, 'It started about six days ago, but it wasn't so bad then. I gave him juice from the Aloe and thought he would get better, but he's worse.'

Hinane lifted his shirt and ran her hand all over his stomach, pressing slightly at different angles to determine where the actual pain was. Her hands felt the heat and slight vibrations when she touched the right side between the hip bone and the belly button. Idir yelled.

She looked up with concern and shot a glance towards Nella, 'What else?'

'He vomits at times.'

Takamat rushed in and Hinane shot up, took Takamat by the elbow and led her to one side of the tent, whispering, 'I think he suffers from an infected blind

gut. It seems the appendix has perforated already. The inflammation is severe.'

Hinane hesitated for a few seconds, her eyes casted to the ground, a closed fist covering her mouth while thinking.

Then she said, 'There's nothing we can do, the contagion is spreading, the entire lining of the abdomen might be already inflamed.'

Takamat frowned, 'Has he got a fever?'

Hinane shook her head, 'Not yet.'

Takamat spoke fast, 'Then we still have time. You will have to cut the tube out. I know how...'

Hinane butted in with distress, 'I can't cut him. We have to find a surgeon.'

Takamat put an urging hand on her shoulder, 'There's no one close enough. It will be days before a physician will reach the village, then it will be too late, as it had been for many of them before. This is one of the major reasons for people dying here, no one fit enough to help.'

Hinane hesitated and Takamat encouraged her, 'You have a steady hand and you're the only one who can do it right now. You've seen it done before by the surgeons in your mother's village, and I will guide you along.'

And as a last prompt Takamat added, 'I sat with them before, they showed me how.'

Hinane frowned, 'Why don't you do it?'

Takamat looked at her shaky hands, 'I don't have the stomach for it,' she dropped her shoulders in a desperate move, 'Hinane, you have to help Idir.'

She gestured towards the women behind them with a slight tilt of the head, 'Look at them. They're powerless. You're the only one that can save this boy.'

Takamat said with a determined look in her eyes, 'You know how, and you know you can.'

Hinane understood the deeper meaning of Takamat's words then looked at her feet, frowning slightly, 'I know the practice in theory, but as you know, never tried my hand at it before. He could die.'

Takamat got impatient and snapped, 'There would be no difference for the boy if dying when trying to save him, or dying when not. At least he might have a chance at your hand.'

Hinane lifted her chin and nodded.

Nella stepped closer, tears gleaming in her eyes, 'What's the matter? Is it serious?'

Hinane searched for the words to explain in simple terms.

Nella prompted, 'Please what is it?'

Hinane pushed her hesitation aside and said firmly, 'He needs surgery, but he will be okay, I will help him,' she forced her voice to carry conviction even though she had no basis for certainty.

Hinane put an arm around Nella's shoulders and led her to Idir, 'Calm down. Then tell him how much you care for him. Tell him he will be alright.'

Nella nodded and followed Hinane's order.

Hinane turned to Takamat, 'Prepare everything we might need. And rush everybody out.'

Hinane hurried from the tent, taking in the outside fresh air to calm her

nerves. She walked to the palm trees close to the outskirts of the village and knelt underneath it. She lifted her eyes towards the horizon, the moon showed white against the blue of the sky that was rapidly turning into purple, pink and gold by the setting sun.

Cutting people in battle to kill them was one thing, but cutting people to save them was a foreign concept to Hinane. The thought that the slightest wrong move could be fatal for the innocent child, pressed heavily on her resolve.

As if in answer to her distress, the eagle flew in and settled in the tree beside Hinane, his eyes fixed on her. Several minutes passed but neither broke the stare. A calmness took hold in her, she could feel it flow from her crown to her feet. Her heart slowed down and the nervous shake in her hands stopped. She took a long deep breath, then another, and another, then got up and returned to the tent.

Burning torches placed all over in the tent threw ample light on the sleeping boy. Takamat already drugged him with a potion that would knock him out for hours. Takamat led Hinane to a bowl with hot water and botanical disinfectants, calendula petals, comfrey root, powdered myrrh, and yarrow blossoms mixed with oils.

Takamat washed Hinane's hands and tied her hair back to keep it out of the way, then searched her face, 'Ready?'

Hinane smiled weakly and nodded, 'As can be,' her voice came with a croak.

Hinane knelt on the thick pillow pad next to Idir. A few tools placed on a low table at Takamat's right, laid ready for the task. Takamat handed her a sharp small knife. Hinane's hand trembled and she pulled it back without taking the knife. She took a deep breath, took control of her mind and reached for it with a more steadied hand.

Under Takamat's direction, Hinane made a small diagonally incision through the skin and the layers of the abdominal wall in the area of the appendix. Takamat dabbed away the small trickles of blood caused by the incision. The cut exposed the outer layer of the external oblique muscle and Hinane opened it further along the direction of the fibres. Takamat assisted with wooden clamps splitting the muscles which would expose the internal oblique.

They did the same through all the muscle layers, digging deeper into Idir's inside until they could see the peritoneum, the transparent membrane that covered most of the entrails. Hinane grasped it with a tong, pulled it up, and examined it to ensure there was no bowel caught in the folds. She cut it with a small incision and inspected the fluid for purulence. The inflammation puss oozed out and they recoiled from the stench that came from it.

Hinane widened the cut, exposing the cecal area and Takamat assisted with retractors keeping it open and dapping away the blood with white cloth. Hinane searched for the appendix, a closed-ended, wormlike narrow tube attached to the cecum, the first part of the colon. The tube was perforated, oozing the yellow puss into the cavity.

Hinane's heart dropped in despair. She looked up to Takamat, the worry bleak in her eyes. How would they clean this mess, she thought. The only thing to do was to keep the wound open and clean it systematically until they had fully

removed the inflammation. If they closed it now, the puss would seep through the wound to the outsides and into the bloodstream, infecting the whole body, and resulting in a sure death.

Hinane flipped up the perforated appendix, grasped the ruptured base and dissected it from adhesions holding it in the abdominal cavity. Then she freed the tube from its attachment to the colon with a cut and sewed the colon hole closed with catgut thread.

Takamat drained the area by sucking out the frank puss with a narrow tube and spitting it into a small bowl, each time convulsing from the stench and acid taste. After Takamat drained all the yellow liquid she rinsed her mouth with disinfectant. Hinane irrigated the abdominal cavity with salt solution, a time consuming process to make sure that all the inflammation was removed.

Because Hinane was not sure the wound was entirely clean, she said, 'We'll leave it open for a day or two while cleaning it and wait for the infection to subside.'

Takamat nodded. She rose and rinsed the boy's insides with a pasted herb mixture of echinacea, the purple coneflower, garlic, oregano oil, wild marjoram and yellow turmeric root, all known to harbour terrific antibacterial properties which would get rid of the worst infection.

The tension got too much and Hinane fell to the floor on her buttocks, her knees lame from the restricted blood flow. Her resolve crumbled into tears, and acid boiled from her abdomen. It pushed up and burned in her throat, threatening to spurt from her lips. She convulsed a few times, trying to keep it down.

Takamat dropped to a knee and placed a supporting hand on her shoulder, 'You've done well. You did all you could. All we have to do now is keep disinfecting the wound and manage the fever that comes with it.'

Hinane nodded and Takamat's face glowed with affection for her mistress, 'Go, I'll clean up here, comfort Idir and manufacture some sort of protection for the gaping wound.'

For once Hinane obeyed Takamat's command without protest. She stumbled from the tent and vomited at the back of it in the shadows.

She hardly had time to recover when Nella, who waited outside, rushed towards Hinane, 'Is he okay?'

Hinane wiped the acid from her lips and a nod in Nella's direction, 'We did all we could, only time will reveal his fate.'

Nella brought her hands to her mouth with a gasp. Lalla and some of the other women crowded around them, curious for the outcome.

Nella asked, 'What do you mean?'

'I removed Idir's blind gut. It was ruptured and the puss contaminated his intestines.'

The words caused distress and Nella cried, 'What caused it, did I do something wrong?'

Hinane lifted a hand in protest, shaking her head, 'No-no, Nothing you did. Inflammation in the tube begins when the opening from the appendix into the cecum becomes blocked.'

Nella didn't understand. Hinane shook her head, these poor people knew nothing, she thought.

'You did no wrong Nella, it's just one of those things we have no control over. I will ask Takamat if you can sit with him for a while. Takamat and I will stay with him for a couple of days, his case demands more attention.'

Lalla put her arm around Nella's shoulders and followed Hinane into the tent.

With a mixture of healing herbs, grapefruit and citrus extract, healthy boosters with powerful antibacterial and antimicrobial effects, it took three days of inspecting, cleaning, disinfecting and strengthening Idir before they could stitch the wound closed.

Takamat mortared a mixture of olive oil, hot beeswax, plantain leaves, calendula leaves and yarrow blossoms. She scrubbed the stitched wound thoroughly, before applying the paste which would secure a full recovery and leave no scars.

Idir was back at play within fourteen days after the incident, the usual time for recovery for anyone with this type of ordeal. But to the women, it was more like magic as they had seen many of their people die of the same thing before.

From that day forward, they referred to Hinane as the mystical princess who bore magical powers, and who could restore the dying. She became known as a deity who carried the favour of all their gods.

Hinane shrugged it off as merely the society's ignorance.

'It's simply absence of intellect due to a shortage of interaction with more advanced civilisations, nothing more,' she explained.

But indeed, the incident made her feel more powerful and in control. And by whichever means employed, her standing in the society would fortify, the ancient wisdoms will make it so, she smiled with thought.

CHAPTER 14

'In the name of Achilles,' roared Tala with murder in her cold purple eyes that slant upwards. Her right arm bulged from the effort, the sleek cut muscles gleaming in the sun as she shoved the tip of her sword past Hinane's chin who ducked the blow just in time.

Tala's long raven hair swept about her as she circled around and prepared the next attack. Tiny sweat droplets trickled from her forehead and temples down her cheek and chin. She took one quick move to wipe it away with her free hand and Hinane immediately took her chance.

Hinane rushed in fast and positioned her body close to Tala's, trying to pre-empt the attack and avoid the blade. Hinane grappled and clinched Tala's sword with her own at the lower part of the blade where it was the strongest. She jostled forward with her full body weight, pushing from the hips and left shoulder, trying to throw Tala off balance.

Tala lost her stance only a little. Even though Hinane used all her strength in an attempt to thrust her to the ground, Tala's legs were too strong and didn't budge. But Hinane pushed through and kept on going, forcing Tala backwards as she charged.

Then with one sudden movement, Hinane released the power push of her blade and swirled the hilt upwards to hit Tala's sword-arm shoulder with the pommel of her sword. Then she hit Tala on the chin with an elbow while kicking her front balancing knee with a left heel.

Tala fell to the ground, a dust cloud erupting all around her while yelling, 'Bloody crap.'

The warriors watching them, bellowed with laughter. Izza, Menna, Siman, Tayri, Kwella, Bahac and Damya intensely followed their sparring and studied their every move.

Before their transit to the Hoggar, it was a common daily practise to be in combat training against each other. They continued the habit, and today as every other day, a short distance off from the oasis to avoid curious onlookers, they were engaged in sword, axe and bow tactics.

Hinane grew up in an environment where regional communities were always in cultural conflict, either having to deal with tyranny threats from neighbouring tribal chiefs, or nations from afar invading their territory to gain ownership of land, or to capture slaves.

Even though there were no immediate threats lurking in their new home region, it was wise to train every day as a mental aid and an outlet for bottled energy and frustration that stirred within all of them. That's what they were born to do, fight, and venting their dexterity and vivacity was necessary to keep them well-balanced.

Hinane wiped the sweat from her brow, lifted the broadsword again and motioned her wrists in the form of the infinite symbol, circling the hilt while cutting through the air with the blade, 'Remember, sword fighting is all about perception, decision and action.'

She stopped the movement of her wrists and lowered the sword to her side, 'If the enemy moves against you, observe the purpose of his motion, watch his expression, scrutinise him, read him. Once you've received his intent through your thoughts, decide how to neutralise his move.'

Hinane lifted the sword and manoeuvred her body to illustrate what she meant as she spoke, 'The foe is moving in to attack your high-outside opening. You decide to move on guard to absorb his attack and simultaneously threaten him with your point. Or, adjust your position and use footwork to avoid his attack, or decide on a combination of the two. Then act swiftly upon your decision, do not hesitate.'

They nodded and Hinane ordered, 'Siman, Tayri, practise these moves.'

Siman and Tayri engaged and Hinane turned towards Bahac and Damya, 'How do you avoid a hit?'

Without waiting for an answer Hinane continued, 'Keep the attacker reacting. Make him defend against your attacks for as long as you can by using the five master cuts.'

'When properly executed, the cuts can be strung together in an unpredictable pattern. If your opponent is on a certain guard and attacks you first, use the master cut to counter attack him.'

Hinane demonstrated a series of cutting movements and said, 'This is your most efficient counter to his aggressive undertaking. This is what makes a master cut a master cut. Got it?'

They nodded and copied her movements.

Hinane turned to Kwella, 'Dual with me.' Hinane talked her through the moves while demonstrating with her own sword. 'Rap your opponent's blade as a distraction when you're crossing swords. Or knock it to move his blade out of your way to take advantage of the opening it gives. If he is too strong to create an opening with a rap, intercept his next blow by throwing a false strike to draw his blade. Then change the attack to hit through the opening created with a cut or thrust.'

Hinane ordered her to repeat the moves on her own and walked to Menna, 'Show me how your new leg moves.'

Hinane previously taught her smart movements that did not rely on support from the false leg. Even though Menna had a strong heart to follow through, she just could not match the proficiency she once had. Understandably so, and Hinane spent more time discussing the arts of battle strategy and politics with her than with anyone else. Menna had a sharp mind with quick understanding and the ability to identify feasible tactics in difficult situations. Hinane came to respect her counsel and constantly created possible battle encounters for Menna to solve.

The group practised their moves a couple of times, with Hinane sparring with each of them before she called a halt. She slid her sword back into its sheath around her waist, and wiped the sweat from her forehead with a backhand. She walked to Burn, took the water bladder from the saddle, gulped the water and passed it on to the others who formed an arc in front of her.

Hinane's chest heaved up and down from the training efforts which made her voice raspy, 'The most important part of sword fighting is to tap energy from different symbolic animal images represented by each side of the sword.'

She waited for her heavy breathing to even out, then continued to explain.

'The lynx is stationed at the top of the pommel of the sword, symbolising the head, representing your mind for objectivity and clarity. The lynx has the best eyesight among all animals, and so it is chosen as a symbol of clear-judgement.

'Your feet, grounded in earth, represent strength and good posture for balance. The sun, representing heaven, describes that your footwork should be circular in nature. A stable spine represents the silver cord between heaven and earth, vertical and upright, to stay strong and grounded with one foot while the other moves circularly.'

The group listened attentively.

'On your right sword arm shoulder is the head of a cheetah, symbolising breaking through a rival's guard with speed. Your right shoulder connects to the entire right arm, which is your top hand associated with quickness. The top hand is the guide of your attacks, not the provider of the power behind them.

'For power, use the potent muscles of the shoulder and right side of the torso to force openings. The right hand itself is symbolised by a crocodile with the sword-blade being represented by its tail, which lashes out. The head is about where the elbow is, which means you should use your elbows when fencing close-distance. Your elbow speaks of boldness and snap movements.'

Hinane had them mesmerised. She smiled at this and continued with a compelling voice, enjoying the images she created as she knew this was what they would remember in battle. The subconscious communicated best with pictures, a language her warriors understood best.

'The left shoulder is a ram, your charging power. Just as rams butt each other forcefully, so should your left shoulder be used to smash into your enemy in unhinging him.

'The rest of the left arm is a lion. The power behind your cuts is provided by the king of beasts, the symbol of bravery and courage. The left hand is a wild dog, a hound, a very swift animal which controls the point. 'Remember, your right hand is your fulcrum, the pivot about which a lever turns, and your left hand controls the tip of the sword.'

Hinane fell on one knee and drew an eye symbol in the sand, they bent closer, 'And the eye of the swordsman is everywhere. The eye must stay alert, bold and wise. Awareness isn't just what you see, but what you hear, what you feel, what you sense.

'Never focus directly on your foe, but throw your sight everywhere. Don't stare at his face or sword, look through him. See as if in reduced illumination, as in moonlight, where vision is faster and more sensitive to movement than vision in daylight.'

'Hugh?' comes in a choir from all mouths.

Then Kwella said with a shake of her head, 'We know not what you mean.'

Hinane laughed and rose, 'We'll work on this technique later. For now, concentrate on the qualities of all I've just mentioned, strength, balance, posture, speed, accuracy, power, commitment, good judgement and skill. Acquire all these traits then you will be a master swordsman.'

Izza walked to her water bladder and drank from it. She wiped the excess water from her lips and asked, 'What are our plans Hinane?'

'What do you mean?'

'We've learned much about the wealth of this place, some of the ways of its peoples, and the bountiful hunting grounds in the ridges.'

She paused and looked over the mountain ridges with a small crease on her forehead, 'It's a good life here, but what lies about and beyond our horizons? It's getting a bit dull don't you think?'

Hinane walked to Burn, took her hunting bow and swayed the quiver from the horse's back to her shoulders. She knocked an arrow and lifted it towards the pierced and bloodied carcass of the dwarf crocodile which she set high up on the rocks as target for bow practice earlier that morning.

She drew the string far out with tremendous power, a movement that stunned many opponents in battle before. Just the slight release of the two knuckles that pinched the arrow in aim, was needed to start its flight.

It hit the reptile in the eye and the mush splattered against the rock, leaching down the jagged surface. She drew another and another, with alacrity and stealth releasing the arrows one by one. Each time an arrow struck, the reptile's short legs rattled with its tapering tail dangling lifelessly from side to side.

Hinane only turned to face them when the quiver was empty and her mind had constructed an answer. She understood the restlessness of the warriors but did not find a suitable outlet for it as yet. In the Atlas, they were accustomed to skulking threats at any time which kept them on guard. But here, all looked so harmless, peaceful, uneventful and over the time since being here, the restlessness pulled in her joints too.

But she showed none of that and answered calmly, 'We do what we always do, branch out our language, write verses, practice combat moves, hunt wild animals, and recruit women from the clans to train as warriors.'

Tala lifted her eyebrows with doubt, 'The women from these mountains only weave and tend to their brood. They're soft and weak, they know nothing of combat.'

Hinane hid a smile at Tala's impudence, being a homemaker was a weakness in her eyes.

'That's exactly my point. We can teach them a lot,' said Hinane.

Kwella snorted, 'We have better chance of making warriors of their goats.'

They laughed.

Menna asked with a high degree of curiosity, 'For what purpose, even miniscule, would we want to teach them?'

'I would also like to know,' said Amezwar from up on his horse a short distance off.

They swirled to face the man who owned that soothing but also impaling voice. Amezwar had the ability to diffuse a charged situation with his voice alone, tuning tense atmospheres down with quiet sensibility, a quality envied by most nobles in the Hoggar.

Amezwar had watched them practise from a rocky hilltop, especially recognising Hinane's skill with the bow. His admiration for her grew thick in his chest, but it was tainted with slight apprehension. Although he was infatuated by her, he was not absolutely certain of her motives. It was too soon to tell and experience cautioned him, no matter the intense effect she had on his physique. But nothing of this reflected on his face when sliding from the saddle. He bowed slightly and they acknowledged the protocol with the same gesture.

Hinane worried that they were so engulfed in their training that they did not even spot his approach, that was not good and she made a mental note to pay more attention.

She caught his eyes to answer his question, 'For defence, self-respect, self-preservation. One never knows what peril might befall.'

Amezwar frowned, not entirely satisfied with the vague explanation, but nodded.

He threw a quick glance at the warriors and turned to Hinane, 'Walk with me.'

He led her at the elbow out of earshot. Hinane searched his face for the reason behind the tension in his fingers clutching around her arm. Her eyes

darted over his high-bridge, straight and narrow nose with a slight convex in the upper segment and small oblique nostrils. This feature was predominant of the nobles in the Hoggar and Hinane straightened her shoulders with an uncertain stir, very aware of her own standing in this mountainous society, or lack thereof rather.

She dropped her gaze to the path before her and winced when he spoke. Hinane was certain he could control a regiment with his voice alone and she wriggled her arm from his grip. Her irritation was directed towards the control he could exercise with such little effort, and by shaking his hand, she hoped also to shed the feelings of inadequacy that came with his touch.

'Last night there was a council meeting ordered by the current Kel Ahaggar confederation leader, Atisi, for all the chiefs, the Amghar, to attend. The main subject of discussion would be about your intention here. Are you joining one of the existing tribes, or remain on your own?'

Hinane stopped abruptly, 'What do you mean?'

The corner of his lips twitched slightly, 'You've won the favour of most of the tribes since being here, especially that of the women. They look up to you.'

His grin widened, 'And off course, awe from the men too, no doubt.'

He turned serious again, 'Some clans hope you would join them, others wonder who you are exactly, what your true motives are. They say you have special powers.'

Hinane was intrigued, 'Why would they say that?'

'Maybe the long journey through the harsh deserts, arriving here intact, keeping good health throughout, staying stronger than most men would.'

Amezwar paused with a look in the air, waving a hand towards the bird that circled above them, 'Or maybe because of it always rounding you.'

Hinane had grown so accustomed to the eagle, she sometimes hardly noticed it, unless it wanted her attention for some reason.

She smirked and prompted Amezwar with a raised eyebrow and a tilt of her head, 'And?'

'They say you have magic herbs that give your warriors and people ability to endure the deserts, and heal the ill, they say you are immortal.'

Hinane intervened with a soft laugh, 'Hardly. But I do have a few remedies, yes.'

Amezwar shook his head, the black veil covering it lifting slightly in the breeze, 'There's more. It's who you are. You carry charisma and a mystical air that enslaves all about you. They call you, fugitive princess, which was the actual reason Atisi enquired about you. You piqued his interest, or should I rather say, his distress.'

Hinane held his gaze with her soulful eyes, and Amezwar's resolve broke. He moved closer, his intense desire for her winning the struggle over his cautious mind.

He put both his hands on her upper arms, drew her against his chest, his eyes burning intensely into hers. They shone with dark blue hues, almost black with emotion, and he said with a hoarse voice, 'I want you to be with me, to join my clan. And I...' he paused, blushing slightly as if it's the first time discussing

intimacy matters.

He brought his head closer and she could feel the warmth of his breath scorching her cheeks, 'I want your permission to visit your tent in private.'

Hinane's jaw dropped in surprise. He moved boldly. But she liked his directedness and forwardness. It showed that he was decisive with the guts to act on it. However, his assertiveness was directed to a department not marked a high priority for her right now.

She frowned in deep thought. Besides, she did not feel that electricity she knew must exist between lovers. The intense feelings Lunja had for her father, the passionate heartbeat that flushed the red into Takamat's cheeks when speaking or thinking of Yeddes. The same was not present in her for Amezwari.

And yet, she admired his wealth, his status in this society and his prominence. A personal alliance with him was surely an attractive option. But she could not defy who she was. She could never bow to his authority and governance like they expect of the women in his commune, no matter how flattered his request made her feel.

She dropped her eyes and broke from his embrace, 'I'm privileged by the interest of a man of your status, one as powerful as you.'

She looked at the warriors who continued with axe throwing rehearsal in the interim, 'But first I have a duty towards my warriors and my own people. They followed me here in good faith, we have encountered much, endured much, they look up to me.'

Hinane sighed, 'And now they want more,' as do I, she added in her mind.

She put a hand on his upper arm, 'I am deeply honoured, but now is not the time.'

She felt uncomfortable under his stare and desperately needed to break the strange and unfamiliar tension his attention caused in her pelvic. She bowed towards him and turned away, walking back to the group with Amezwari's eyes burning in her back.

He took a deep breath of disappointment. But then a slow smile broke his solemn face as he watched her.

The lines on his forehead softened as he whispered, 'I'll wait for you my fugitive princess. There is no one else that equals your valour and I want you by my side. But I can wait, I can be patient.'

The energy from his stare and whispered words empowered by his smouldering feelings, although inaudible to Hinane, reached her in charged waves.

Hinane's step steadied and strengthened under his gaze, and suddenly she felt light-hearted, potent and oddly secure.

CHAPTER 15

Amezwar led Hinane into the hospitality tent of the Kel Ahaggar confederation, where Atisi, the Amenokal, held all his meetings of importance.

The tent was set out with low tables laden with fruit, juices and tea with house servants waiting for orders. The attendees consisted of the twelve Amghar, the chief of each tribe and their main companions.

A cool breeze blew through the open tent flaps and lifted Hinane's hair in a sensual wave, and those who beheld fell into a numinous awe. Amezwar, totally aware of the effect she exerted, led her proudly at the arm to his normal spot. He sat her down next to him, Hinane thankful for his support, since she had no idea what to expect, his energy beside her was most welcome. She contemplated the matter since Atisi's request came to attend this meeting, but could not determine what exactly required her input.

Amezwar leaned in, whispering in her ear whilst indicating two other noble women across the table who were also chiefs. This made Hinane feel a bit more comfortable, and she smiled at the ladies who returned it with a friendly bob.

One of them was very attractive and Hinane caught the fond look she proffered Amezwar. Hinane suddenly wondered why he was not married with a family. He surely attracted enough interest.

A slam on the table interrupted her thoughts and stilled the humming voices that resonated through the tent. A tall, broad shouldered man with a big belly entered the tent. He had a very dark complexion, face deeply lined, hard like leather, his eyes shone raven black with cruel, unfriendly brown specks. A white veil headdress, folded like a turban, covered his head so Hinane could not see his hair. He wore a long beige tunic and brown sandals on his feet.

'That's Atisi,' whispered Amezwar.

Hinane followed Atisi's every move, trying to determine his character from his appearance. According to Amezwar, there was a dispute among the Amghar about his integrity, and this knowledge together with his form made Hinane uncomfortable.

He sat down at the head of the long table and the two men who followed him, dressed in similar fashion as Atisi, took their places at each side of him.

Atisi darted his eyes over the congregation and bowed his head lightly. The group acknowledged him with the same nod but stern faces as most did not feel the warmth that's supposed to accompany the greeting.

Atisi narrowed his eyes, slightly irritated with the lack of respect shown. He shoved the platter with fruits in front of him across the table, illustrating his displeasure, but it did not elicit any reaction.

'We have lots to discuss.' His voice rasped over them and Hinane shivered slightly.

As if feeling her discomfort, Atisi directed his attention towards Hinane, 'Ah. Tin Hinan, finally we put eye to eye.'

Hinane bowed respectfully in his direction as the custom dictated. Until she had formed her own opinion of him, she would treat him with respect, not wishing to upset him from the start.

Atisi stared at her with a steel gaze, thinking of the day when he witnessed their first approach to the Hoggar from his spot high on the cliffs. He had a bad

premonition then and felt it now again.

'I've heard much about your journey and your many attributes,' his eyes tried to strip her soul bare, while continuing, 'Amezwar, your friend there, made his intentions known to incorporate you into his clan.'

Hinane was taken aback instantaneously and the blood in her veins started to boil. She did not expect Amezwar to be so forward. She frowned annoyingly and cursed him in her mind. She wanted to maintain her freedom more than anything else. He knew that, and deliberately moved against her desires.

And from the way Atisi spoke he silently ordered her to join Amezwar's clan. She rebelled against any form of authority or control, and her good intentions of not confronting Atisi flew from the tent upon a small breeze.

But the voice in her gut prompted not to mortify a man like Amezwar, especially not in public at a meeting of this importance. She felt trapped and searched her mind for an escape.

She tried to proceed with caution, but the anger boiled and the fire blazed from her tongue, her eyes spitting daringly when they met those of Atisi, 'I wish to keep my people together and remain my own tribe.'

A murmur went up from the others, the two women chiefs smiled softly and Amezwar turned red. Atisi drew his breath, her arrogance like cold water on his face, and he raised his right hand for silence.

'And your motives?' He asked with distaste, 'You ride your horse like a soldier and handle your weapons like a warrior. You train and recruit more warriors, and then you go and write poetry with love-sick women, teach a new alphabet, heal the ill and save the young. Your skills are diverse, but your true purpose confusing. Why are you in this colony? Clear yourself from any menace.'

Hinane almost choked. Being at loggerheads with a man of his stature was a battle of a totally different territory, and she lacked the experience or weapons for this tabletop combat.

But she pulled from her internal resources and lifted her chin, steeling herself, 'Must there be a sinister motive? I only arrived for a new and safe home for my people, why is what I do, creating such a stir?'

No one reacted, and Hinane continued.

'Can't I just be, and do what I am accustomed to. I was not aware that there were any set laws governing this settlement, prohibiting me from having protectors or engaging in literature, or practising medicine. If there are certain laws restricting it, I would very much like the wax-sealed scroll for it.'

Many drew sharp breath at her boldness and the blood drained from Atisi's face leaving it grey. It swelled and his eyes bulged in their sockets. Hinane pointed out much of what was lacking under his rule and he did not appreciate her insight, 'Women should rather focus to marry and bear children.'

The tension in the tent strained, Hinane reddened and bowed her fists, 'You have two women chiefs here,' gesturing at them with a hand, 'Why should me being one too, present any dilemma?'

'They have proved themselves to be leaders with their chief status inherited from their forefathers.'

Hinane disregarded this remark with a lifted brow, 'As did I.'

Hinane had enough, wanting to end this and without waiting for a response from Atisi, she turned to look at the chiefs around the table with an enquiring gaze, 'If there is no other valid, or sensible fair reason prohibiting me from remaining and expanding my own clan here among you,' she threw a mocking look at Atisi and held his stare, 'I will take the opportunity to proof myself and continue with my daily activities.'

This outraged Atisi, but before he could react, Tedus, the female chief who favoured Amezwar butted in, 'Women leaders had been frequent for centuries among the Amazigh and we do not oppose Hinane's wishes.'

Tedus was a proud, striking woman of about forty years with long black hair, brown eyes but a little plump below the chin.

She smiled and turned towards Hinane, 'Call me Tedus, I think you will be a strong ally in our midst,' she squared her eyes with those of Atisi's and Hinane had no doubt as to who was one of Atisi's rivals.

'She has lots to teach us Atisi, she brought much of which we don't know.'

Hinane directed a gratified bow towards her and hid a triumphant smile.

Atisi bellowed, 'Who else agrees?'

More than half around the table raised their hands and Atisi had to save his giggling concerns regarding Hinane for another opportunity. He turned to the man on his left and raised the next matter of discussion. But the look of hatred he threw towards Hinane before that, showed that this matter was far from settled.

The cold breeze shrivelled in her neck and Hinane averted her eyes quickly towards Tedus, wondering what caused her allegiance. Was it to win the favour of Amezwar, or was there a price tag upon it?

Hinane dared a glance towards Amezwar, not sure what affect his rejected request left upon him. He met her eyes with a pained look. She smiled an apology, but her eyes conveyed that he deserved her retribution as it was intolerant to put her on the spot like that.

Amezwar devoted his attention to the proceedings and Hinane listened quietly to every word for the rest of the meeting, absorbing everything. She needed to sharpen her mind and had to find new weapons to enter this political battle with Atisi.

From their talks, they led a simple life with an uncomplicated and slow emergent political governance structure. Hinane summarised that three things made a tribe powerful here, its people, commodity and politics.

The foundation of a forceful tribe rested in the strengths of its people, their values as social exchangers, their opinions, attitudes, and teachings.

Commerce, the articles and services of their trading, was measured in quality. The more practical and useful the goods or service, together with the value the customer attached to it, the higher the demand. The scarcity aspect that sometimes resulted from this high demand, raised its value, and herein laid the covert of becoming wealthy.

And then there was intriguing politics. The opinion held and communicated, the social relations formed and gained for authority or power, and the

regulations, policies, activities and affairs involved in managing that society. And finally the methods and tactics used to formulate and apply those with the proper administration.

It seemed that the one who conquered political power, currently Atisi, was also the one who most developed the fine arts of warfare with the ability to control and manipulate with fear, and strategising with injustice.

No wonder Atisi was anxious about Hinane's warrior status. She was a threat as he had no comprehension or understanding of her battle strategy or customs, other than the rumours about how she came to be here.

The council committees assisted the Amenokal in decision making and administration, and currently, Atisi had four committees who ensured his assets grew. They were also supposed to maintain the peace and internal order with no other excuse for interfering in the lives of the vassals, the tribes, other than collecting taxes. The nobles and warriors of Atisi's tribe were tasked with collecting taxes and the rumours were, they were brutal in their fetching.

This custom aggravated Hinane. Man should be free, the land, the earth, the animals, the food should be freely available to all as they were gifts delivered directly from the gods which no man should take ownership of, or reign over. But she held her tongue as she realised her age and lack of experience crippled her knowledge in this field.

Over centuries, several different tribes congregated in the Hoggar region. Most tribes were large groups of hundreds of members who descended from one common male ancestor, sometimes from a fictitious character just to satisfy the prescripts. Other tribes were smaller groups reaching back into the past for generations to a common well-known ancestor. And other tribal systems have totally collapsed, leaving the households and families as independent units.

Each tribe had a distinctive traditional culture consisting of families, relatives and friends with a common identity, dialect, and belief system. All of them together within a tribe, shared in a scheme of creating and managing material wealth.

But the confederation's objective was to conflate all the tribes into a functioning political unit that demanded strong adherence to basic rules, principles and expectations, regardless of their own family customs which resulted in disputes and disagreements.

Hinane grasped with insight that in order to become a respected and admired Amenokal, would require managing a system where all worked towards a common purpose. Even if there were some differences of opinions on how to express that common purpose, also considering different customs and traditions, the objective still remained unity in vision.

It was also evident to her that there was a huge lack of communication between tribes which stunted learning from one another. A tribe would therefore stand the risk of eventually stagnating if not advancing. The ideal situation would be to allow tribes to interact, lift their concerns, and together find solutions to obstacles that would benefit the confederation as a whole.

But this confederation system was far from it. Justice in the settlement was kept alone by the confederation council and it was not rationally executed. What

was discussed around this gathering table was done so only to trick the eye, a cover up for feint allegiances, with false integrity, dishonesty, and undercurrent energies of bloated egos, and the greed for power obscured by rightful intent.

Hunger for supremacy was fuelled with corruption, disabled virtues and twisted moral principles. Atisi ruled by using extortion, violence, discrimination, favouritism, patronage and bribery.

Hinane felt sick and her hands started to shake. She despised Atisi's governance and the falseness of the chiefs who favoured him.

Amezwar must have felt her stirring distress as he enfolded her hand in his, pressing it lightly. She glanced at him with gratitude, thankful for the calming comfort his touch offered. She smiled at him and saw the remains of their silent feud earlier were absent from his eyes.

CHAPTER 16

The figures drawn on the rock wall surfaces, some as tall and large as Hinane, were somewhat confusing in what they depicted. Hinane ran her fingertips over the red-ochre painted scenes of archers with muscular arms and legs, enormous cats, cattle with long horns, and flared-eye horses pulling war-chariots.

Tala's voice echoed through the fortress, 'Jabbaren, giants,' she called, 'with strange big round heads herding oxen.'

They didn't hurry to her side to look as they did that first day, reacting to each drawing they came across with amazement. They walked slowly now, each left in their own fantasy of creation, scrutinising each motif in trying to reconstruct the scenes. Some of them made no sense at all and left them speculating about it around the fire each night.

The derelict and isolated rock fortress, which they've discovered in the Tan-Zoumiatak along the Tin Abou Teka massif, faced the deep cliff and gorge below. It was hidden from plain sight and cut through with a number of narrow alleys. They've discovered no evidence of former human activity, except these drawings with their mysterious meanings.

Since entering the Tassili range a few days before, they'd discovered thousands of drawings and carvings depicting an era long gone when the Sahel was fertile savannah land teeming with wildlife and strange beings. Images of huge elephants with raised trunks, rhinoceros with mammoth horns on their snouts, giraffes with necks stretching into clouds and big fat hippopotamuses, were all found in several different sites across the entire massive range.

Some of the images were arranged in chronological sequences, representing dancers in scenes of what looked like weddings and banquets, followed by pastoral life and hunting images.

And then there were many indecipherable sequences with many strange objects. But the most bizarre, were figures with sprouting mushrooms protruding from all over their bodies, others were holding mushrooms in their hands, and other shapes were seemingly crossbreeds of mushrooms and humans.

There was one particular depiction of a priest, or a spiritual medium of some sorts, in antler headgear with a bee's face, clutching a bunch of mushrooms. Geometric patterns were drawn all around these mushroom creatures, which meant, whoever sketched these must have been in deep trance states.

As the days passed in the oases, Hinane grew more curious of the surrounding Idurar n Ahaggar massif, the Tifinach name she'd given the Hoggar mountains. Its uncharted mysteries drew her like a lodestone and when she announced their expedition on horseback into the range, Izza and Tala were the first to sign up for the quest. Siman and the twins Bahac and Damya, shared their enthusiasm and stood waiting impatiently while Hinane readied for departure.

Menna, Tayri and Kwella were left with recruiting more warriors for Hinane's legion. A task Hinane would have preferred to oversee herself, but she needed to learn how to trust that her followers were equipped enough for any task. It was a challenging detachment pursuit, difficult for anyone who wanted to keep firm control in hand. But to quiet Hinane's restless mind caused by the conflict with Atisi, and the warriors' need to spill latent energy, suddenly became more important and they left camp with eager strides.

A voyage into the unknown was always the best remedy to order one's mind, Lunja always said. Nature subtly taught how to formulate strategies and Hinane had many aspirations with no campaigns to achieve any of them. She needed to find solutions and the expedition might help her find them.

They had been scavenging the highland plateaus for a few weeks now, and from the daily recordings she scribbled down, Hinane reconstructed a strange lunar landscape across hundreds of miles east from where they left the oases. The landscape consisted of deep gorge canyons, dry river beds and plateaux carved by water and softened by winds.

Hinane reckoned the unique rock formations and networks of steep-sided valleys were results of alternating wet and dry periods over centuries, as it had been depicted in some of the drawings on the rock walls.

Over time, the running action of rivers on the surfaces of the plateaus formed deep gorges and separated them. Wind erosion during dryer periods formed rock formations which resembled ruins, which they referred to as stone forests. They could not get enough of surveying all the strange hideouts which the stone forests offered, and tried to review each one with time speeding by unnoticed.

Here and there were small waterfalls dropping into clear cool rivers with barbus fish, brine shrimps and lots of gazelle arriving to quench their thirst, providing them with enough meat. Thus, food and water presented no problem, and they relaxed and enjoyed the isolated freedom that nature presented.

Every night, around campfire, they talked about what they'd discovered that day, and with that, strengthened a camaraderie bond that would hold a lifetime. Deep rooted friendship was the finest shared foundation anyone could have, and

they marvelled in each other's company with lots of humour and banter.

And tonight was no different. Except that the adventure and enigma enlivened that day would present a campfire chronicle for centuries. None of them could accurately account the true identity of the animal which escaped their hunt in one of the canyons after they had left the fortress with the giant creatures on the walls.

'It was a bear,' said Hinane.

'No,' Izza shook her head, 'It can't be, no one ever saw bears in North Africa before. Not even one account of it scribbled or told throughout Libya.'

'It had a face like a hyena, it must have been a hyena then,' added Damya to the mystery.

Bahac snorted, 'Nah man, it was a big baboon, hairy and ugly enough.'

They laughed and gazed into the fire, recalling the image of the beast into their minds, trying to conjure its likeness. It was stout and thick in body, brownish black in colour, the long fur on its underside was reddish orange, the muzzle and claws short. When they spotted the beast it was feeding on a gazelle, which meant it was a meat eater, which meant it could eat humans too. When the animal sighted them it became ferocious, wild and advanced in attack with a resounding roar.

Hinane shook her head in afterthought, 'No it was definitely a bear, it had the mannerisms and posture of a bear. It could not have been anything else.'

They still looked at her with doubt and she added, 'No previous records of bears, don't mean there are none. Who would know anyhow, this mountain massive is isolated from frequent hunters.'

Tala threw in her response, 'Whatever its identity, its hiss and snarl shot ice shivers up my spine and froze my brains. And when it came charging towards me I almost sha...'

Hinane interrupted quickly before she could utter the curse, 'You acted quickly enough when you drew arrow.'

Tala shook her head in self-loathe, 'Yeah but I didn't fire, I could not pull that bow string, my hands shook and couldn't take aim. It never faltered me before.'

'Well, well, the robust, bold and invincible Tala was indeed afraid,' teased Siman.

Tala rebuked in haste, 'Shut your trap,' then she looked at Izza, 'Thanks for getting the beast off me Izza, I owe you.'

Izza waved it away, 'It's nothing.'

But it took days for Tala to cast the memory. If it wasn't for Izza, the animal would have ravished her. She thought it her last gasp of breath when the beast's weight bore down upon her chest and his claws cutting into her leather cuirass. She hated the sensation the incident had birthed, the feeling of defencelessness and terror.

Izza managed to pull it from her in a wrestling struggle, but it was the shouts from the others who came running in haste that scared it away. The beast escaped them in the chase afterwards, obviously well familiar with the canyons and hideaways. They saw it disappearing into a crack, but there were so many and they could not discern in which one exactly from their distance. And now its

true identity would always remain a mystery.

Tala came to realise how dependent they were on each other in times of need, and she would have to learn to allow that and swallow her pride.

Hinane helped stilling her mind, 'Accepting help is not a weakness, it's a skill. Pride should never prevent applying that skill.'

* * *

On their way back to the Tamanrasset, they discovered remnants of another ancient city, about one quadruplex in size near Ti-n-Tazarift. There were remains of a huge amphitheatre set in an immense public square with houses grouped around it. Leading off from the square were avenues, streets, passages and blind alleys.

The concaves at the bases of the rock walls also revealed a variety and multitude of paintings. Images of round-headed people were displayed among representations of streets, avenues, tumuli and tombs. They also found complex mixtures of other motifs depicting crocodiles, hippos, boats, ostriches, giraffes and a savannah land inundated with cattle imagery.

But it was the image of a strange god-like figure drawn on a wall in a narrow blind alley which captured Hinane's imagination the most. It stood with a histrionic pose displaying mastery over the forces of chaos.

'We are all beings part of a larger whole,' Hinane murmured to herself.

'What do you mean,' asked Izza behind her.

Hinane inspected the artwork, walking slowly along the imagery deeper into the alley, 'All these drawings and engravings we've seen till now are evidence of the evolution of life through dramatic climate changes and animal migrations across centuries and centuries, no one even knows how long back.'

'And?'

'Great and powerful nations have risen, sacred knowledge was revealed and buried again as these nations fell, becoming lost to history beneath the desert sands. Now we only...'

A yowling sound came escalating towards them against the alley walls, echoing loudly in their ears. Hinane spun around, drew bow and arrow from her back, knocked and aimed, all done in one movement.

With alacrity, the spotted cat lunged towards her with a hiss and spit, and she fired. It dropped close to her feet with the arrow buried deeply in its chest. The air left its lungs and the cheetah died with a soft chirp. It had a small head with high-set eyes, and the black tear lines running from the inner corners of its eyes down the sides of the nose to its mouth, made it appear sad as the life faded from its honey coloured eyes.

There were no black spots on its white underside, but the tail was lightly spotted which merged to form six dark rings with a bushy white tuft at the end. It wispied one last time and came to rest between its supple hind legs.

Hinane kneeled next to it, regretting her abrupt reaction and swallowed on the knob in her throat, forcing back the building tears. It was a beautiful creature, so elegant, even in death, and she killed it. The guilt stabbed like a dagger in her

heart. She stroked over the lifeless body, her hands gliding apologetically over the lovely soft pelt.

Then her heart pulled in shock and made her gasp, 'No, it's a mama cheetah.'

'How do you know?' asked Izza.

Hinane pointed to the cat's belly where her teats were swollen with milk, tiny droplets came oozing out and dry dark brown blood spots still visible on the hairs around her puffy gender parts.

'She gave birth recently.'

The graveness of what she'd done pressed like lead in her torso and she cursed with a pained face, 'Damn it.'

Izza frowned with hands on hips, 'There was no way of knowing Hinane, don't knock yourself so. It was out to kill.'

Hinane stood up, searching into the dim alley, 'Cheetahs don't kill humans. She wanted to scare us off. The cubs must be here somewhere. Help me look.'

'What if there's a male defending them?'

Hinane shook her head, 'No, cheetah females are always alone, it will only be the little ones.'

'What happened, we heard a commotion,' came from Bahac who ran with a drawn sword, Danya and Siman following her into the alley.

But the cheetah in the soil told the story and Hinane advanced further without a word, only raising a hand signalling silence. She sharpened her hearing and listened closely for any soft chirping of the cubs as she walked deeper into the passage. Many minutes passed, but then she heard the soft chirps, just like that of a bird.

Only two cubs were left in the litter, normally females gave birth to three to five. The others have probably died already, which explains why the cheetah hid them here in a hollow wall, shielding them from wild dogs, hyenas and hawks.

The cubs' eyes were still closed which meant they could not be older than three days. The small kittens already had their spots, with downy grey fur mantles around their necks which extended to their mid-backs, resembling a mane-like appearance.

The raucous warrior hearts' melted in an instant and their 'aaaws' bubbled from their throats, a totally unusual reaction from them.

Hinane ordered with a hoarse voice, empathy for the orphaned cubs lying thick in her throat, 'Siman, skin the mother, we'll take her pelt as comfort for the little ones. And milk her teats, it will keep them alive for a day.'

Skinning animals always seemed heartless to Hinane, as if disgracing the animal and its soul, even though they always thanked their gods for the proviant. To soothe her conscience, they prepared a ceremony to honour the cheetah's transition.

That night they drew a circle in the dust where Hinane had killed it, marking it a sacred space to send the animal's spirit into the heavens with ceremony and prayer.

When watching the warriors as they prepared the rock altar and fire, Hinane smirked in recalling her conversation with Amalu about the Christians and their

churches. While the Christians relied on the use of buildings or temples to hold worship, they merely casted a circle any place, anywhere they chose, as their gods had spirits everywhere and everything was sacred.

The warriors turned to look at her, the carcass spread on the altar ready for the ritual. Hinane took her dagger, shoved it into the chest of the cheetah and detached its heart to let its spirit free. She held the dark red organ out, slightly lifted and recited the customary chant while blood trickled over her hand and forearm.

When their prayer was sent upwards, she ignited the carcass with a torch from the fire, watching it burn to ashes as her thoughts jumped from subject to subject till late into the night.

Only one female cub survived during the next three days with her tiny honey eyes opening a day later. And since she was the cause of its orphaned status, Hinane felt compelled to adopt her.

'What would she eat,' frowned Damya.

'I'll concoct a potion of herbs and plant protein to pull her through. But the sooner we feed her solid meat, the better.'

The little cub soon purred a place deep into their hearts and followed Hinane everywhere. This was a bit of a nuisance but the cub quickly learnt with a few painful chirps to stay clear of their boots and be still on horseback. She snuggled happily in the pouch Siman manufactured from her mother's fur which was fastened to the saddle at Hinane's back.

The first eighteen months of a cub's life were important, since their survival depended on knowing how to hunt and avoid other predators. Hinane had much to teach her.

While the other big cats mainly hunted by night, the cheetah was a diurnal hunter, usually hunting either early in the mornings or late in the evening since they depended more on sight than smell when stalking. In natural conditions, at the age of about two years, female siblings would leave the group to live in solitude, while young males often remained together for life.

But this cub would not grow up in natural surroundings and she had no siblings. It would be raised in semi-captivity with Hinane, till adulthood at least, and since Hinane did not want to restrict its wild nature, she had to think of suitable ways to incorporate the little cub into her household and hunting practices.

Burn snorted and knocked a hoof when Hinane held the cub for him to inspect for the first time, letting him smell and muzzle her. Burn had no objection and flared his nostrils with a snort and bob.

* * *

The Ahaggar towered high into the blue sky on her right when approaching from the east on their way back home. Its highest point was known as the Tahat mount which stood out like a thumb among a series of plateaus, the Tassili Immidir and the Tassili N'Ajjer.

The Atakor area located here, fifty miles north from their oases, perched

about two thirds as high as the Tahat mount along the peaks of the adjoining black mountains. It was made up of hundreds of towering organ-pipe looking monoliths composed of volcanic rock, scoria cones, craters, lava domes and eroded flows in horseshoe shapes.

She brought Burn to an arrest, looked at the Atakor, then in the direction of the oases, not feeling the urge to return to it as yet.

She tilted her head in quick consideration and said, 'I think our journey calls for another detour.'

They followed dry river beds which would lead them to the pinnacle and after a couple of days' climb, they stood in awe of the wondrous beauty the panorama presented.

On a plateau just before the highest peak Hinane ordered, 'We'll pitch camp here.'

They screened the monoliths for shelter and when the camp was set up and the cub asleep, curled up in her sack with a full tummy, Hinane took Burn through the last cliffs to find some time alone at the top.

She stopped at a high rock cliff with a broad and endless view of the valleys and vast landscape below. She watched the descent of the sun as it moved closer to the scattered clouds that hovered almost on the same level as her feet. It felt as if her next step would take her floating upon it, and she suddenly felt powerful and strong, but also humbled and gratified.

She had never seen anything so perfect. The only sound audible, was a soft wind hauling in her ears which enhanced the mysticism of the place, the sacred ground of the gods and voices of angels, she thought.

She sat down and crossed her booted feet in under her legs, her short skirts lifting slightly in the breeze. She breathed in through her nostrils and out through her mouth, her chest heaving up and down in four second rhythm cycles as she fell into a calm rhythm, her eyes fixated on the sun and clouds.

She slowed her heartbeat and stilled her mind, contentment and peace in her being. Time stretched out in endless curves, and she escaped into a place where the past, present and future blurred together, happening all at once.

Burn's soft cautionary whinny was only a faint sound far in the recesses of her mind.

'It's the Assekriem, the end of the world.'

The voice pulled her back with a shocking impact. Her heart beat faster, her breath increased in increments, her mind scurried confused, not knowing what was real and what was not.

She turned to the voice and her heart pumped uncontrollably, her legs failing in standing her up. She was not sure if her limbs were dumb from poor blood circulation, or from the shock bred by his deep toned voice and striking physique.

Her first reaction would normally be to draw her sword in defence, or knock an arrow, or swing her slingshot, but the weapons were fastened to the saddlebag a few paces off where Burn was grazing on scrubs.

She scowled at the horse looking for support, but Burn bobbed his head once with a short whinny as if giving his approval of the man and continued

grazing.

She relaxed a little from Burn's reassurance and shifted her gaze back to him. He with the smooth tanned skin the colour of honey, with tattoos covering his muscled upper arms that bulged even more from the leather thongs bound around it. He was clad in an unbuttoned brown flax shirt, exposing his bold torso with curly chest hair. The shirt draped loosely over leather pants stuffed into short boots.

He had long shining black hair that reached his shoulders in a few kinks, and almond eyes framed with black brows and long lashes. Growth of black hair, a few days old, covered his upper lip and chin.

To Hinane his exotic magnificence was dazzling and dizzying. She instinctively knew that this man would play the most significant part in her life and excitement waved through her.

His lips twitched into a slow smile and he bowed, introducing himself, 'My name is Chikae, which means, God's power.'

Hinane forced her legs to stand and straightened her shoulders, trying to regain composure.

Chikae grinned at her attempt, his gaze dropping approvingly to her shapely legs and she frowned annoyingly.

The blood supported the life back into her limbs and she steadied, 'Am I trespassing?'

Chikae looked at the view with a deep appreciation for it mirrored upon his face, 'This is open territory, given by the gods for us all to appreciate. But it is one of my favourite places yes, and you're the first interloper encountered in it.'

Hinane snorted gallingly at his last arrogant remark, too late minding her manners. The freeness of expression during the last couple of weeks with only her rowdy warriors to consider was not exactly assisting her now with the much needed correctness when meeting strangers.

To hide her embarrassment, she averted her eyes to gaze at the sun now lying very low, dimming the skies into soft hues. The familiar shriek resounded against the cliffs and Hinane rejoiced as her eyes followed her eagle flying along the ridges, its shadow ensuing beneath it against the cliffs. It was the first time the bird appeared since she adopted the cub. Come to think of it, she didn't name it yet, not the eagle nor the cub, and she made a mental note for such ceremonies.

She pulled her thoughts back to Chikae and broke the silence, 'The end of the world you say?'

Chikae teased, 'Hopefully not literally.'

Hinane giggled, but immediately arrested from the girlish response, and before embarrassing herself further, forced a serious frown to her brow, 'You're from here?'

Chikae caught the turmoil of her thoughts and grinned wider. He had never seen a woman changing so swiftly from feeling to feeling. The golden highlights in her dark hair caught the last rays of the sun and emotions ran unbridled in her blue eyes.

He walked closer to Hinane and she steeled herself, her eyes meeting his

boldly in a fixed stare. He was only a few fingers taller than her, she realised with surprise. As he straddled closer, his body's muscles showed lithe underneath the skin with no fat underneath.

She swallowed nervously as he lowered his head to hers, his breath feathering pleasantly in her face, 'I'm an explorer and trader from a fertile, subtropical land southwest of the deserts, known as the Ghana Empire.'

Hinane felt that familiar stir at the prospect of adventure curling in her belly and a smile bumped the frown off her face, 'And...' her voice drenched from anticipation.

Chikae's eyes bore fervently into hers, 'A land rich with gold and copper, a land of sweet coconuts, berries and juicy yams.'

He touched her lips with the tips of his middle and forefingers, running it along the edges of it to one corner. He moved them down her chin and neck to the rim of her shoulder, underneath the strap of the leather cuirass, then slipped his fingers out and stroked lightly down her arm, over her wrist and circled them in the palm of her hand.

Hinane missed a few heartbeats, the aroused ripples charging into her lower belly with a force. And when he moved his body tightly against hers, she drew breath sharply when the ripples exploded. She stood rooted to the ground, not wanting to break the spell or stop the eruption.

Chikae drew her deeper into his magnetic world, 'Where tough men like me impart satisfaction to a woman's every need and satiate her core essence. Where passion brings courage to her heart,' he looked at her lips, 'and meaning to her soul.'

Hinane's chest heaved up and down.

He lowered his head, almost touching her lips with his own, 'Where love and honour...'

'Excuse me my king,' interrupted the spell.

Chikae kept his closeness, turning only his head to the speaker, 'Not now Afer.'

But the sturdy black man with kind wide set eyes, open face and brawny bones, persisted, 'We must go.'

Chikae looked back intensely into Hinane's eyes, bowed closer and pressed his lips softly against hers. He pulled away slightly and beamed into her eyes, whispering something in an unfamiliar language. He broke the thrill when separating from her and disappeared behind a rock, following Afer without another word.

Hinane raised her brows in bewilderment and touched her lips where the energy of his warm lips was still lingering. She closed her eyes and released the tension in her being with a slow discharge of breath, but remained cocooned in excitement, not entirely sure if the incident was real or a figment.

The whirr of wings brought her back to reality. Scarab beetles came flying in a drove past her. Scarab beetles were common all over North Africa and revered by many cultures as sacrosanct. According to Lunja's scribes of their ancient texts, the Egyptians believed that scarab beetles came into being spontaneously from balls of dung. They associated this with their religious ideology of

self-creation and resurrection.

The scarab beetle was worshipped under the name Khepri, which meant, he who has come into being. The scarab became an important symbol of creation, resurrection and everlasting life in the mythology of ancient Egypt.

In the same way that the scarab beetle pushed a ball of dung before it, the Egyptians imagined that Khepri rolled the sun, the solar ball, across the sky from east to west each day.

As she watched the sun roll away into the west in blazing colours, the appearance of the scarab beetle held so much meaning for her that her hands started to tremble.

Filled with overwhelming emotions, tears flowed from her eyes.

CHAPTER 17

With a dreamy smile, Hinane galloped into her camp back at the oases.

Amezwar approached in quick strides and the usual frown, with Takamat and Yeddes following on his heels, their welcoming smiles illuminating their faces.

Amezwar spoke first, 'What took you so long, and why did you leave without informing me?'

Amezwar was furious upon hearing she had left, and as the weeks passed, boiled over as he realised he stood powerless against her free will. But all that was left in his voice now, was concern and anticipation. When the report came from his lookouts that Hinane and her warriors appeared on the horizon, he could wait no longer and rushed to her tawshet.

Hinane's smile faded, a storm whipped up in her eyes and a stubborn look crossed her face, 'You are not my keeper and I can go as I please.' The words came harsher than what she intended, as deep down she felt guilty for not sharing her plans beforehand, and she disliked that reporting her movements should become a requisite.

A determined look hardened his face, but Hinane could see the hurt swelling in his eyes.

He rebuked with gritted teeth, his voice scorching, 'I came to invite you for celebration in honour of your return, but I can see you're not in the mood.'

He jumped on his horse and galloped away into the desert, looking as valiantly as he always did no matter his disordered emotional state.

Hinane called after him, regretting her hostility, 'Amezwar.'

Takamat took her arm, 'Let him go. Your attack was unfair, but it's better that he recovers on his own.'

Hinane stared after him with a frown. Although his advances did not elicit the same responses as Chikae's, she still considered him as a valuable alliance and did not want to lose his favour.

Takamat's next words sent an electric current through her body, 'He loves you Hinane.'

And her quick response came as a shock even to herself, 'I already love another.'

Takamat's eyebrows flew up in surprise, 'You do? Who?'

Hinane touched her lips, reliving Chikae's kiss.

Her eyes took on a smouldering glow and she smiled secretively at Takamat, 'I'll tell you later.'

She turned to Yeddes, handing him the reins, 'Please take care of Burn,' then turned to the warriors, 'Have a good rest, tomorrow we'll regroup with the others to catch up on affairs.'

The little cub's chirp announced her disapproval of being forgotten on Burn's back and peeped from over the sack's edge.

Yeddes and Takamat immediately took to the cub and Hinane had to relay the whole account of her discovery before she could retire to her tent. Hinane undressed and slid into the hot steamy water with Takamat washing her from head to toe while relaying all the events during her absence.

'And you know what else I've discovered,' asked Takamat excitedly, without giving Hinane the chance to respond.

'Remember the yellow brittlebush's flowers on those long stems we found in the desert on our way here?'

Hinane nodded and Takamat went on uninterrupted, 'I found uses for the resin it secretes, for one, to glue things together. I also ground a smooth paste from the glue when it's dry, which I found is good for cleaning teeth.'

Hinane kept quiet. She knew Takamat would just babble along, whether she listened or not.

'But the best is, I sprinkled it on one of the older people's sores, just to see what happens and it seemed to cure it. It also took away pain when I heated the glue paste and rubbed it on sore muscles.'

She started to wash Hinane's hair and mumbled in a scornful tone, 'Your hair is in a mess, what have you been doing?'

But then continued with the previous subject, 'I also found it to emit a nice aroma when burned as incense.'

Hinane managed one sentence in between the rambling, 'I hope you're scribing it all down Takamat, your findings will be valuable in future.'

'Oh yes princess, but I also found something else and called it Alkhad, or maybe Tadjalt would be a better word, it's the milky sap from a ground-crawling desert plant.'

She paused when moving to Hinane's feet for a good scrub, 'I found it to be a good remedy for scorpion stings and a good purgative that cleanses and purifies the body.'

Hinane smiled, 'You had been busy.'

Takamat giggled from the tribute and then all of a sudden remembered, 'And what of the man you so abruptly came to love.'

Hinane sighed with content and sagged deeper into the hot fragrant water, hesitating to share him with someone else, fearful that the incident would lose all

its lustre.

And when her answer came, her voice was husky and deep, 'I think he captured my heart in seconds,' she frowned slightly, 'Or was it something else,' she remembered the explosion in her lower belly and felt that area stirred again just from the thought and blushed slightly, but then quickly said, 'He's strong, handsome, and a little bit dangerous.'

'Dangerous?'

'I mean the effect he exerted. It scared me a little, and I must be vigilant against the imprisonment of my soul. What if I lose myself?'

Takamat was taken aback, 'That bad.'

Hinane nodded with a sigh.

Takamat asked eagerly while cleaning Hinane's nails, 'When will I meet him?'

Hinane's forehead creased, 'I'm not sure he's even real.'

Takamat's confusion was amusing to watch. Hinane giggled, and not wanting to account the whole incident said, 'I mean, if I'll ever see him again. Our meet was brief, but long enough to know I can never replace him with another, he captured my spirit.'

Hinane fell back into memory, thinking about it, reliving it, 'It's difficult to describe, but I don't know for sure what I felt was love or lust. Lunja often tried to explain the difference. I can only know after sex I suppose.'

Takamat's confusion deepened with red spots forming on her cheeks, totally embarrassed by the forward way in which Hinane discussed the subject.

Hinane continued, 'I mean, only time will tell if it's love or lust, don't you think? To have sex in the first place, I must feel the attraction first. But then when time goes by and the attraction fades, was that love or was it something else? How would one ever know?'

Takamat replied, 'Give it time and thought.'

'How did you know?'

'Know what?'

'That you loved Yeddes?'

The question was left unanswered as Takamat suddenly remembered with a jump, 'Yeddes asked me to be his wife,' the smile went around her head, 'And I accepted.'

'That's wonderful Takamat. You're certain he'll be good to you, and for you?'

Takamat nodded with absolute certainty, 'Compared to other men in the Ahaggar, he's still the best, the one I want. But we need a more secure base, a more certain future...'

Takamat's face grew solemn.

Hinane was puzzled, 'And?'

Takamat hesitated only a few seconds more then found the courage, 'I wanted to address this long before, but you've been occupied and I didn't want to burden you with dismal matters.'

'So tell me now Takamat, what presses so?'

'The supplies we carried from the Fez are depleted. We planted the little seeds we brought with us, but its proceeds are not nearly enough to sustain us. The jewellery... we, we will have to trade it for millet and other goods.'

Hinane sat frozen.

Takamat took the liberty of Hinane's pause to express an idea to resolve the matter, 'Or you can marry Amezwari. He is a rich man and...'

Hinane shot angrily from out the water, the droplets splashing everywhere on the floor. Illuminated by the droplets, her firm rounded breasts and taut stomach muscles glowed ivory soft in the candle light. But the lovely perfection of her physique was totally lost on herself or Takamat.

'I will not marry anyone for wealth. I will not give up my freedom for security. You should know me better than to even suggest such a thing. And why didn't you come to me sooner, this is a serious matter which needed my attention from the start.'

Hinane was angrier at herself than at Takamat for procrastinating affairs most important to their future. She knew she had to do something about their standing but she ignored it, hoping it would resolve on its own. To guarantee truthful and loyal followers, was to protect, care and provide for them, and at the moment she was failing dismally in that.

She grabbed the towel from Takamat's hands which she held out in a miserable and apologetic manner. Hinane covered her body, checked her temper and ordered with a softer tone, 'Go and ask Yeddes to meet with me first thing in the morrow. Tell him to bring the books. And then return, you need to repaint my tattoos, it faded long time ago, together with my integrity and identity it seems,' she added, more directed towards herself than Takamat.

She sighed and ordered, 'Never keep anything from me again.'

Takamat nodded with a contrite face and left.

Hinane walked to her bedside where the book Lunja gave her was kept on a low table beside the collection of ivory statues. She took the thick and heavy book and ran her fingers over the leather covering that held the glued parchment sheets together. She caressed her fingertips over the smooth and supple surfaces of the sheets made from the skin of young sheep and goats.

Once harvested from the animals, the skin was first washed and cleansed of hair. It was then soaked in lime, stretched on a frame, and scraped again, ensuring that all flesh was removed. Then it was wetted, coated in chalk, rubbed with a pumice stone, and finally allowed to dry while still on the frame.

The process was painstaking and required effort, but the result was very attractive. Smoother than leather or papyrus, it easily took writing on both sides, and the smoothness of the surface made all letter forms easy. It was quite light in colour, making for good contrast between ink and background.

The black ink applied was atramentum librarium, as used by the Romans and which Lunja acquired in the trading ports. It was also sometimes called ink stone, and manufactured by a reaction of iron salt with tannic acid extracted from oak bark. When first put to paper, the ink was bluish-black, but over time, faded to a dull brown.

The leather cover was embossed with the word, Tifinach, the alphabet Lunja put together, but the book held far more than words and verses. In the back quarter of it, Lunja inscribed countless phrases that sometimes made no sense to Hinane at all. More inscriptions appeared in dull brown, which indicated it was

put there very long time ago by her ancestors, therefore Hinane revered the book as most sacred and her most prized possession.

Hinane felt a pang of anxiety. Since she came from a long line of powerful and efficacious women, would she be able to follow? Emotions surged as she paged through the book looking for answers. She fell onto the low mattress bed covered with caracal fur, the towel covering her body falling from her shoulders and back, leaving it exposed while tears streamed down her face.

'What am I to do,' she whispered to herself.

As if knowing the answer, the little cub chirped. She plodded closer from where Takamat left her at the side of Hinane's bed while they were bathing. She pawed Hinane on the ankle, demanding attention. Hinane smiled through the tears and picked her up. She sprawled out on the bed with the cub, and Takamat grinned when reappearing through the tent flap seeing them play.

Hinane offered her an apologetic smile and Takamat accepted with a relieved sigh. She took the henna ink and started painting the spiral shape symbols of Lunja's tribe on Hinane's legs and arms. With each draw of the brush, Hinane felt the hidden messages of each of the motifs return, they symbolised courage, strength, honour, decree and heritage.

Hinane stopped Takamat's drawing hand in sudden thought, 'Let's draw something fresh, let's take the old and mix it with something representative of our new life here.'

Takamat smiled with excitement and together they designed new patterns. The act became a ceremonial occasion which they shared in harmony and glee. The little cub added input with playful paws wherever they were painting and Hinane laughingly tried to keep her from making a mess in the henna.

While waiting for the ink to dry, Takamat brushed Hinane's hair till it shone like dark bronze gold and she observed her mistress with wonder and approval. Hinane was totally oblivious of her own fine looks. A good thing, sighed Takamat in her mind. She wouldn't like Hinane to use her appearance to manipulate. But then Takamat realised with a grin, that Hinane would never use her looks as a weapon. Hinane valued competency and intellect more than anything else and would never use her femininity as armaments. Or would she? Takamat sighed, one never knew with Hinane. Maybe she would do whatever the situation dictates and demands.

Takamat was glad she was an ordinary girl and not a woman with standing or status. She was totally happy just to be a wife, one day a mother and Hinane's subordinate. Takamat smiled happily as she thought about her life with Yeddes .

When the tattoos were dry she oiled Hinane's body with olive and coconut oil, the smell of the coconut reminding Hinane of what Chikae said, 'A land of sweet coconut, berries and juicy yams.'

She felt the pull in her groin and let herself float back to that day on the cliff, at the Assekriem, the end of the world, and by some means, that exact moment was in fact the end of her old world, the meeting with Chikae the marking of a new one.

Since meeting him that day, Hinane often imagined herself in physical entanglement displays with Chikae which she never before even contemplated.

And now thinking of him again, made her blush and the stir shocked through her pelvic.

Takamat watched the emotions play on Hinane's radiant face while she massaged her legs. She could have sworn she heard Hinane purr along with the cheetah cub which laid beside Hinane, enjoying the loving strokes of her mistress' fingers along her tummy.

CHAPTER 18

Hinane and Yeddes sat on pillows facing each other. In between them was a low table with grapes, dates, figs, goat's cheese and camel milk. The meal was a welcoming change from mostly meat and fish of the last couple of weeks in the mountains.

The tent flaps were wide open to let the sunlight through, revealing the growing camp on the outside. Still little in comparison to other tawshets in the region, but it was her domain, her realm to rule.

Takamat served the ritual tea and her conversation with Yeddes was light and cheerful. Her soft voice mingled with the sounds of the moaning camels and goats outside which made Hinane's lips curl into a dim smile. It was so easy to please Takamat, just provide a safe home and someone, or thing, to care for. Hinane wished her own life was so simple and straightforward.

With a sigh and a sober frown she addressed Yeddes when their discussion stilled, 'Lunja taught me all about battle strategy and courage. She shared with me all the secrets of healing plants, taught me the myths and legends of our ancestors, the prophecies of our gods, but nothing of trade and commerce.'

Yeddes nodded and let her continue.

'I learned some from our surrounding neighbours and the confederation, but as a trusted friend and esteemed member of Lunja's following, I also value what you know and what you've learned since arriving here.'

Hinane picked a fat juicy fig and sliced through it with front teeth, her eyes boring steadily into Yeddes' tanned face and black eyes.

Yeddes put his teacup down, 'We were lucky, as since arriving in the Ahaggar we've almost doubled the camel count.'

He smiled, 'We've arrived in season.'

Hinane nodded and said, 'We can sell camels to traders for transporting their goods, or maybe we can start caravanning ourselves?'

Yeddes agreed, 'It is better to keep the camels, yes. But what would we trade?'

Hinane leaned backwards, stretching her limbs in thought, then asked, 'What else do we have?'

'Nothing of note.'

‘What are the other tribes doing?’

Yeddes took a few grapes, popped it in his mouth and swallowed it before answering, ‘The men take care of livestock, goats, some cattle, horses and Barbary sheep. They sometimes migrate by following the natural cycle of grazing. But this oasis provides all of that and more, and most of the time they remain stationed here. Only when it becomes really dry, or the competition for grazing increases, then they leave. Their practices produce enough meat, milk, wool and pelt to trade for other goods.’

Hinane turned to Takamat who sat quietly at Yeddes 's side, ‘Please bring my book and ink.’

Takamat disappeared through the divide and Hinane prompted, ‘Go on.’

‘Most of the women farm on a small scale with crops, millet, barley, wheat and corn, vegetables like onions, tomatoes, sweetpotato, fruits like dates, pomegranates, cotton for weaving and plants for dyeing.’

Takamat returned with the book and Hinane scribbled a few notes.

‘Which the tribes trade among each other?’

Yeddes nodded.

‘Do they trade with other civilisations up north?’

‘Not that I know of. They don’t have the means, like our camels, they only have horses, mules and donkeys, which are no good for transporting heavy loads or surviving long journeys.’

Hinane wanted to be sure, ‘So they don’t have any solid trading alliances with other nations yet, other than among themselves in the settlement?’

‘Like I already said, I don’t think so, but the oasis is big, with the possibilities that they do.’

‘What else?’

Yeddes 's face lit up, showing more personal interest in the next commodity, ‘Iron smelters manufacture broadswords, the takouba, for hunting and protection, and knives, daggers, axes.’

Hinane considered this with narrowed eyes, flashing back to Yattuy’s advice that day in the souqs but did not branch the subject.

She took a slice of cheese, ate it and continued, ‘From the talks at the meeting at the confederation, there were several debates among the chiefs on how to trade with distant metropolises. They pondered about traversing the Saharan routes that connected the great cities on the southern edge of the Sahara, through the deserts to the northern coast of Africa and to the empire of Rome.’

Yeddes waited to hear the direction of her intent.

‘Since the chiefs did not pursue this yet, I want to be the one managing these routes.’

Yeddes smiled in agreement.

‘I want a full account by tomorrow afternoon on how many camels we could use, and the amount of weight they would be able to carry. We can charge a premium fee to convey merchandise, together with the protection of my warriors. Valuable loads would require proper guarding.’

Yeddes nodded his approval and caught Takamat’s eye, she blushed, the

interlude not going unnoticed by Hinane.

'Takamat, do you know anything of the plants they use for dying which Yeddes talked about?'

Takamat nodded.

'Will you show me this afternoon?'

'Off course.'

'If there's nothing else, you two can go. Please ask Izza to group the warriors at my tent.'

Yeddes got up, walked to the door opening, but swung around when Hinane spoke.

'You wish to marry Takamat?'

Takamat went red and he bowed deeply with a wide grin, 'That will make me a very happy man.'

They shared a happy look.

'You have my blessings, proceed with the arrangements.'

Their joyous departure left Hinane in the same mood and whilst chewing on a sweet date, she mooned about Chikae.

But she pushed his memory aside when the warriors came. She listened attentively to Menna delivering her report of all happenings during her absence. The manner in which Menna managed to mobilise herself with only one leg, without using it as an excuse, subsequently established her as a significant official.

Regardless of her ordinary mousy light brown hair, eyes of the same colour and stocky build, she managed to gain the trust and favour of the warriors. Her loyalty and steadfastness, rooted in her belief in Hinane and what she stood for, was the pivot of her accomplishments in recruiting followers. Hinane earned various kinds of reputations in the settlement and many were eager to pledge their allegiance.

'We were most fruitful in recruiting. Most women feel, since they are the ones staying at home while their men tend to livestock and trading, they need to learn how to fend for themselves, protecting their brood and territory.'

Hinane frowned, 'Protect them from what?'

Menna hesitated and Kwella continued, 'We also had interest from a large number of men wanting to learn our tactics.'

Izza bantered, 'With your curves Kwella, any man would like to learn from your tactics. Was that now manoeuvres on the battlefield or between the covers?'

They laughed, only Hinane did not join in the teasing.

She repeated her question to Menna, 'Protect them from what?'

Menna looked worried when she answered, 'There's a pillaging party in our midst, in the settlement I mean. When the men are not close, they loot their goods and violate their women.'

Hinane got up, stretching her legs, 'How do they violate. Rape or abuse?'

'We received accounts of both.'

Hinane walked to the tent opening and gazed outside, then turned back, 'Do the victims know their attackers?'

Tayri took the opportunity, 'Word is they come from Atisi's stables. But there's no direct evidence of it. Although, some of the lootings and assaults go hand in hand with tax collecting, which means, the orders could only come from him. There is no one else with the arrogance or capability.'

Hinane agreed and commanded, 'Izza, Tala, help Menna to assemble the newly recruited on the open sand dunes west from here, three days from today.'

Hinane turned to Siman and the twins, 'Go with them, I need to know how many horses we can gather from these new recruits, if any.'

Hinane left the tent with the warrior girls following, but spun around in warm afterthought, 'Oh and join me tonight in ceremony to name my cub and bird.'

Takamat sat waiting outside on a camel. She held out Burn's rein for Hinane, ready to visit the fabric dyeing operations at a nearby tawshet. Takamat preferred riding a camel as, 'It was much safer, provided much more comfort, and its height, offering a better view of the horizon,' she had put it countless times.

After visiting some nearby tawshets, learning the dye practise from several dyers, Hinane returned to the one that used her favourite colour, indigo. The pigment was made from different dye plants, the *indigofera tinctoria* and *indigo suffraticosa*. The plants were cut and soaked in warm water to release the dyestuff. The resulting mixture was then dried to produce chunks of indigo pigment.

To use the indigo in dyeing, it should be mixed with calcium carbonate and sulphuric acid, all simmering in a pot with water. The wet cloth was added and boiled for thirty minutes or until the water was clear, leaving all the blue soaked into the fibres. Hinane was surprised by the vibrant indigo colours the plants brought forth and excitedly came up with a few ideas for its uses.

After visiting the dyers, Hinane sent Takamat home, 'Prepare for tonight, I have a matter of importance to attend to,' and rode towards Amezwari's tawshet, the confrontation of the day before still niggling in the back of her brain.

She was grateful for the time alone while waiting for his appearance in the reception divide of the tent. He was out on attending to his commercial affairs and would return shortly, she was told. She sat back against the pillows, enjoying the rich comfort it provided and fell into deep thought, sipping the sweet tea poured by one of the servants.

What would she name the cub? Amayyas, which was the Tifinach word for the cheetah, the hunting feline. She shook her head, no. She already thought to name her golden eagle Aete, which meant, mighty eagle. But what of the cub? Closed-eyed against the cushions, she still struggled with the thought when Amezwari stepped into the tent.

He watched her for a couple of seconds, his feelings for her conducting the fast rhythmic beating in his chest. She felt his searing stare, opened her eyes, and quickly heaved upright in a more elegant sitting position.

But he didn't move and Hinane stood up, walked closer and took his one hand in both hers, 'I came to beg your forgiveness,' her eyes pleading her case.

A small smile plucked in the corner of his lips and he nodded, defenceless against her charm. He sighed and brought her hands to his lips, kissing it lightly,

worried that he might offend her. She let him be and found his touch far from displeasing.

He led her back to the pillows and sat down next to her. Hinane relaxed while he ordered the servant to bring more refreshments. She started telling him of their discoveries during the expedition and was surprised to find he was a charming listener. He rendered the correct and polite responses at the right times, but most of all, she enjoyed sharing her experiences with him.

Later, Amezwar accompanied her back to her tawshet for the night's ceremony and Chikae became just a distant thought. Amezwar's presence was real, here and now, without the physical turmoil which Chikae inflicted upon her, but nevertheless real.

When Hinane and Yeddes arrived it was already dark and the festivities in full swing, with the entire clan grouped in between three huge bonfires. Torches were lit in a huge circle around them with the warriors' beloved horses standing about. Most of the time horses formed part of their important ceremonies, especially this one.

The little cub was treated like a little queen, brought in by Takamat on a silk pillow of crimson colour and golden embroidered rims. Hinane liked to put up a dramatic show as this was what her people liked, ritual entertainment.

When all was ready for the start, Hinane took the cup from Takamat and invited Amezwar to an elevated seat to observe the procedures.

Hinane walked to the centre and the warriors formed a circle around her.

She held the cup in the air for all to see, 'I will call you Ahina, which means swiftness, as you my little pup, will become swifter in the hunt than any other beast.'

The little cub blinked as if answering in agreement and Hinane laughed. A drumbeat and clashing of cymbals sealed the initiation, the clan chanting 'Ahina' while clapping hands in rhythmic motions in tune with the lotar lute and the tinde, a goatskin covered wooden mortar. The warriors around Hinane shoved their lances into the air with metrical beats while humming in strange tones.

While still holding the cub high, Hinane danced in a circle leading off to spiral patterns, imitating the movements of the sun and moon in the sky, and the continuous cycles of the seasons. She danced in rhythm to the drums with bare feet over the long blades of the warriors' swords arranged beforehand in the form of a five pointed star. She danced not once looking down, perfectly accomplishing the required motions. The excitement sizzled and the warriors became louder in their humming as they followed Hinane in her movements.

When they all stepped from the blades, they moved a little to the side but still inside the huge circle framed by the torches to where a great rectangular pit had been dug. It was filled with logs and stones, upon it a fire was lit and burned until the stones were red-hot.

Hinane handed Ahina to Takamat and paraded with her warriors around the pit seven times while they resumed the humming. The rest of her people looked upon them with shining eyes, eagerly anticipating what was to follow.

Next, Amezwar became witness to something unexplainable, an occurrence he would never entirely understand. To him it was magic. But to the warriors it

was part of their teachings, their skills, their inborn inheritance.

They formed a circle once again, humming and chanting, their eyes casted upwards, 'Wood breathes, alike the vital force. Wood supports, alike the vital force. Wood fires, alike the vital force.'

Hinane took the palm tree leaves that lay beside the pit and dusted off the stones while they chanted, 'Stones a might, alike the vital force. Stones a lava, alike the vital force. Stones a metamorphic, alike the vital force.'

Hinane stepped to the head of the pit and the humming became louder. She held out her hands above her head, palms facing to the skies while walking calmly over the bed of red hot fire coals with bare feet.

Yeddes caught his breath as he watched, and shot up, almost running closer to get a better view at the side of the pit, his hand stretched out to prevent Hinane from entering the hotbed, but nobody paid him any attention.

Hinane's feet left black tracks which quickly disappeared and glowed red again moments after she lifted them. Made slightly misty and unreal by the heat waves and smoke rising all about her, she seemed more like a phantasm than woman.

As she arrived on the other side, the onlookers cheered her accomplishment with drumbeats and shouts. Her feet were not burned in any way, but the intense heat burned Yeddes' face so badly that it peeled a few days later.

Then Hinane invited her warriors to follow her and cross the red-hot rocks under the protection of her spell. They followed in a single file over the stones in the same manner as Hinane, all the while Hinane held out her hands over them and kept on humming.

As Yeddes stared, his discomfort grew. To him, what he was seeing was improbable. He felt the heat fumed upon his face and the warriors walked across unscathed, not one single blister forming upon their soles.

When they were all across, Hinane turned away, walking to Takamat to retrieve the cheetah cub.

Suddenly a hubbub arose from the crowd. Inspired by the unusual forces an unknown man rushed to the coal bed. A woman tried to prevent him, but he brushed her hand off his arm and started walking over the pit with the leather sandals he wore, immediately taking fire.

He staggered as the heat bit into his soles and leapt into the air from pain, then plunged wildly forward and fell. Instantly the warriors were at the side of the pit, dragging the body clear, coals sticking to the burned flesh. Tala shouted, 'Stupid imbecile.'

Hinane lifted her chin, then bellowed with a frown, totally manipulating the situation to make a point among her people, 'Fire-immunity is only given by the gods to those using their powers wisely.'

'It's magic,' said Amezwar, the familiar frown throwing thin shadow lines upon his forehead.

Hinane heard the distress in his voice and turned to face him. She ordered a servant to tend to the man's wounds, walked closer to Amezwar, and said softly to console him, 'Magic is merely manipulating imminent power, influencing that special interrelation between two finites, there's nothing supernatural about it.'

Amezwar felt his discomfort grow larger. How would he ever tame this spirited woman whom the gods and spirits favoured so much? How would he make her his own?

And at that moment he realised he would never own her soul. She was an individual, a soul and spirit of her own making and didn't need any man to comfort or protect her. Along with her gods and beliefs, she was everything already on her own. He could only have what she was willing to share.

He watched her with a soft sadness as she returned to the ritual, leading the horses to the pit. His stomach churned into a knob as she casted her protecting spell over the horses. Was he willing to accept such a meagre offer, feeding from the scraps she would toss him? Would there be ever a time when she would offer him more?

When Burn's hoofs struck the fire as he sped over the hot coals, and two other horses following, little wood splinters shot up into the sky, lighting it in hundreds of little red beams, 'The shiny tongues of the gods,' yelled the warriors.

Feeling like an outsider, a forgotten observer, Amezwar quietly watched the women's frenzied dances, propelled by the horses' energies in thumping rhythms.

The eagle dived in and settled upon Hinane's shoulders, its wings stretched in full span, creating the image of it being fastened to Hinane's back, a metaphor for the entanglement between man and the universe's creations.

Hinane yelled, 'Aete,' the others chanting with her, and the cheetah cub in her arms dazzlingly consumed in the wild performance.

Then Izza came standing in front of Hinane, her chest bulging as she held out her arms arching backwards above her. Her stance was an invite for the usual exhibit normally displayed in ceremony for the amusement of the tribe.

Hinane put Ahina down while Aete remained perched on her shoulder. She held out her hands, palms facing Izza and closed her eyes in concentration, gathering the energy forces with her mind.

The warriors started to chant again, 'To those who breathe, air flows alike the vital force. Energy fills, alike the vital force.'

Izza fell in hypnotic trance, her body became rigid and Hinane ordered her to open her eyes. Izza obeyed and watched Hinane's right hand beckoning her to move. As if a fixed casted statue, Hinane willed Izza to lower her shoulders to the ground. While still in a straight rigid stance, she pivoted backwards, her heels digging into the soil, her toes lifting. Slowly Hinane willed her lower and lower and left her stretched out on the ground.

Hinane reversed the trick and Izza rose, still rigid and stiff. Hinane used her hands as a lodestone, magnetically pulling her upwards, slowly raising her till Izza was again vertically posed in front of Hinane.

Amezwar stood aghast at this uncommon sight, 'What is this absolute madness,' he said loudly.

And when the warriors applauded Hinane, and took her by her shoulders, pulling her towards the refreshment tent, he turned abruptly, trying to shrug the unnerving enchantment and disappeared into the night with mixed feelings of repulse and awe.

CHAPTER 19

Hinane was pleasantly surprised by some of their new recruits' talents. At first, some of them merely came snooping out of curiosity, standing in groups chattering and giggling while watching the training in the open dunes, westward from the oases. After three days of putting up with the snoops, Izza and Tala chased them away as plain trouble seekers and lazy wenches.

They had been schooling only the ones with combat potential for the past two weeks now, and Hinane was pleased with the selection, although not all will make good fighting warriors from the almost two hundred in training. Menna would deploy the feebler ones for other uses also essential in battle, like managing weapons and supplies that mounted warriors required.

Hinane thought the loss of her leg would make Menna a fiercer warrior in actual battle fights. Instead, it made her more callous in planning attacks with strategies so cruel it made Hinane's skin crawl.

'And a warrior should never go into battle with just one horse,' she added with a frown, 'There should be at least a pack of horses carrying the extra armaments.'

She further explained to Hinane what she meant and Hinane nodded with satisfaction, grateful that her credence in Menna proved fruitful.

Today, the new recruits were divided into groups, each group training with a different weapon. Hinane, Tala and Izza walked among them, correcting a move, giving out advice, adjusting a stance and offering mental strength. Swords were clashing, the woe-woe-woe of airborne slingshots resounded, whimpers of effort and pain echoed against the cliffs, and cries of accomplishment sliced the atmosphere.

Hinane already negotiated her first trading trip through the deserts to the Roman cities up north, an area totally unbeknownst to her. And not knowing what to expect, she wanted the best warriors, who would accompany the caravan, to be in top-form, ready for any occurrence. Since this would be the first voyage, she could not afford any errors as future dealings would depend on her reputation established with the first trip.

Through incisive and clever mediation, with the proper initial introductions made by Amezwar off course, she negotiated her first transaction with Usem.

Usem was a well-respected Amghar in the settlement, a fine business man not afraid to take a risk, hence his current affluence. And if she could deliver her end of the bargain to his satisfaction, many others would follow.

Tedus, who came to her aid at the confederation meeting, also ventured a small load, and together with Usem's valuable consignment, Hinane stood to make a handsome profit.

Hinane frowned upon thinking of Tedus. When they returned from her encampment after the negotiations, she prompted Amezwar about why he had no wife, and teased that anyone could see Tedus would gladly fill that role.

Amezwar just laughed and replied, 'A clever man knows when he is chosen for his wealth rather than his character.'

Hinane was not convinced that Tedus chose him for his wealth, but without enough knowledge about it, she did not prompt the issue further.

Hinane stopped at a group where Siman was instructing a few male recruits. The men seemed to be drawn to Siman, this stocky black woman with not a shred of fear in her liver. Hinane observed how her sweaty muscles glowed purple black in the sun and grinned. Her sentinels needed to be absolutely reliable and vigilant in defending the cargo, and the practice routine she and Menna composed for the undertaking was demanding and taxing, but Siman added some of her own native tricks in the tutoring. Hinane nodded her approval and walked further.

On route, Hinane also had other campaigns to attend to which would require leaving the caravan at intervals, under the entrusting of a second in charge. Obviously Izza and Tala were qualified for the tasks, but one, maybe Izza needed to stay at the oases to protect her people from Atisi's increasing onslaughts. The mere thought of him made her queasy and she paced faster to the next crowd as if to walk away from the uncomfortable feeling.

'Hinane, how about you and Izza give us another display of the axe, showing us newbies how it should be done?'

The good-humoured challenge came from Kitah, an eager fighter who already caught Hinane's attention as a prospective leader. She held the axe in her right arm, wiping the sweat from her temples with the left, her chest moving up and down from exertion. Kitah was recruited from Usem's clan and was still very young, but she had a huge natural strong build which belied her age.

Izza and Hinane glared at each other in playful challenge. A by-standing warrior passed them each an axe. They raised it and grinned at each other.

Izza bawled, 'Just like the good old days.'

Hinane loosened her arm, swinging the axe in circles above her head.

In jest Izza taunted some more, 'Let's see if the regal life here has softened your blows.'

Hinane snorted, 'Bring it you rascal. Show me the goat's milk didn't fatten your muscle and slowed your arm.'

They engaged into a vigorous fight with moves that made the beholding warriors scream with terror and roar from excitement. After a robust back and forth tussle, Hinane finally outsmarted Izza and she plonked on her back into the sand.

Hinane jumped on top of her and held her left forearm against her throat, 'Surrender?'

Izza shook her head. Hinane tickled her under her arms and Izza squirmed with chuckles, 'What kind of tactics, you use,' came broken up from her throat between gasping for breath and giggling, 'Stop it,' and then squalled with laughter when Hinane persisted, the group around them enjoying the fun.

'Help... Help.'

They turned to the screams that came from over a dune hill. An old ragged goat herder appeared, hysterically waving his arms while running closer, then stumble-falling into the soft sand. He struggled to his knees, holding his hands clasped together in the air like in a prayer, 'Please, please help me.'

'What's your malady nomad?' frowned Hinane who quickly got back onto her feet.

He pointed to the dune hill, 'They're killing us.'

'Who?'

He was breathless and gasped a couple of times before answering, 'Big men... big strong black men.'

'How many and why?'

He shook his head, unable to speak any further, clutching his heart.

Hinane, pointing to Izza and Tala, commanded, 'Follow me,' and to Kitah, 'Look after the man before he faints.'

She waved Siman, Bahac and Damya closer, who already came running when observing the commotion, 'Come along, and gather some of our strongest troops.'

Hinane ran to the horses, jumped onto Burn and raced in the direction the man indicated. The rest followed like a cloud of irate wasps clustering about her.

Once over the hill, they saw horses carrying black warriors armed with spears that shone intimidatingly in the sunlight. Loaded mules with chained slaves trailed in a long line behind. Two gruesome warriors were beating a couple of goat herders, tearing the clothes from their bodies.

Their cries of pain, mingled with the yelp of goats, came shifting towards Hinane on a light breeze that always whipped up just before sunset.

She approached with speed, the axe held tight in her hand, and charged into their midst with clout and fury, 'Stop that.'

The two gruesome beaters looked at her with bleak eyes, totally unaffected by her intrusion. This outraged her more and she bellowed, 'What did they do to deserve this treatment?'

'So, again we meet my butterfly.'

Taken off-guard, Hinane threw her bewildered gaze in his direction. She didn't notice him in her hasty charge and Hinane breathed faster. Chikae sat on his horse with a deadly attractive grin. She clutched the axe with mixed feelings, anger towards the beaters, and a wild excitement in her belly of seeing him again.

Her disapproval mixed with the excitement spiked in a high pitched voice, 'Why are you beating these herders?'

Chikae's face cringed slightly but the grin remained, 'It's punishment for theft in your country. In my own empire they would have been dead by now.'

And then he bowed in mock, 'If it pleases you princess, we can give them a fair hearing?' His face turned serious, 'But they drugged two of my guards and raided salt and gold from my load.'

Hinane answered, her voice now evened out by his reasonable explanation, 'And you found the evidence in their keep?'

He nodded slowly, 'Indeed I did, your highness.' His patronising address reddened her cheeks.

He lifted a hand towards two of his men with a small gesture that ordered to show her the find. They moved aside and revealed the bags of salt and small chests holding tiny gold nuggets in small canvas pockets which laid separate from the other cargo. One of Chikae's men picked up a pocket and brought it closer, holding it for her to inspect.

She opened it and threw some of the chunks in the palm of her hand. The gold glittered in the sun, and she started to ramble inside from a strange thrill, everyone watching her keenly. But she said nothing and replaced the nuggets into the pouch and handed it back to Chikae's man.

She turned to the herders, 'Is what this man is saying true?'

They just stood there and Chikae's warriors prompted them in their sides with their spears.

Hinane ordered, 'The truth.'

One of the herders nodded profusely, he sagged his shoulders in shame and started to weep.

'Then it seems they deserve this punishment,' Hinane turned to Chikae, 'But since you've retrieved your goods, can you let them go?'

Chikae snorted with deride, 'Well thank you, and yes princess.'

Hinane slid the axe back into the loop-hold on the saddle with might, angered by his patronising manner.

She pulled on the reins and gave him a haughty look, 'What sort of king allows such scanty nomads to steal from him. Not a very bright one I assume.'

She wheeled Burn and with a heart beating wildly, rode off with her warriors following at her side, her eyes quickly glancing to his caravan of slaves carrying goods.

Chikae ordered his men to free the herders and to set up camp. He galloped after Hinane, the stallion eager and alert underneath his master's command. When he reached her side, he grabbed Burn's reins and stalled him to a halt.

Hinane sat paralysed. He had been vividly alive in her mind the past months and she could will his image to her wildest tastes and preferences. But now facing him for real, she was unskilled and defenceless in his physical presence. It took all her wits to keep her pose, and she sat close minded, scared he would guess her turmoil.

'I still don't know your name,' he smirked.

She blushed. But before anyone could comprehend her weakened stance, she straightened her shoulders, lifted her chin and turned to Izza and Tala, pointing at her warriors, 'Take them back, we'll continue another day.'

Izza bowed as the etiquette demanded for when in the company of strangers, 'Yes princess.'

Hinane braved a look at Chikae when they disappeared over the dunes. She caught his patiently waiting gaze that burned upon her face, 'I am Hinane, Amghar of my own tribe from the Kel Ahaggar.'

'They also call you the divine one from afar, Tin Hinan?'

'They do?' She answered with lifted brows, but then remembered Amezwar

mentioned the same.

‘They say you have the powers of a priestess.’

‘And who are they?’

‘Your people told my people.’

He enjoyed her confusion, ‘I’ve been trading in the Hoggar settlements for decades and carry much knowledge of the ongoing here, especially of dominating matters. I know everything about you.’

Hinane snorted, ‘How come have I never heard of you?’

‘Disguised as a pleb when I visit foreign civilisations, no one knows my true identity, a suitable protection for a wealthy king. Unlike you princess, who flaunts her wits and wears about.’

‘I do not,’ rebuked Hinane and she blushed again.

Chikae watched the crimson colour on her cheeks and felt his groin stir, ‘Come join me,’ without waiting for an answer he led Burn back to his camp, his tent already pitched and readied by the slaves with comfortable carpets, pillows and furs.

He offered her a silver cup filled three quarters to the brim with red wine. She was not accustomed to the strong drink and the warmth of it sped to her belly and inflamed her ears. She watched his eyes glinting in the candle lights, the twilight already casting long shadows over the camp and dunes.

Chikae devoured her with his eyes, inviting her into his soul, but she kept hers averted, not accustomed to the intense infatuation he displayed. She held the cup to her mouth, unaware of the seducing effect her full lips had in the low light.

But before taking a sip she asked, ‘Tell me of your land of gold.’

She watched the love for his people and land played upon his face and in his eyes as he talked.

‘My people, the Soninke, established the Ghana Kingdom in Kumbi Sale, far southwest from here. We gained hegemony over a vast area that thrives on trade of gold, salt, sometimes copper, textile, tools, leather, artefacts, jewellery and figs. We mastered the art of iron smelting, and have a long heritage of master craftsmen manufacturing swords and lances of much distinction.’

Hinane listened with attention, looking for opportunities that may be presented in his account.

‘The Ghanaian king controls everything in the kingdom and implements sophisticated methods of administration and taxation, unlike here where matters are immature and callow. The king governs large armies with a monopoly over well-concealed gold mines.’

Hinane sighed, it seems that was what drove every nation, taxes and battles, but she was more interested in his status for now, ‘You talk of him in the third person. Are you the current king?’

His lips twitched in a smile, ‘As I’ve said before, yes. I talk of him, me, in that way most of the time, as I’m mostly disguised and careful in my dealings.’

‘Do you have a queen?’ The question slipped out unguarded, and she bit on her lip, angry at herself.

He was amused and teased, ‘I have a special palace set aside for all my

women and my concubines of whom there are many. Eunuchs are charged with protecting them as they all belong to me and no one is allowed to touch them.'

Hinane went white from disappointment and shock.

He loved the way in which she got upset with him, and carried with a more placid tone but which was heavy from tease, 'I have many guards, horsemen and foot-soldiers. Between the public gate and the private door to my palace, is a great courtyard surrounded by a wall. A gallery on each side of this courtyard is used for holding audiences, and even though I handle all my affairs myself, I am aided by many functionaries, such as secretaries, captains, and stewards who all love and respect me. So yes I am powerful and very important with a lot of women falling at my feet.'

Hinane shot up in anger from his haughty manner and the godly status he pictured so lavishly of himself. But drowsy from the wine, she lost her footing and Chikae steadied her back to her feet. The look he gave her made her want to slap him, but instead she sat back down on the pillows.

He continued as if nothing happened with a more conversational tone, 'But we also have many other commodities to offer in trade and that's why I travel to other settlements. On this journey I brought wine, figs, pomegranates, dates, melons, cucumbers, squashes, rice, murex shells for dyeing, textiles and tunics.'

It didn't make sense to her that a king himself would administer the trades and she asked, 'Why do you brave the routes yourself and don't stay to enjoy your gold and taxes, and satisfy your women?'

Laughter peeled from his lips, clearly amused by her exasperation, 'I grow bored quickly.'

'But you have many to keep you entertained.'

He shook his head, 'No, it was just a tease. I have only five women, one main wife, a second wife and three concubines. But I hardly engage with them, they are of simple mind and offer no mental stimulation. They already gave me two sons, they served their purpose and remain only for display as our society dictates... and for the odd entertainment as urges surface.'

Hinane was amused and saddened at the same time. She emptied her cup down her throat and looked for something in her mind to soothe her disappointment about his marital stance and that his life seemed so far removed from hers, so she accused bitterly, 'And you keep slaves.'

He was confused at her resentful tone but answered evenly, 'Yes, captured from southern forest areas,' he looked at her upset face, 'You don't agree with the practice, you don't have slaves?' he was surprised.

She shook her head and took the cup from him which he refilled, 'I have servants, but don't abuse or trade with them. They are in these positions out of choice, not force and often become a beloved part of my household.'

'Slaves bring in high profits.'

Hinane harnessed a rebuke before it would lead to a heated argument.

She took another sip, the red liquid made her relax slightly and her thoughts voluntarily returned to the idea that formed in her mind when he talked about his trades.

And the wine gave her the courage to voice it, 'I want to offer you my

warriors as protection on your trading exploits.'

He bellowed with laughter and then when seeing her face turning red, quickly asked surprised, 'Protection? Why, I have my own...'

She persisted, 'And I'll bid my camels to carry your goods to areas outside your current reach.'

Chikae put his cup down and she furthered an explanation, 'The beasts of your burden, the slaves, donkeys, mules and horses, can't provide enough muscle power to haul your trade goods. They prove better suited for traversing rugged terrain, as I assume the roads to the southwest to your empire looks like. But it is the camel that will make better transport through the desert to the northern cities of Rome.'

'I know this, but...'

She interrupted him, 'Camel caravans can carry goods quicker, and with less seasonal interruption, providing heat in cold nights and protection during sand storms.'

She smiled, her time to tease, 'And judging from what happened today you'll need my warriors to guard the valuable goods you move.'

Chikae was intrigued by the way she tried to push him into alliance, then smiled, 'With some handsome reward to your own coffers no doubt?'

'Off course. And in good time, have my own goods to move.'

Chikae stood up and approached her. He slowly lifted her by her arms, looking deeply into her eyes. Hinane shuddered from the galvanising energy between them, as if another entity was growing by their sexual attraction.

She couldn't drag her eyes away from his lips.

He bowed closer with a whisper, 'I predict a voyage to the north would be most profitable, yes. But I would not traverse the route myself, it would be too far from my empire.'

He touched her lips softly with his, then tore away and turned his head, looking at her shoulder while saying, 'The treaty will bond us in profit, and dare I ask, also in another?'

She blushed.

He took the cuirass strap and slid the armour off.

She inhaled sharply, he felt the stir and cautioned, 'May I continue?'

Asking her permission aroused her even more. She did not equal his obvious skill in the matter, she only knew what her mother taught in theory, and therefore remained silent in permitting him.

He took his forefinger, tracing the muscles on her upper arm all the way down to her wrist, then up again, following the movement with his eyes.

Hinane's chest heaved up and down as he moved his finger over her bosom towards her chin.

She whispered, 'Will you teach me?'

He picked her up and laid her down on his sleeping pad in one corner of the tent. She closed her eyes, surrendering to his delicate but scorching touch.

Much much later, when the moon shone silver-white over the dunes, Hinane laid satisfied in Chikae's arms, stroking his chest, her eyes dreamy, shining happily in the soft candle light.

Chikae traced the only permanent tattoo on her hip with his finger, and she smiled, 'The mark of a woman warrior, the same as my mother's, and her mother's.'

Chikae followed the rounding of her arm, over her breasts, down her side again, over her buttocks.

She frowned, 'Do you love your wives Chikae?'

He sighed, 'I am a king, the leader of many peoples in Ghana. I am bound by tradition to have wives and children.'

Hinane rolled on top of him, pressing her lips against his throat, repeating, 'Yes, so you said, but do you love her, the main one I mean?'

'Yes I love her, as I love my mother, or a sister. But since I met you that day in the Assekriem, my heart only knows one queen. And I did everything to find you again.'

A sudden thought jumped into her mind and she frowned, 'You set me up,' she shot upright, exposing her breasts fully in the candle light, 'You, you arranged it.'

His eyes lingered on her enticing swollen nipples, 'Arranged what?'

'Today, the herders, the beating, you staged it didn't you?'

He smiled apologetically, 'I had to do something to get your attention. How else was I going to meet the mighty princess again?'

The furrow between her eyes deepened as she realised he flocked the goat herders on her account.

Pity for them rose in her heart, but said instead, 'Comforting to know you couldn't be cheated by goat herders.'

Sensing her empathy for them he said, 'I offered them a handsome fee for their performance, don't waste another thought, they were happy to serve their king.'

She sagged back into his arms, and a soft giggle escaped.

Now knowing about his scheming streak she asked carefully, 'You knew I wanted to offer you my camels?'

He grinned, 'No, that bonus you threw in yourself. But that was a mighty nice offer, I'm such a lucky man.'

She took a pillow and playfully tried to suffocate him, but he fended her off with little effort. It erupted into a wrestling match and when he had her arms pinned down lying on top of her, he said tenderly in her neck, 'You must learn butterfly, that every deed, every favour, every interaction, are always delivered with a concealed and deeper motivation.'

His lips teased her, 'For instance, when I thought you were craving my lips, you actually wanted my trading goods for your own profits.'

She giggled again, then pressed her knee slightly against the growing hardness between his legs, 'Are you talking about these dangling profits?'

He pressed his lips against hers and slipped his tongue into her mouth, his intense desire for her charging through him once more. When he lifted his head, leaving Hinane dizzy from the kiss, he peered deeply into her core and said with a hoarse voice, 'You will always be my queen.'

Hinane smiled sadly, knowing that his life was bonded to other obligations,

as was hers. And although she felt a deep adoration for him, she could see no future shared, other than brief moments like these.

The thought pained her, and she took him with a desperate passion.

CHAPTER 20

'Hinane's tawshet is growing,' Atisi's voice grinded like metal against stone, his eyes dark pools that surged over the Amghar that sat in a circle facing him.

'She recruited from our tribes, or rather, snatched them with manipulative scheming. Women and children worship her for the attention she gives to their schooling. She sullies their brains with twaddle talk on taking pride in their womanhood, making them stubborn for us men to tame.'

Atisi tried to determine who was sharing his concerns, but their faces were stern and he pressed for a reaction with a fist slam on the table, 'She's a damn imposter.'

A murmur went up and Atisi took the opportunity for an upsweep.

'I'm losing numbers. The women in my camp learn her alphabet, a language of fools no one understands. Their children sing songs of her magical powers, she teaches them verses of no importance, and trains the girls of puberty into unappealing warriors no proud man would desire.'

Some chiefs voiced their shared grievances, whereas others sat quietly, listening unaffected to the protested accusations.

Amezwar shifted uncomfortably. When the command came for all chiefs to attend this meeting without informing Hinane, he knew there would be allegations like these, and he was not exactly sure of how to react or proceed.

It was Tedus who challenged Atisi first, 'So what of it? Are you scared to lose favours? Or power? Or both?'

Atisi balled his fists, his face swelling, 'I'm concerned for what she's doing to this confederation.'

Tedus smiled, 'She is widely loved and admired. The women and children merely learn from her, deriving much asset and inspiration from her teachings, hardly joining her tribal ranks.'

Atisi shot up, angered by Tedus' disloyalty, 'What of the warriors she's training.'

He banged his fist on the table again, 'She's brewing. If not, then why is she recruiting? And what's her intention by exhibiting her combat operations so openly?'

Amezwar hid a smile when recognising the fear in Atisi's voice and butted in, 'A long bloodline of brave warrior women, descendants of the ancient Libyan Amazons, is running through her veins. It is what they do, who they are, who Hinane is. Why would she use it against us? For what purpose?'

Atisi's eyes spat at Amezwar and he balled his fists, 'Your word carries no weight here Amezwar. You are jailed in her claws. Your affection for her makes your reasoning weak and your opinion worthless.'

Atisi turned to the rest of the group while rising to his feet, ignoring Amezwar who turned red from humiliation.

'I will go right now and wring the answers from her.'

And with that Atisi walked from the tent, shouting the orders ahead to bring his horse.

Amezwar followed the chiefs to outside the tent in haste and jumped on his horse, speeding ahead of them to Hinane's camp.

Hinane was sitting under a tarpaulin tent, helping Takamat stitching her wedding caftan when Amezwar rushed in, the nearing horses' hooves like a rolling thunderstorm.

Hinane grew a bewildered frown when she recognised Atisi following closely on Amezwar heels with the chiefs and their nobles trailing in the rear.

Amezwar warned her softly when sliding from his horse, 'Steel yourself.'

But Atisi reached them before she could say anything. He halted in front of her in a dust cloud and eyed her with aversion.

Hinane bulged her chest and straightened her shoulders. She stood waiting with a firm jaw and straight face, but her heart hammered against her ribs.

Back there, when Atisi jumped upon his horse, he had the verbal attack against Hinane arranged perfectly in his mind. But now, standing here so closely in her potent presence, he was stripped from his original wording.

Instead he sniped, 'We must talk.'

Hinane answered evenly, 'Speak then.'

Caught off balance by her calmness, Atisi threw a glance at her tent, 'I thought of more private and comfortable surroundings.'

'I'm most comfortable on my feet,' she challenged.

Atisi's eyes turned to hot stones. He was infuriated by her unaffected attitude, clearly dismissing his authority, and he was furious with himself for not having a clearly formulated reason for being here.

He looked around him for support, but they all kept silent, waiting eagerly for the expected confrontation.

'I... we, don't agree with your practices.'

Hinane asked with lifted brows, 'Which ones?'

'All of it.'

She tilted her head, thought a little bit with a crinkled nose and turned towards the group with a challenging stance. Hinane could never deny who she was and would never give in to Atisi and what he stood for. After investigating the brutal attacks in the confederation, her scouts reported him to be the only one responsible. He did not deserve her respect and she will not bow to him, even if it meant conflict with him and his acolytes.

The adrenaline rushed and bulged in her chest and throat, as what she was about to do next could be of serious consequence.

She hesitated slightly before she spoke, not entirely sure what their exact standpoints were when she addressed the Amghar that arrived with Atisi, but

went ahead in challenge 'Does he speak for all of you?'

Most of them just stared at her without expression. Tedus and some of the other chiefs looked as if they wanted to respond, but hesitated nervously.

Tedus looked at Atisi, then back at Hinane. She made a choice and rode up to Hinane, bowed and steered her horse to stop next to Amezwar where he stood slightly behind Hinane, facing Atisi with a lifted chin and a daring look in her eyes. One by one, almost half of the chiefs followed Tedus' lead, forming a line behind Hinane.

Atisi reddened. He balled his fists in fury, the knuckles almost showing white on his dark fingers that clenched the horse's halter. With a loud grumble, he gathered the slime from his nose and throat and spat it towards Hinane's feet. His vile spat left a sour taste in Hinane's mouth, their eyes locked and both held the stare firmly in a wordless battle.

A shiver ran down Hinane's spine from what his eyes promised. Her eyes burned from not blinking, but she took a deep breath, lifted her chin even higher and stretched her eyes wider.

For a few more seconds he held the gaze then looked away. He yanked on the rein, rode in against her, bowed and opened his mouth to say something, but then checked himself. He straightened with a red face, rounded his horse and left dust storms hanging when leaving with his followers behind him.

Amezwar broke the silence, 'You've started a war.'

Hinane sighed and turned to bow towards her supporters, 'My home is your home.'

Amezwar sensed her silent cry for support and turned to the chiefs, 'I think we've finally reached the crossroad. We must brace ourselves and be prepared for any onslaughts from Atisi.'

Hinane invited them into her tent, 'Come we have lots to discuss.'

She turned to Takamat who stood watching the events with clenched hands, 'Takamat, get the servants to serve our guests and call Yeddes . Hurry.'

Takamat set off and Hinane lifted her eyes towards the horizon to follow Atisi in the distance. Before he disappeared from view, Atisi stopped to talk to his men. Obviously, she could not hear what was said, but his face was contorted in an awful expression.

Atisi hissed whilst looking back towards Hinane, 'According to my informers, she's leaving soon with a cargo caravan to the north. We must derive a plan to overturn her. She must not succeed.'

Soho, his second in charge, frowned, 'She has strong warrior forces to guard the file.'

Atisi growled, 'Then we must gather more aid. And derive a strategy to exterminate those deserters who sided with the bitch.'

A shrewd look crossed his face as a thought struck him, 'And I know just who to employ.'

He pulled on the reins, the horse whinnied, bit on the girdle and shot forward in a gallop.

Atisi's mocking laughter darted upon the heat waves towards Hinane, the horrid sound of it was like ants crawling in her neck. She stared after him with

worry.

For support, Hinane searched the skies for Aete, but he remained absent. Ahina was strolling somewhere in the encampment, entertaining the numerous children admirers. So when Yeddes came closer on a hurried step she smiled faintly and waited for him before entering the tent, taking the time to gather her thoughts and build more courage.

With her bold move, she caused a divide among the confederation's leaders and surely these chiefs would now expect some protection and guidance from her.

She sighed and brushed a hand through her hair, the extra responsibility loaded upon on her shoulders arriving totally at the wrong time.

Yeddes took her at the elbow. They entered the tent together and Hinane felt the strength flowing from him. She straightened her back and faced the chiefs with a brave and encouraging smile.

CHAPTER 21

While Takamat embroidered the last of the motifs on her tunic for her wedding that evening, softly singing love songs while working, Hinane was writing.

Hinane was torn between joining the voyage to Carthage to deliver the cargo, and staying to protect her tribe. Either way, she was in peril. A worried look decked her face while she scribbled advantages and disadvantages of each situation.

She rested her chin in the palm of a hand, elbow on the low table, thinking while watching Ahina sleeping in the corner. The cub was growing fast, jumbled in her brain along with the other thoughts.

The tent flap revealed an open view of the sand hills in the far distance and a speck appeared, slowly growing bigger as it approached.

'Somebody is coming,' said Takamat when looking up from her embroidery.

'Probably more wanderers seeking refuge from the desert,' said Hinane absentmindedly.

'Hmm, maybe to join the ranks of the furtive warrior princess I presume. We had a lot of those lately,' frowned Takamat, 'I wonder how word travels so quickly across the desert oceans.'

Takamat was still distressed by the manner in which Hinane confronted Atisi and where it would lead to. She said almost scornfully, 'Your tribe is unwavering, all faithful followers of the brave, daring, fearless, ruthless...'

'Stop the chatter Takamat. I'm trying to concentrate.'

Takamat pulled her lips into a firm line like a scolded child and watched the nearing speck growing larger. As the group approached, the figures became

more recognisable and Takamat could figure out their shapes, 'I'm sure it looks like Amalu with his family and nomads.'

Hinane didn't pay attention.

Takamat got up, walked out the tent and squinted her eyes for a better view, 'It's Amalu,' she shrieked excitedly back to Hinane and ran towards the visitors.

Hinane's full attention turned towards them and rose when Amalu entered the tent with Takamat. Hinane walked closer with a big smile and open arms, 'We meet again, welcome.'

Hinane turned to Takamat, 'Please ask the servants to bring tea and food for our guests and ask Tala to show his people where to establish their camp,' she turned to Amalu with a smile, 'I'm sure our guest would be staying for a while.'

Hinane settled on the pads, indicating for Amalu to take a seat across from her. Amalu fell to rest, sighing with relief, glad for the cool comfort at the end of a long hot journey. The iron disk on his right wrist with the symbol engraved upon it caught Hinane's eye, eliciting a wary pull in her gut. She frowned lightly but could not pinpoint the exact cause of her disquiet and shed the feeling.

He looked at her fondly and tilted his head in a bow, 'You've done good I hear.'

The corners of Hinane's lips twitched in an upward curl, 'You've come to join me?'

He nodded hopefully, 'If there's room for my services?'

Hinane lifted her brows and he explained, 'As a cropper. I heard the land here is fertile.'

He took a deep breath, wiped his forehead and ran his hands over his eyes while letting the air escape from his lungs in a sigh.

He was tired, but not only from the journey, 'I have travelled too much, too far, for too long, I need to rest my soul someplace now, what better place than here where the area provides abundant offerings?'

'You're welcome in my homestead, we can do with a knowledgeable farmer.'

Yeddes entered the tent, his hands stretched out in a hearty welcome, 'Amalu, what desert wind blew you here?'

Takamat followed Yeddes inside and watched Yeddes talk with a soft glow in her eyes while serving them tea. Hinane sat back and listened while the two fell into a jovial discussion of the desert voyage, farming and agriculture. Hinane's mind darted away, still nibbling on her predicament and Takamat sat quietly at Yeddes' feet.

Finally their conversation dwindled and Yeddes concluded, 'It's my wedding ceremony tonight, you will join us of course.'

Amalu accepted with a deep bow, 'I am honoured to be a guest on such an important day, but I have to get refreshed for the occasion.'

Takamat left to show Amalu where his camp was being set up and left Yeddes alone with Hinane.

Yeddes asked inquisitively, 'Did you decide?'

Hinane nodded, 'I stand to lose more if I stay. I must go.'

He bobbed in agreement but his voice was filled with worry, 'You probably made the right decision.'

Hinane sighed, 'Our future depends on the routes I will establish. I suspect Atisi would try defeating me in that rather than attack my tawshet. There is nothing of importance here, it is me he wants.'

Then she added, 'I've also received word that he wants our camels. He reckons they are our strength on this trip.'

'The breeding camels remain and he might launch a bout in the camps.'

She nodded, 'Maybe, but Izza can handle that.'

He prodded with more concern, 'And the countless vulnerable people who would stay behind?'

'That's why I trained them, and why half of the warriors stay.'

'Atisi would demand his taxes, now more than ever, and we have nothing.'

Hinane looked at her hands, trying to hide the discomfort her answer would bring, 'Amezwar will assist with that if need be. I will compensate upon my return.'

Hinane had to swallow her pride, deriving from the lesson Tala learned on their exploration trip during the bear hunt, to accept help from others, in this case from Amezwar.

If Atisi demanded his taxes before her return, borrowing coins from Amezwar would totally put her in his debt, an obligation she would hate to endure. But there was no other way. Until she had managed to earn profits from her trip, she was at the mercy of stronger alliances. She knew fully well, she drew upon Amezwar's affections towards her to obtain this, but she will use what was necessary to survive.

'Amezwar deserves more of your favour Hinane, he is a strong supporter.'

She wiped over her face with a sigh, 'I know,' but didn't branch the matter further.

Hinane smiled weakly, 'Go now, we can't have the groom keep the bride waiting.'

His face lit up in a flash, nodded and disappeared to get ready for the important ceremony.

While Hinane got ready for the evening's celebrations with Ahina playing all around her feet, she thought how everything about her future would depend on this trip. A nervous twitch pulled in the corner of her upper lip and she quickly tried to rub it away. Don't think, just do, flitted in her mind. Don't think of what can be lost, think of all to be won, she coached herself.

She lifted the sword-belt to put around her waist, which would complete her outfit. Just before Lunja died, she said the power was all contained in the sword-belt. What did she mean, wondered Hinane. She inspected it again in the candle light and ran her hands over each facet of the brilliantly designed emblem of her tribe. The gold was set in the shape of the golden eagle, its wings were tapped with leather and crystal insets, eyes jutted with emerald stones. What was so special about it, niggled in her mind.

When the camp was alive with torches and fires burning, Hinane stepped from her abode with Ahina tight on her heels. When she took in the exultant scene before her, she smiled weakly with a little sadness nestled in her heart. The traditional wedding ceremony would last seven days of celebration, and was

a step she would never take. Chikae was the only man she would trade her freedom for, but that could never be.

Everywhere were seated groups drinking tea and wine, feasting off the meat on the fires, singing the traditional songs asak and tisiway in rhythm to the violin and drums. The young women were engaged in the zarraf, a brief spontaneous dance, following their men's more prolonged dancing called tende n tagbast.

Hinane joined Amezwar who arrived in the meantime for the celebration. With him were Takamat, Yeddes, Amalu and his wife, Izza, Tala, Menna and the rest of her closest warriors who were sitting together on lush pads and carpets around a fire, watching the dancers performing the required ritual. Ahina was mesmerised by the fire and the cheetah cub sat down elegantly next to Hinane on the pad, watching the flames turn from orange to blue.

Yeddes and Takamat had no other family and swayed a little from the traditional proceedings, entering straight into the binding ritual after the first dances were performed. Takamat looked radiant and so much in love. She wore a headscarf that covered her hair with a wraparound skirt and embroidered blouse. Yeddes wore a long tunic which Takamat sewed to match hers.

They exchanged their vows and without drawn-out proceedings, their marriage ceremony was complete and celebrations would follow. When they'd re-joined the group, Takamat's eyes glistened with happiness.

Hinane said quickly, 'Now that you're married Takamat, when is the first little one due?'

Yeddes looked down at her with a wide grin. Takamat blushed, fumbled her hands together and mumbled shyly, 'Soon.'

Tala lifted her cup jovially, 'To attractive sons of Yeddes and Takamat.'

The group erupted in laughter.

Amezwar peered at Hinane, his love for her shining reverently in his eyes.

Takamat caught Amezwar's look and teased, 'What of you Hinane? Our princess must marry and have children of her own before falling out of favour by grey hair.'

Hinane glimpsed briefly at Amezwar and lifted her cup, feeling pushed into a corner and uttered rebelliously, 'To ageing princesses and their countless lovers.'

The laughter continued, and Amezwar hid the hurt in his eyes behind a lifted cup.

And when Hinane readied to embark upon her voyage to Carthage ten days later, he crushed her against him, holding her tighter and tighter as the minutes passed. He buried his face in her hair, inhaling the fresh smell of it, and touched his lips against the soft flesh in her neck, tasting her fragrance to commit it to memory.

Hinane swallowed woefully, she wasn't resentful of his touch at all. The safety his arms provided was a comfort she would often think about on her journey.

The gratitude towards him loomed like warm fuzz in her belly. She owed him much and knew someday he would demand payback. As Chikae said, there was always an ulterior motive and some price to pay.

She pulled away from his embrace and her eyes pleaded with him, 'Look

after my interests?’

He only managed a nod as the words escaped him. He watched her mounting Burn and stood like a statue for long afterwards as she disappeared from sight and out of reach.

The long train of camels with their heavy and valuable cargo, surrounded by the armoured warriors on their horses, followed in Burn’s spoor. Hinane sat proud and graceful, with mixed feelings, often looking back at the tawshet that grew smaller and smaller.

But when the oasis finally disappeared from sight, Hinane grew more and more excited of their quest. And the further she rode, the lighter and faster her heart bounced, as not far from there, at the Assekriem, Chikae waited to entrust her with his precious yellow metal and ivory.

But it was not the goods and the thought of profits that pushed the flush to her cheeks. It was the anticipation of sharing one last night before they would split, Chikae returning to his kingdom in the dark south, and she into the unknown territories towards the breadbaskets of the Roman empire.

First she would go to Tunis in Carthage, and Regio Tripolitana the region incorporating the three cities Oea, Sabratha and Leptis Magna, and then further east along the northern Africa coast to Benghazi, the chief centre of Cyrenaica.

Hinane spurred Burn along. The journey was like a long adventure stretching up ahead. Aete showed the way and Ahina sat elegantly behind her as if she was guarding her rear.

The excitement rushed through Hinane’s veins and lightened her heart. She felt happy and free.

CHAPTER 22

Atisi’s voice was gruff from anger when he bellowed, ‘If you don’t come willingly, I’ll take your village as slaves and force you to submission.’

His dark eyes were like two smouldering lava pools, but the black Hausa chief stood motionless, seemingly unaffected by the outburst, only his eyes shining with glazed hatred.

Atisi’s face hardened into cold rock. He swiftly raised his broadsword with the sharp point pushing lightly against the throat of the Hausa king.

‘He does not understand our lingo,’ reminded Soho as he prompted their interpreter with a thrust of the elbow to continue relaying what Atisi had said.

‘I know what he says,’ came broken from the man at the point of the sword. It was the first time he spoke during their discourse.

‘I care not for your demands, it is not my fight.’

He met Atisi’s boiling eyes without fear and held it tight, almost mesmerising Atisi into slower movements like that of a cobra snake.

Nokoto was his name. He was chief and protector of this small village on the southern edge of the Sahel, far south from the Tamanrasset oases. The Sahel was a region of semi-arid grasslands, savannahs, steppes and thorn scrublands lying between the forests of the south and the Sahara to the north. It stretched from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Red Sea in the east in a belt several hundred miles wide.

Atisi traversed across the Sahel where a series of Sahelian kingdoms and empires were centred, looking for strong warriors to join his forces against Hinane.

The Sahelian states did not expand further south into the forest zones as they wished not to be burdened by the humid heat and diseases of the region. But besides that, they preferred staying on the arid seams of the semi-deserts which held no economical attraction for their enemies so their homes and lands could remain unclaimed.

The Hausa peoples, originally from Nubia, occupied fertile lands in the south, directly beneath the Ahaggar mountains along the southern edges of the Sahel near permanent river water sources where they intermixed with the local tribes. Subsequently, the Hausa emerged as the new power in the region with the decline of the Nok and Sokoto nations, who controlled the area until two hundred years before.

The Hausa was a little different from earlier settlements. They were multi-ethnic, fortified, and each village seated with a king who was recognised as the superior power within their immediate surrounding areas. They were avid fighters, brave in their quests with bold and courageous onslaughts.

Nokoto, one of the powerful and feared kings among the Hausa, bore the evidence of many fights with a scar from his left eyebrow to the left side of his square jaw and down to his collarbone, the grey and pink line deeply edged in his black face. His chest and upper arms were covered in several other scars and around his wrists he wore trophies of the hunt, teeth and claws from caracal cats, and different types of little bones in a string around his neck.

Bright coloured bird feathers adorned his headdress and leather straps, with long cattle tail hair dangling to below were bound around his bulky upper arms. Around his middle was a strapped loin cloth made of cattle hide covering his front and rear with his upper torso totally exposed. His primitive appearance was a complete contrast to the traditional wear of the Tamazight.

His six wives standing behind him, anxiously observing the conflict in the open communal area in between their huts, were topless. They only wore a cloth skirt around their waists and were covered with white body paint depicting different motifs. In calabashes next to them were mixtures of blood and milk for nourishment.

The Hausa did not overexert in eating meat since they measured their wealth by the number of animals they owned. And judging from the goats, sheep and their treasured cattle grazing on crops growing in neat fields along the edges of the small settlement, it was evident that Nokoto was a very rich man.

As with many Hausa kings, reciprocity was important to Nokoto and he was particularly known for being extremely generous. But none of it was now

displayed towards this unpleasant man who stood before him.

The talking drums communicated long before this day of his appearance, telling that this dark fat man from the north brought with him only devastation and cruelty. And even now, as they stood wordlessly confronting each other, the talking drums sent the current events ahead.

The drum storytellers, the griots, beat feverishly on the hourglass-shaped instruments with an animal hide drum-head on each end, and leather cords running along the sides of the drum body. The griots held the drums underneath their arms, squeezing and releasing with intervals to emit a range of different pitches while hitting it with a bent stick.

To add excitement as events unfolded in drama and tension, drums shaped in several animal forms, the Igbo, with hollow chambers and long narrow openings in the body, were struck by heavy wooden drum sticks. Their deep sounds vibrated through the air, blending with the percussive tones of the shekere, a gourd covered with a net and decorated with seeds and beads, which were shaken against the hands of the maidens that sat at the feet of the griots.

The drums' messages that reached Nokoto's tribe from out the north, communicated how Atisi attempted to recruit men from the empires to fight against the white warrior woman from afar, the woman acknowledged by their shaman elders as sacred and favoured by the Gods.

Anyone that would stand against her, faced many generations of ill fortune and would cause the desert snakes to infest their villages, consume all the water from rivers and wells, and devour their peoples alive.

Atisi's campaign first led him to the Kanem empire. The Kanem were formed by the refugees from the collapsed Assyrian empire in the far northeast, and exiles from the lost state of Agisymba in the southwest.

The Kanem declined his proposal and the fat man ventured further into the territory of the mysterious Bura-Asinda in the southwest Sahel. But his failed negotiation with the vicious and gruesome king led him to Nokoto's clan in desperation, it was his last chance to succeed.

Atisi came to realise he had nothing the southern tribes would want and no leverage to employ them. They had their own lands, their own riches, their own beliefs and laws. Being powerless infuriated him and he decided to use a new strategy.

'Stop that pounding noise,' shouted Atisi with his head slightly turned towards the drummers, one eye glancing towards them and the other still fixated on Nokoto. Atisi had enough of these savages and their primitive customs and the drums pulled on his nerves.

He shouted again, his voice shaking with wrath, 'Do as I say. Still the drums.'

Nokoto lifted his right arm, but did not give the order to stifle the drums and the beating crescendoed. One of his men on his right threw an assegai towards him, and the one on the left, his shield. Nokoto caught them without a glance, just instinctively knowing where the weapons would be in mid-air.

Atisi grimaced, 'You want to fight me with a zagaya?'

The light spear in Nokoto's hand was of a wooden shaft and pointed with an iron spearhead. It was shaped like a barbed triangle with serrated edges, hardly

a weapon that equaled Atisi's broadsword.

But Atisi learnt from the past few weeks, never to underestimate the talent in which these savages could wield their armaments and he waited vigilantly. Atisi had the advantage of the bladed length of his sword, but the short spear could prickle quickly, piercing into flesh fast and deep.

The men that accompanied Atisi on his pursuit, quietly surrounded the village when they first approached, and already stood ready. Nokoto's men were smaller in number, but they were fit and fast.

Atisi acted. He thrust and punched forward with his sword arm. But Nokoto was prepared. He lifted the shield towards Atisi's face to limit his vision and to block his weapon. He jabbed the short spear from the outside of his right hip, spitting a defence like a snake.

But Atisi was faster and he knocked the shield away, then the assegai, and moved in to reach Nokoto's exposed flank. This set off Nokoto's men into a screaming outbreak and they swarmed from all over to attack Atisi's men with assegai, spear and hideous facial expressions. A frantic combat between Hausa and Tamazight erupted.

Atisi lunged-step forward, flattening his flabby body as far as possible to dodge Nokoto's next spear thrust. He shifted his rear foot diagonally forward so that it was in line with his front foot and the tip of Nokoto's weapon. The move brought his body out of the direct forward thrust-path of the expected spear, achieving an angular attack and evasion both at once.

Because Nokoto's weapon was shorter and more manoeuvrable, the angle of his next downward thrust was hardly noticeable, and the tip pierced into Atisi's upper leg.

Although he meant to bury it deep with force, Atisi's sword deflected it slightly with a circular motion and the spear fell to the side. But it still drew blood and the rage pushed red specks behind Atisi's eyeballs which made him attack with bile rancour.

After a lengthy bout, Atisi finally managed to overpower Nokoto and he collapsed when Atisi thrust his sword through his waist side, the tip of the blade extruding at the rear. Behind them, speared bodies were swarmed up amidst ones with long robes and swords. The battle became a blur of bladed motion, blood and screams.

No matter how bravely they tried, the Hausa was not adept enough for Atisi's troops and slowly the Tamazight gained the advantage and control, forcing the savages to surrender. Atisi captured all those who survived with all their women and children. He manacled and bonded them into long connected lines between two long sturdy sticks, roping their necks tightly to it.

Atisi's men bound Nokoto's wounds and threw him on the back of Soho's horse to be kept alive.

'A snake without a head is useless,' snarled Atisi when he gave the order. 'We need him to order his men.'

Atisi moved the slave column on foot, driving them along by flogging the cowhide whips which he raided from the village, over their heads and shoulders. Alongside the slave column, his men drove the livestock, the spoils and

treasures of the battle, a handsome addition to Atisi's assets.

The days passed in pressing heat as they moved into the deserts up north back to the oasis. Atisi's whip blows and threats continuously lashed out over the slaves, leaving them to bleed and suffer with no food and water. Even Soho was aghast by the barbaric treatment he displayed and strands of Atisi's atrocity pulled in his heart.

'They are thirsty, tired and hungry Atisi. If you don't give the order for food and rest, they will all die.'

Atisi exploded into a vile laughter and flogged again over the captured heads with a thrash, tearing through flesh that stirred painful yelps from the victims.

'March you bloody savages. Those who perish, I need not. Those who live would be considered worthy enough to rise against the white witch.'

'If we can replenish the strength to their frail bodies you ass,' flitted through Soho's mind but did not dare say it loudly.

Nokoto, stirring now and then in a haze, whispered softly, the words in his unfamiliar language muted to any ears, 'You only took a handful of us you fat fool, not nearly enough to face that white warrior woman. She will kill us all.'

The drums foretold, all the Gods governing east to west, bestowed special powers upon her. Nokoto shivered and fell into another deep sleep, his last vision of his six wives fastened in front of the column, their eyes swollen closed, their lips cracked from the sun, and blood trickled from the wounds on their shaven heads, necks and shoulders.

His children stopped weeping long ago, as each whimper tossed another whiplash across their blood sodden and frail torsos. They stumbled along at their mother's sides, their small hands clenched tightly into their mothers' fists as if it was the only thing keeping them fastened to life.

Flies caked on the mucus flowing from their nostrils and mouths. It was only the hatred for Atisi smouldering inside of him that kept Nokoto from dying.

CHAPTER 23

The hideous stench pricked in her nostrils and Hinane recoiled with disgust. The sea snails that caused the smell were collected from the Mediterranean ocean and left to decompose in large vats for mass-production of Tyrian purple, an extremely treasured dye, and one of the most highly valued commodities of the Western Roman Empire, especially in Carthage.

Carthage also produced a less-valuable crimson pigment from the kermes, a scale insect local to the area. But this was not nearly as coveted as the Tyrian

purple which was exported to all the cities of Rome.

The art of the Tyrian dyeing practice was adopted from the city Tyre, and its produce was worth fifteen to twenty times its weight in gold. Prized above all others, it was used in garments worn for ritual and ceremonial purposes by high Roman officials. Although they could only afford togas with a small stripe of Tyrian purple, it still flaunted their status and command.

One type of murex shell snail specie secreted an indigo dye substance called tekhelet, and another specie secreted a purple-red dye. Together when successfully blended, the blackish-blood colour stained to a rich purple. The colour was achieved by double-dipping the cloth, firstly in the indigo, then in the purple-red dyes.

The snails secreted the waxy substance when being poked, just as in nature where the snails released the colour as part of their predatory behaviour. Hinane watched as the dye makers milked the little creatures which was a time consuming process.

'It takes twelve thousand snails to yield just a little over one scruple of pure dye, enough to colour only the trim of a single garment. Indeed an item of luxury trade.'

Hinane turned to the voice behind her, catching only a glimpse of his beard stapled chin when staring at his chest covered with short red-copper curls.

He was much taller than Hinane, and her eyes had to move upwards to his friendly broad face dotted with freckles and framed by golden red flaming hair locks that reached his shoulders. He had a slightly pointed chin, well-formed lips and teeth, wide forehead and a gigantic torso clad in buckskin tog. He stood solid with strong long legs fitted with leather trousers and boots.

He folded his big arms behind his back with a little bend of his chest, 'I am Tuberon my sweet, what do people call you?'

Hinane smirked at the forward introduction, but instantly liked his brashness and returned his greet in a playful fashion, 'Hinane sire.'

He had been watching her closely since she moved into his view, observing her avid interest in the dying practises. He took her by the elbow and led her through the dyers' stalls, all awhile describing exactly what they were doing.

The most favourable season for harvesting the shellfish from the ocean was after the rising of the Dog-star. Or else, just before spring before they discharged their waxy secretion. After the juice was drained, the veins were extracted and salt was added, a sextarius of about one obolus to every hundred pounds of juice.

It was then left to steep for three days, nothing more, for the fresher they were, the greater virtue in the liquid. It was then set to boil in lead vessels, every hundred amphora jars were boiled down to five hundred pounds of dye at moderate heat. For this the vessel was placed at the end of a long funnel that was connected with the furnace. While boiling, the liquid was skimmed from time to time in removing any flesh that adhered to the veins.

About on the tenth day, the contents of the cauldron were boiled into a liquefied state. A clean grease-free fleece was plunged into it as a test, but until the colour satisfied the wishes of those preparing it, the liquid was still kept on

the boil.

Once ready, the textiles were left to soak for five hours in the first of the dual colouring process, the indigo dye, and then, after carding it, was thrown in again until it fully embodied the colour.

'This is just as exquisite as the purple,' said Hinane admiringly whilst stroking over some of the fabrics just lifted from the first dying process, only stained with the indigo blue.

She continued softly in thought, 'Indigo carries the blue light rays of the light spectrum throughout one's being. It absorbs the mental energies that obstruct intuition and cloud the mind. Through its profound resonance, it builds bridges between intuition and conscious awareness so we may better hear the whisperings of our souls.'

'Absolutely. And you know this, how?' exalted Tuberon.

Hinane smiled with reserve, 'My mother,' but did not offer more details.

Tuberon straightened his back and challenged with a mild and friendly stance, 'And purple rays ease our passage through the next spiritual gateway. It enriches our emotional lives and encourages a healthy balance of expression.'

'You certainly are well informed,' she laughed with surprise that he shared knowledge of the spiritual meanings of colour. Hinane's interest in him was pricked and she studied him more carefully.

He smiled at her and invited, 'Hungry?'

And without waiting for an answer, he led her through the crowds to a tavern where the smell of juicy pork legs met them at the door. Only when the tasty smell pricked in her nostrils and the sight of it feasted in her eyes, did she realise how hungry she was.

She left her encampment on the far outskirts of Carthaginian territory early that morning to investigate the city markets, and the excitement she enlivened since then smothered anything else.

The trip from the oasis was uneventful, mundane and dreary with no dangers or attacks. Unlike her first journey into the deserts, as this time they were fully prepared for the terrain and its hardships. Even the expected assault from Atisi did not come, and as she neared the cities of Rome, the more relaxed and excited she became. Firstly, she needed to investigate how trade and economics worked here before starting to trade with the contracted goods she brought along.

Earlier on, Tuberon only threw a cautious glance at her warrior dress but now he studied her more intensely as the thoughts played in her eyes. His eyes brushed over her, from the henna tattoos on her limbs, over the leather cuirass protecting her curvy bosom, down to the leather straps of her boots.

His stare did not make her feel uncomfortable and she waited patiently for his comment. She realised from what she saw so far, that she stood out from the other girls on the streets and working in the markets, and she knew she attracted a lot of attention.

Carthage was of all sorts, people coming from different cultures and civilisations and she did not think that what she depicted was that uncommon. And yet, she did on the odd occasion move away quickly from uncomfortable

stares.

But Tuberon said nothing, only meeting her eyes with the normal male appreciation for beauty glittering in his.

He lifted his goblet filled with wine, 'Welcome in Carthage warrior princess, you and I will be good mates.'

She didn't answer as their food arrived and since having no idea what he meant by that comment, just let it slide.

When the tender meat melted in her mouth, she thought of Tala who was guarding the campsite outside the city, and Izza who stayed in the oasis to defend her tawshet against Atisi's raids.

She smiled at how they would have enjoyed this meal and a pang hit in the pit of her stomach. She missed Izza, and Tala also walked with a harsh frown upon her face for the past few days. She said nothing, but Hinane knew how close Izza and Tala were, and the time spent apart deepened their appreciation for each other.

To help rid Tala of building frustrations, Hinane involved her when training Ahina for the hunt. Ahina had grown tremendously in the last few weeks since leaving their home, but Hinane could not dare bring her into the city.

Remnants of the animal trade, which once flourished for the sake of entertainment in Roman's gladiator coliseums, still lingered. The practice was however declining significantly due to the scarcity of suitable wild animals for sparring in the gruesome sport. Hence, the value for animals like her cheetah would fetch premium rates, and Hinane did not want to elicit any interest in the feral cat.

Tuberon clashed his goblet on the table a few times to attract the attention of the barmaid for a refill. Hinane studied Tuberon while he stared, with boyish interest, at the half exposed bosom of the girl while she filled his chalice. Hinane's eyes stayed fixed on the fine patterns on the silver goblet, her interest immediately spiked.

She stole Tuberon's attention from the girl, 'Tell me what you know of the people here, their history and industries, my knowledge on the subject is rather thin.'

Tuberon swallowed the wine, wiped his mouth and started talking.

After 1000BC with the arrival of first the Phoenicians, and only much later the Romans, the population of the Maghreb rose, bringing the rest of North Africa into civilisation. As a result, by 200AD there were as many people between Libya and Morocco as there were in Egypt. Egypt and the Maghreb together contained about half of the African total. However, the harsh climate and primitive lifestyle caused industry and economy to grow very slowly.

The Roman province of North Africa eventually came into being and Carthage and other large cities in the region erupted. Cities such as Hadrumetum which was located sixty-four leagues south of Tunis on the Gulf of Hammamet in the Mediterranean Sea, and Hippo Regius a city further south near the river Seybouse.

The North African province, Rome's first African colony, Africa Proconsularis or Africa Vetus, was established by the Roman Republic in

146BC, following the third Punic War. The province was governed by a proconsul, which was established in the most fertile part of Carthaginian territory. Utica, a city northwest of Carthage, was formed as the administrative capital and the remaining territory was left in the domain of the Numidian king Massinissa.

At this time, the Roman policy in Africa was simply to prevent another great power from rising on the far side of Sicily. In 27BC, when the North African province had transformed into an Empire, the province began its imperial occupation under Roman rule.

During the reign of Juba II, Emperor Augustus had already founded three colonias with Roman citizens in Mauretania close to the Atlantic coast, Iulia Constantia Zilil, Iulia Valentia Banasa and Iulia Campestris Babba. This western part of Mauretania became the province called Mauretania Tingitana.

Several political and provincial reforms were implemented by Augustus and later by Caligula, but it was Claudius who later finalised the territorial divisions into official Roman provinces. It was split into Africa Zeugitana, which retained the name Africa Proconsularis, in the north and Africa Byzacena in the south, both of which were part of the Dioecesis Africae.

People from all over the empire migrated into the Roman Africa Provinces, most importantly merchants, traders, and mainly veterans in early retirement who settled in Africa on farming plots promised for their military service.

A sizable multinational population developed sharing the North African region with those speaking Punic and Berber languages. Imperial security forces were drawn from the local population, including the Berbers.

What made the Berbers accept the Roman way of life all the more readily, was that the Romans, though a colonising people who captured their lands by the might of their arms, did not display any racial exclusiveness and were remarkably tolerant of Berber cults, be they indigenous or borrowed from the Carthaginians.

Many North African cities were re-developed according to Roman principles. The Carthaginian ports of Tripolitania were rebuilt to a very high standard, reflecting their economic importance. Less substantial developments were undertaken in smaller urban locations but to the same end, Roman influences.

Eventually the Western Roman Empire, nearly all of the Maghreb, was fully Romanised, and the Roman Africans enjoyed a high level of prosperity. This prosperity touched even the populations living outside the Roman lines.

'Like my people's territories, the Garamantes and the Getuli, which were reached in 10AD with Roman expeditions to sub-Saharan Africa,' said Tiberius with another sip of wine and a big fat ring around his smiling lips.

'The Romans organised a series of expeditions along the northern coast and into the interior of Africa to cross the Sahara desert. They explored five different routes, one through the western Sahara towards the Niger river and Timbuctoo. One through the territory I came from, the Tibesti mountains towards lake Chad and Nigeria. Another through the Nile river toward Uganda, one through the western coast of Africa toward the Canary islands and the Cape Verde islands. All these expeditions were supported by legionaries and had a

primarily commercial purpose, to find gold.'

Hinane shook her head in wonder, 'The Romans are everywhere.'

Tuberon laughed, 'There were only a few expeditions though. Long journeys in the heat were not favourable to the luxury spoiled Romans. Instead, they made alliances with natives of the deserts to provide them with what they needed.'

A wonder I didn't bump into any Romans, crossed Hinane's mind, the escape from Morocco and Lunja's death for a split second clear in her thoughts.

'And now we,' interrupted Tuberon her trail of thoughts, 'the Garamantes enjoy wholeheartedly in the services and pleasures of over six hundred cities in Roman Africa.'

The Roman cities once reflected a prosperous and stable economy, and prolific urban areas were fitted with paved streets, good drainage and pure water supplies. Civic buildings and spaces were built such as forums, theatres, amphitheatres, baths, temples, and markets.

'And,' he grinned sheepishly, 'I, actually, we, have established exceptionally profitable trades within the ports. Over one third of Garamante citizens are located in countryside agricultural production areas, having strong alliances with the Romans.'

Hinane sharpened her ears, 'So what do you trade with?'

'We deal in export products, such as the purple dyes you saw today, wood, salt, dyed textiles of cotton, linen, wool, and silk. Also artistic and functional pottery, faience, incense and perfumes. Our artisans work with glass, wood, alabaster, ivory, bronze, brass, lead, metal, leather and precious stones to create a wide array of goods, including mirrors, highly admired furniture and cabinetry, beds and implements. We exchange it for fish and fish sauce, copper, horses, kola nuts, beads and spice.'

'You sure capitalise on a lot.'

'Ha, that's not all, remember the Garamantes is a very big nation in the Fezzan and we also produce wheat, dates, olives, grapes, and several other crops, which we irrigate by foggaras.'

'What are foggaras?'

He answered quick, as if not wanting to let out his secret, 'Under earth water systems.'

But before Hinane could ask more he carried on with a conceited face in a jesting manner, 'Oh and the most important of course, we developed the horse-drawn chariots which we use very successfully in battle.'

'Battle with whom?' frowned Hinane.

'The territories of the Punic ports in the far north, like Sabratha, Oea, and Leptis Magna, previously, and sometimes still do, feel threatened by us, so we receive a lot of resistance. But we're not really serious with these conflicts because we do not want to settle down on the coastal plains at all, our riches lay inland.'

'Besides, we as people of the desert, and the urban brewed peoples, need each other. Most of our Garamantian warriors had become tradesmen, and because of our now friendly and powerful relations with the Romans they believe

we are the descendants from Apollo.'

His laughter resounded through the tavern and his chair broke from the unsettled shaking. His huge body plunged onto the floor which erupted another burst of laughter from his chest and from the surrounding patrons.

Hinane giggled, 'Come, let's be off, I need to see much more of the city before this day is over.'

Hinane made mental notes of everything she saw that day, trying to formulate in her mind how she could become part of the trade richness offered here.

Another high-volume, high-valued export was olive oil. Amphorae were found throughout the Mediterranean region and large areas of olive groves indicated high export levels and high commercial value.

Pottery manufacture was widespread and potters supplied amphorae to traders of oil, wine, and garum. Huge quantities of red-slipped tableware and oil lamps were manufactured for the domestic market. Often used as a cargo makeweight, red-slipped table pottery achieved enormous popularity throughout the Roman world and production rose accordingly.

As the produce of North Africa became more and more important to the Empire, the quantity, diversity and popularity of North African products grew proportionately. Carthage produced raisin wine, which was highly prized in Rome, Etruria and Greece. Fruits, nuts, grain, grapes, and dates were grown, and Carthage bred fine horses which were greatly prized and exported.

Carthage traded its manufactured and agricultural goods to the coastal and interior peoples of Africa for salt, gold, iron timber, ivory, ebony, apes, peacocks, skins, and hides. The city's merchants invented the practice of sale by auction, and according to Tuberon, other ports established permanent warehouses or sold their goods in open-air markets.

Carthage traded in almost every commodity wanted by the ancient world, including slaves. The slave trade was likened to any business ordering supplies. The traders would request a certain number of slaves and the local suppliers would have them waiting. About ninety percent of the city's population consisted of enslaved peoples. So when the supply exceeded demand, the Roman authorities tortured many to death in the many arenas around the empire for the entertainment of the masses.

The slave trading post they were exploring now was crowded, dirty, smelly and noisy. Bile formed in Hinane's stomach and pushed up into her throat, threatening to seep out her mouth with the acid taste of it fuelling her disgust even more.

Tuberon put an arm around her shoulders, trying to free her from the feeling but continued regardless, 'Desperate slaves try to escape, sometimes in large groups, but are put down with brutality. Usually, there are enough food and water before they are sold to make them look attractive enough for a sale. But unknown to the captives, the hardest part of their ordeal, the sea voyage, still waits.

'The slave ships would come, and the slaves are herded aboard with the stench of dead bodies and filth from the previous voyage still clasped within its

hold. They are chained in darkness with little food or water, the heat and the stench almost unbearable for the six to eight weeks of passage. There are sometimes more than two hundred slaves kept in the ship's hold. And as they die, sometimes half of the original total, their bodies are casted into the sea. Who knows what happens to them then, maybe get eaten by eels and predator fish, or merely sink to the bottom to rot over months. Poor sods.'

Hinane pulled away from his embrace with bitter anger, 'And yet you also provide slaves.'

'Only ones who steal from us,' he said nonchalantly. 'Would you rather me have them killed?'

Hinane knew he lied only to console her a bit and answered with quivering lips, 'Sometimes dying by the sword is more humanely and dignified than dying from hunger, torture and pain.'

Tuberon sighed, 'It is part of life, the sooner you accept it, the better. If I don't provide slaves to the markets, hundreds others will. You can never change the ways of the world as far as greed for coinage and power is concerned. It would be senseless to pass up on the opportunity because of a weak conscience.'

She wanted to vomit, but gritted on her teeth, fumed by her own emotions as he led her away back into the noise of the city. Taverns and brothels along the way had already lit their windows with lanterns and candles, getting ready for the nightlife, inviting visitors to spend their reserves.

Hinane only listened vaguely to Tuberon's dialogue since it changed to light affairs, the despair and fate of countless people sold as slaves still pressing on her temples.

She firmly decided she would never use slave practises to gain riches. Almost everyone she knew used slave trading as a revenue stream, and she shivered just by the mere thought of it ever happening to her, or anyone she cared for. Captured slaves also had families who cared for them, they had souls and spirits, and she was taught to respect each and every living thing.

A heavy sadness crept over her as they walked further down the busy streets, and the feeling remained until she fell into a restless sleep.

CHAPTER 24

Initially the Romans were rather grave in their tastes regarding food, their ornaments, and what they wore was more functional rather than flaunting.

Then, after 10AD, as they spread out and conquered civilisation after civilisation, they gave way to style in a more swanking manner. They became very conscious of their position in society, clothes and jewellery turned out to be important status symbol items and a separation measure between various classes.

As jewellery became more in fashion, piercing became widespread. Ordinary men pierced their nipples as a show of strength, courage and power, symbolising their loyalty to their empire, so did the Gladiators and soldiers, believing it would protect them from injuries.

Romans started to favour pearls, sapphires, topaz, rubies, emeralds and diamonds, all encased in various mountings of silver, iron, gold and the occasional bronze and copper which were rare finds. Pendants encased in gold were common, some large enough to hold a bit of perfume, the ladies who attended chariot races in Rome flaunting it in full display.

Horses that took part in the races were decked out in pearls and stones woven into their tails and manes. The young boys driving them, usually wore neck chains with a small pouch containing protective amulets, known as a bulla.

Roman men wore a ring on the first segment of each finger, a mark of the fashion and their popularity. A variety of robust designer rings made of iron, gold and silver with chalcedony and carnelian stones were common. Women were more conservative in their choices and wore finer settings with beautifully delicate pieces in their ears, on their fingers, around their necks, on their clothes and in their hair.

Carved rings were very trendy. The stone was carved in the emblem of the household so it would facilitate sealing documents after being pressed into hot wax. The emblems signified whom the documents or letters were from, and it became a sacred and formal way of communication throughout the empire.

Through centuries these customs spread to all areas of the Roman Empire, eventually reaching Carthage. Hinane browsed the jewellery stalls with much interest and each shop owner tendered a little tale of the lifestyles of Romans.

These days the most sought after jewellery item by far was the brooch or fibula as they told Hinane. It was designed to hold cloaks and clothing together, it really was only an ornamental safety pin, but the metal workers raised it to glorious works of art.

Hinane loved the laurel leaf designs, the silver palm branches set in iron pin moulds and winged eagles and goddesses in gold brooches and hairpins.

'Take a hairpin,' said the old hag behind the display table, 'It will show nicely against your dark hair and ward off the evil eye.'

'Ghmff,' snorted Hinane, 'No such thing, superstitious old woman.'

But she did take a look closer when a striking young girl appeared from behind the curtain in the back of the booth and chased the elder away, 'Sorry,' she apologised to Hinane, 'My Mother is on her last years.'

Hinane waved it aside. The girl lifted a pendant with a yellow-orange amber stone in a rub-over setting. The stone was secured by collars of gold raised up over the edges of the stone.

She held it for Hinane to examine, 'People love amber, they say it makes them calm. Amber is referred to as the gold of the north but is actually just the resin from fossilised trees. Many of the ancient civilisations made jewellery from it and even today are considered valuable possessions.'

Hinane liked the well-versed friendly girl and enquired about what else was popular. The girl smiled with enthusiasm and Hinane could hear the passion for

her products in her voice.

'For the average plebs in the street, blue and red coloured glass, bone and pottery beads were all they could afford. Most affluent Romans though, favoured polychrome products, meaning exhibiting mixed colour effects, for example, using honey brown topaz and blue aquamarine together. Others loved settings with red garnet, cornelian, pearls, jet and emeralds. And amethysts were favoured to avoid the intoxicating powers of Bacchus, to keep the wearer clear-headed and quick-witted,' she smiled, and then said shyly as pink hues crept onto her white cheeks, 'A popular item admired and worn by the ladies of in the brothels is the hoop earring,' and with that held a pair out to Hinane for inspection.

Hinane shook her head quickly and looked at a stone with layers of reddish brown and white banding.

Her interest encouraged the girl to continue, 'That's sardonyx. Roman soldiers carried into battle talismans of sardonyx engraved with images of heroes such as Mars or Hercules, believing that it would bring courage and victory. It's also used to fashion cameos, which are carved raised figures, and intaglios the reverse of cameos.'

Hinane picked a bracelet of copper coins, each one embellished with motifs of gladiators, horses, lions, elephants, monkeys and crocodiles in silver reliefs, set within a quite elaborate gold mounting. It was unmistakably made with high technical skill and sophistication, and just by holding it in her hand she could feel the imminent power, glory and might of the Roman Empire.

The girl smiled at the changed look on Hinane's face, and said, 'The wealth and power of the Roman Empire expanded across the Mediterranean and Egypt which brought them into contact with many different cultures. So they've incorporated many of these different styles and designs, combining them with their own. Cleverly depicted in this piece.'

'Fascinating,' breathed Hinane.

'I should have known to find you here,' bellowed behind her and Hinane swung around.

Tuberon stood with hands on hips and wrinkled brow.

Hinane smiled sweetly at his comic stance, the previous day's umbrage about the slave trade dismissed. Actually she already set it aside the previous night when they parted, amused to watch him walk into a noisy brothel with another bit of his colourful personality and character unfolding.

It seemed Tuberon was a man with many tastes with a huge appetite for every adventure that life offered. He sampled everything and heeded no attention to what anyone might think or say, unbounded by any conformity.

That's why he was fun to be with, and Hinane pleased to see him.

She teased, 'Even though I can wrestle you to dust in one blow like any man, I am still a lady who likes beautiful decorations.'

Tuberon bunched into a wrestling stance, 'Come one, show me what you've got,' he challenged with a growl and snarl.

The girl in the stall squeaked worriedly.

Hinane gave her a comforted look, 'No fuss we only jest,' and turned to

further admire the bracelet with the heavy coins.

He towered behind her when he said, 'That would suit your reputation well, why don't you buy it?'

Hinane wavered with a frown, 'I'm not sure how.'

'What do you mean?'

Hinane sighed. She was still unsure exactly how exchange was conducted in the city, as some goods required gold coins which she did not have, and others were fair enough for bargained trade, only she was not sure when to apply what.

She had no other currency other than the goods she brought. Also the gold that she carried, which was still left safely at her encampment, belonged to Chikae and he was very specific with his terms of trade.

'I don't understand exactly how the coinage currency worked,' she said with a clumsy look that crimsoned her face.

He said nothing and took her by the elbow, leading her to a clay casted seat on the side of the narrow market street. As they sat down, he started to explain, and while he talked, Hinane speculated about his inexhaustible knowledge of everything.

Tuberon was evidently a seasoned travelling merchant, about fifteen years her senior, and by now certainly knew quite a lot. She wondered about the state of his affairs. From the way he talked, and how he described his homeland and trading industries, it was clear he was well off. Who better then to advise her of economy and trade? She thanked Athena in her mind for crossing their paths, then listened to Tuberon talk.

Faced with many military problems Diocletian, the Roman emperor who reigned between 284AD and 305AD, totally reformed the currency. He abolished the fixed link between the coinage metals and raised the coinage standard for debased gold coins. Debased meant reducing the precious metal content of coins by mixing it with a lesser valued metal. This was of course a form of taxation, in this case a tax on cash balances which would cause the uncontrollable rising of inflation in later years.

The new price of gold coins no longer depended on the gold-to-silver ratio, but on the value of their gold weight, so that the price of the coin could change in line with the market price of gold, even though the gold content in the coins was lower, hence the inflation crisis that followed.

The gold solidus was first introduced, struck at sixty to the Roman pound of pure gold, and thus weighing about five scruples gold per coin with an initial value equal to a thousand denarii.

Emperor Constantine I the Great, reigning between 306AD and 337AD, was more successful in reforming the currency regime in 312AD. He introduced a new gold solidus, struck at a rate of seventy-two to a Roman pound of pure gold, each coin weighing about four scruples gold per coin, or in the class of a normal finger ring.

This coin soon became the standard, and huge volumes were minted in Rome Italia. Even after the division of the Roman Empire into eastern and western empires in 395AD, the solidus became the principal coin of the monetary system. Therefore, it also became in use throughout Diocese

Africae, the provinces of northern Africa, except Mauretania Tingitana. The Diocese seat was at Carthage and was subordinate to the Praetorian prefecture of Italia, therefore all coins were equal throughout all the Roman Empires.

Due to the requirement that taxes be paid in gold, solidus minting operations were only executed by the emperor and his court in Rome.

The issue of bronze coins was of little importance to the central government of Rome, since expenditures of the state were large and easier paid with gold coins. However, the importance and need for smaller denominations for the population was high and numerous bronze coins were minted by local authorities. Although probably not authorised by Rome, it was still tolerated and struck in large numbers, but authorities were strictly forbidden to strike silver or gold coins.

Tuberon held out a selection of coins so she could get familiar with the different denominations. Hinane looked at the imagery on one coin bearing the portrait of Constantine with a diadem hair band and draped and cuirassed bust.

'Coins were an important means of disseminating the emperor's image throughout the empire. In an attempt to make him appear god-like, the emperor was associated with certain divinities casted on the reverse side of the coin.'

Hinane turned another over, looking at the image of Constantine holding a sceptre while trampling on a captive.

Tuberon said, 'This imagery embodies the power of the emperor. This coin most likely symbolised some sort of triumph. Maybe here, Constantine was addressing his new city with a message of rebirth with Christianity and the spurning of our pagan ways.'

Hinane pouted, the Christians again. In Carthage she heard people talk of them often. They called Jesus a messenger of his father, the only one true God.

She shuffled uncomfortably and tried to shake the foreboding feeling that crept into her torso, 'Interesting, but to come back to the actual trade, just to take the bracelet as an example, what sense is there then in trading pure gold for a jewellery piece debased with iron, silver and copper?'

'It actually would cost more pure gold in weight than what the piece weighs,' smiled Tuberon.

'Why?' frowned Hinane.

'Because of the artistic addition of craftsmanship. And yes, copper coins are regarded lesser in value than gold ones, but the actual raw copper embedded in the piece is very hard to come by, meaning it's scarce and very costly to mine or find.'

'Aha, so the value increases as soon as you modify it, and significantly more when adding something rare?'

'Exactly.'

Hinane fell silent, thinking of the gold she needed to exchange for Chikae and cursed herself in her mind. Her desperate arrogance in offering her services to him was now like a scuppering scorpion, ready to sting.

She asked worriedly 'Is there still a market for gold, isn't there enough gold in the empire already?'

Tuberon snorted, 'The Romans will never have enough gold. Apart from the

fact that they need to always increase the number of the coins they strike, they will always crave it for personal power, wealth and to finance their wars.'

'What wars?'

Tuberon's stare was sceptical, his mouth slightly open and a golden red lock waved into the corner of his mouth. But then, as he removed the strand from his lips, remembered she was from a far-off rural civilisation and not well-informed. The African region was substantial with many tribes, nations and civilisations, and it would be impossible to carry knowledge of each one's battles. He then informed her of the Roman state of rule and politics.

In 410AD, Rome was attacked by the Visigoths, led by Alaric I. At that time, Rome was no longer the capital of the Western Roman Empire. In 402AD, in fear of the Visigoths, the Western Roman Empire moved its capital from Mediolanum to Ravenna, which was more easily defended. Rome retained a paramount position as the eternal city and the spiritual centre of the empire. The sack was a major shock as this was the first time since the Gallic invasions of the fourth century BC that the city had fallen to a foreign enemy.

On that sad day of 24 August 410AD, slaves opened Rome's Salarian Gate, the Visigoths poured in and looted for three days. Many of the city's great buildings were ransacked, including the mausoleums of Augustus and Hadrian, in which many Roman emperors of the past were buried.

Many Romans were taken captive, including the emperor's sister, Galla Placidia. Tens of thousands of Romans fled the ruined city into the countryside with many of them seeking refuge further into North Africa.

In Rome, after the death of Emperor Honorius in 423AD, primicerius notariorum Joannes was elevated to the throne. General and governor of the Diocese of Africae, Count Bonifacius, refused to acknowledge him, and prevented the plentiful shipments of African grain from reaching Italia.

The Roman general Flavius Aetius shared the power with Count Bonifacius in North Africa, and after a revolt in Gaul caused by general Aetius, Joannes was overthrown. Valentinian III, nephew of Honorius, was made western emperor by the eastern Roman emperor, Theodosius II. Bonifacius supported him and resumed grain shipments. Because of this, under the influence of Aetius, the emperor's mother Galla Placidia convicted Bonifacius of treason against the emperor.

Bonifacius called the assistance of Geiseric, the Vandal king who resided in the Roman province of Hispania Baetica in southern Spain. Geiseric ferried all eighty-thousand of his people across the Mediterranean to Africa in 429AD.

But in the meantime, Bonifacius had been recalled to Italia before the vandals arrived. He regained the favour of the emperor, and was elevated to the rank of *magister militum praesentalis* and to the dignity of *Patricius*.

Fearing an imminent dismissal, Aetius and his army of Germanic mercenaries, marched against Bonifacius in Italia. This led to the battle of Ravenna which Bonifacius won, despite being mortally wounded. He died several months later, being succeeded by his son-in-law Sebastianus, a good soldier and advisor.

In the meantime, Aetius fled, first to his country estates then to Rome. From

there, through Dalmatia and Pannonia, he reached the Huns, who were his friends as he had spent several years at the Hunnic court as a hostage when he was a boy. In 433AD, Aetius entered Italia with a large Hunnic army and Sebastianus was deposed, being replaced by Flavius Aetius as governor.

Tuberon was quiet for a while catching his breath and then concluded, 'Valentinian III is the current Western Roman emperor since 425AD, but Flavius Aetius is an able military commander and the most influential man in the Western Roman Empire now in 435AD.'

'A few months ago Aetius signed a treaty with Geiseric the Vandal king, who remained in Africa. Even not needed anymore, Geiseric stayed upon seeing the riches of the Mediterranean ports, and he won many battles over the weak and divided Roman defenders.'

Geiseric's Vandal army also overran Morocco and northern Algeria, and laid siege to the city of Hippo Regius where St Augustine was bishop. But St Augustine died during the siege, Geiseric taking the city after eighteen months of bitter fighting.'

Tuberon concluded with a serious frown, 'And after a few more battle tiffs, temporary peace was made between the Romans and the Vandals. Aetius gave Geiseric control of coastal Numidia in Libya in 435AD.'

'Temporarily peace?' asked Hinane.

Tuberon grimaced, 'Geiseric is ruthlessly greedy and won't stop, not even close to.'

Hinane deliberated quietly for a while, her eyes following the different social classes on the streets, the poor and the rich. She realised that, to fight the barbarian in her own territory, Atisi, and to buttress her tribe, her strengths would have to derive from her ability to gain assets.

She looked at Tuberon, catching his gaze as he studied the changing thought patterns on her face, 'Will you teach me how to become rich?'

Tuberon stared at her for a short while, then a crooked smile plucked upon his lips, 'It comes with a price.'

Hinane sniggered, 'So I've learned, like everything else. But whatever it takes, I want power, I want wealth, but not only for me, also for my people.'

Tuberon did not ask about her people and she wondered if it was from a lack of interest, or was he just being polite, or maybe it was just one of the Garamantes' courtesies. She frowned, or he knew all about her already and did not have a need for asking.

His sigh interrupted her thoughts, 'Wealth, the desire of all man. The never-ending need to create an abundance of resources and material possessions, all for the misguided feelings of security.'

She ignored his theatrical exhibition and prompted, 'What do you propose I do?'

He threw a quick glimpse at her bosom with a teasing smirk, 'Well first I need to learn your talents and abilities of course,' and when seeing the thunder forming in her eyes, said more solemnly, 'And what resources you have or can get to work with.'

She frowned, thinking about that statement while he continued, 'All you have

to do, is obtain marketable assets or goods, and trade with them in order to generate more proceeds than what you need to survive. Save the surplus and acquire the discipline to defer spending that surplus so it can grow.'

Hinane was eager to learn more and all the while the sun passed the midday mark, pinned her mind to every word Tuberón expressed.

Finding the most suitable commodity of trade depended a lot on what profits were expected, and how much volume of those goods could be produced, or were readily available, and what markets and risks for those goods existed.

If it became unprofitable to produce those goods, or if trade deals dropped sharply, or if there was market instability, especially whenever war and conflicts occurred, then it was wise to adapt to commodities popular with the trends.

Tuberón grew a shrewd glimmer his eyes, 'Getting wealthy does not necessarily require trade, it can also amass through illegitimate or legalised expropriation like robbery, plunder, theft, piracy, slavery, embezzlement, fraud, in other words confiscation, taking an asset or resource from someone else without recompense and...'

'Be serious Tuberón, I'm not a Barbarian or Vandal.'

He grimaced and Hinane wondered with worry how much of those unlawful practices he employed himself.

He turned serious again, 'Create a value, the need for it, then the product or service that would satisfy it. Keep it a scarcity, you the only one supplying it. Then corner the market and up the price, you then duplicate this effort in other areas and add other commodities, using these already set-up streams.'

'As your markets expand, more and more new opportunities develop, because more and more types of goods and services can be traded at the same time, and so, you start a few channels of proceeds. Your job then becomes to govern all these means into streamlined operations. And of course, you need trustworthy people to assist you.'

'But the progress and speed of your wealth accumulation will depend on obstacles when wanting to expand your trade, which sometimes become violent, for example the conflicts Rome had, which crippled the economy and trickled through the empire and here in Africa.'

Hinane nodded slowly in understanding.

'Then the worst part is confronting resistance, when people refuse to sell, or buy or they strike operations when being upset. What spurs more accumulation is competition, the strong players will exploit the weaker ones, and the chase after self-enrichment sometimes leads to inhuman and brutal consequences.'

'Such as?'

'When the economy expands, everyone can gain from trade. But when it shrinks, then accumulation can only occur by taking income or assets away from other people, other lower social classes, or other nations, and sometimes people are prepared to do almost anything for it.'

He paused for a while then said, 'The less urbanised areas of North Africa with a wide spread-out populace, have experienced an economic decline since the sack of Rome and now seek peace and stability in order to rebuild their means. Industries moved to the provinces, basically leaving Rome as an

economic empty shell, still in receipt of taxes, grain and other goods produced in the provinces, but producing nothing itself. The mob of Rome and the palace favourites produce nothing, yet continually demand more, which leads to an intolerable tax burden on the productive classes.'

'Ah taxes again,' exclaimed Hinane, 'The major subject of distress.'

The sun was lowering in the west and Hinane saw Aete flying closer with the beautiful sunset colours changing behind it. It circled above them, Tuberon looking up with her as it squalled. Hinane waited for the message which did not come, and the bird disappeared again in the direction from whence it came.

'It was just curious of what you were doing,' Tuberon's absentminded comment shocked Hinane, and she realised he probably knew all about her. She stirred uncomfortably but did not voice the discovery of his slip.

Was that the message? To show her that Tuberon knew more about her than what she told him? He probably had a wide network of spies all over.

Her heart suddenly missed a beat when realising that he probably also knew about the gold and goods she carried. Cold hands clasped around her throat.

Seemingly without knowledge of her mental torment Tuberon continued, 'Current taxes are calculated between point-three percent and point-six percent of income calculated in tax units of caputs.

Hinane pushed her concerns aside and tried to concentrate, 'What about someone like me who is not a Roman citizen, and not under the jurisdiction of the empire, how am I taxed?'

'At one percent sales tax.'

He explained more but Hinane's attention was broken and only caught a word here and there as he talked about how the Roman state was losing control of its borders and provinces, and over the Mediterranean seas. Should the Roman state lose any of the African provinces, it could be the worst reversal on the west's fortunes, since they were among its wealthiest territories. But it was the middling and poor populace who paid the bulk of taxes and the wealthy aristocracy grew richer.

'My princess, we must go,' came from behind them and Hinane turned to look at Tala. She didn't even realise Tuberon had stopped talking and wondered how long they sat in the silence which Tala broke.

Tala bowed slightly from the back of her horse towards Tuberon who immediately jumped to his feet, looking up at her with much curiosity and an eager responsive greet.

Tala smiled vaguely, the sun glimmering upon her wavy hair that tumbled over her shoulders and over the iron clips and studs on her leather cuirass. Even though considered rough and brutal, she emitted a look of shimmering beauty from the back of her horse.

Suddenly Hinane felt jealous. The tension of it contracted in her belly when she saw the feverish look glittering in Tuberon's eyes.

Hinane pouted, totally confused as to why she felt jealous.

CHAPTER 25

Atisi eyeballed Izza in fury, threatening to erupt into a ravaging outbreak.

But Izza bore no signs of distress caused by his scourge, or from the hostile column of Hausa slave-warriors crowding behind him.

The captured Hausa king, Nokoto, was still weak from his wounds, but he showed nothing of it now. He stood straight-faced ahead of his men with their spears and shields reflecting the sharp rays of the sun. He was watching the white women fronting Atisi whom he had no personal grudge against. They were forced to fight this fat man's battles and a little nerve plucked in the scar on his face, showing his frustration.

From all the colourful attire he once wore, he now only had the neckband with teeth and claw trophies, and a loin cloth around his waist. His warriors standing behind him would have intimidated most, but Izza didn't even wince, and for that, Nokoto admired her.

Maybe Izza's calmness came from Amezwar's reassuring hand which he had rested on her arm when Atisi made his demands. Or maybe it was the confident line of women warriors who formed a guard behind her that levelled her stance.

Izza knew the day would come that Atisi claimed his taxes while Hinane was away, and on frequent occasions, she rehearsed exactly what her response would be. But right now, she couldn't find any of the prepared ripostes, although her mind was clear, the articulation of it would not come.

Over the past several months since Hinane had left for Carthage, Atisi became alarmingly surprised by how Hinane's following kept on growing, her absence having no downward influence upon it, instead it seemed to increase it.

The fear for her escalating popularity and power was like a gnawing rodent in his belly, scratching and gnawing on his nerves, every day fuelling his anger and hate. It had become almost an uncontrollable force and his hands started to tremble when his eyes darted over the horde of warriors and common folk behind Izza.

He repeated his claim with balled fists and vile in his voice, 'You people stay here in my territory, the land of my governing, feeding of my goodwill. You will pay for this privilege in gold and do as I say.'

Soho, Atisi's second who sat little behind Atisi on his horse, drew a sharp breath and Amezwar's eyebrows shot up in surprise. In the oasis and its surrounding territories falling under the Amenokal's rule, taxation was largely based upon proceeds derived from livestock or agriculture products grown on surrounding tilths, the yields varying according to economic and climatic conditions.

Since they were so far removed from civilisations with frequent trading avenues, proceeds in the form of coins were extremely limited, let alone gold. Therefore bartering with produce and not currency, was the most common way of fulfilling demand and supply. Atisi demanded a large share of thirty percent of any surplus made and expected payments to be paid to him twice a year in any

means possible, currency or goods.

A different set of rules seemed to apply for Hinane and Amezwar frowned, 'None of the other tawshets ever had to forfeit in gold, including me? What is this madness?'

Atisi spat, 'It would be best minding your own business. I owe you no justification.'

Amezwar's face flushed and his sapphire eyes deflected white with ice, the furrows on his forehead cutting deeper.

He breathed in deeply to maintain composure and said between gritted teeth, 'And how much gold do you expect? In true fairness, there is no way of calculating an appropriate amount as you are aware Hinane has nothing...'

'Yet,' interrupted Atisi. 'I know she's scheming with that Ghana king.'

'Then demand your dues when she returns,' answered Amezwar with a sting in his heart, put there by the mention of Chikae.

Atisi mocked, 'She and her felines have been worming their way into my territory for months and made no compensation for the right. If there were enough occasions to poison the minds of my people, there was also enough chance to prepare for this day. I want it now.'

'Again, I ask,' said Amezwar with growing anger, 'How would you calculate the exact amount with no current records.'

'We can determine the precise numbers upon her return. For now, I want what's long overdue, ten pounds of solid gold nuggets delivered today before sunset at my council.'

Amezwar's eyes widened in surprise. This was a huge fee to sacrifice, one which could cripple any noble Ahaghar. He also knew this command was put there on purpose to elicit confrontation.

But he made no further protest and turned to his attendees at his side with the order, 'Arrange this without delay,' then to Atisi, 'Upon Hinane's return, we will settle the balance to be returned to me promptly, as I doubt her mission was so fruitful to equal this unmerited share you mandated so flippantly.'

Atisi's motive today was more to provoke Hinane's clan and the man that sided with her, rather than to claim actual taxes. But because his command was so easily met without the panic he wanted to propagate, he suddenly felt cheated, he imagined a greater confrontation.

What aggravated him more, was Amezwar's subtle but strong defiance which threw him slightly off balance. For this and his disloyalty, Atisi despised Amezwar and he curled his lips into an ugly snarl, 'What a feeble puppy you are, sniffing for scraps, dutifully waiting for the bone that might never fall from her table. I hope the bitch is worth every moment of your disgrace.'

Amezwar balled his fists and the blood stained his ears red.

Up until now Izza made no move. Since the word came early that morning of Atisi's approach, and the subsequent message she had sent Amezwar to assist her, she remained calm. But the insults made towards Amezwar, this kind, unselfish man who always backed her mistress, who was totally undeserving of Atisi's insolence, ignited her hesitation into a quick retort.

Her hazel-yellow eyes widened like a cat's, the pupils dilating in poignant

stimulation. She drew her sword split seconds after Atisi's voice had died down. Siman and Tayri copied her instantly, the sound of metal against leather grating in the air. Menna gave the signal and the other warriors silently moved into a strategic battle order.

Atisi grinned with satisfaction. He turned his horse away, lifted his hand and ordered his men into attack. Amezwar stepped closer, trying to intervene, but there was no way of stopping either side. Atisi's and Nokoto's soldiers lunged forward, settling upon the women warriors like a cloud of black locusts.

Nokoto came for Izza, but his heart was not fully in the attack, and she grinned when fending off his short assegai without effort, and shoved him with a shoulder into the ground. When she saw Nokoto grabbing an old wound in his side and his face contorted with pain, she rolled her eyes towards the heavens, snorted and searched for another quarry.

But Amezwar got tangled in the middle of the chaos and it was impossible to dodge daggers, assegais and spears. A sudden stab from somewhere pierced his left eye, the pain reaching deep into his skull and shuddering through his brain.

He instinctively reached for his eye, but the hilt of the dagger buried in it obstructed his touch. The pain shot through his skull again and he sagged to his knees. Impetuously he lowered his head towards the ground, dodging more blows from the warriors around him, but this caused an even more severe pain and blood droplets to soak into the soil. He squirmed limply from the commotion to find safer grounds, and managed to reach the skirts of the scuffle.

Yeddes, who was watching as the events unfolded, saw what happened to Amezwar and rushed closer to assist Amezwar, and led him away from the masses. He shouted towards Takamat who gathered the elderly and children in their tents when Atisi first approached. She came running from her own tent and helped Yeddes settle Amezwar in Hinane's tent.

The fighting outside kept on going, the warriors enjoying the brawl after many mundane but stressful days of the past few months. Soon, wounded bodies were strewn everywhere, cries and moans resounded in the air, but they kept on going.

Atisi left the action early in the fight and rode off on his horse, satisfied with the profits of the day and the disruption he caused. His Hassau slave-warriors and their commanders saw him go and started to lose some of their tactics, uncertain of how to proceed, and started to scatter away.

While the fight died down outside, and what remained of Atisi's men disappearing over the hills under the victory calls of Izza and her warriors, Takamat dosed and nursed Amezwar as effectively as she could. She slowly withdrew the dagger where it sliced through the beautiful sapphire iris, leaving it mutilated and red. And after a few hours, trying to find ways in saving the eye, realised there was nothing she could do, it would never heal again.

She removed the eyeball, burned the faint arteries closed, caked herbs in the socket, pulled the eyelid over it and covered it with bandages. All that was left to do now was keeping Amezwar comfortable and fighting the fever which always followed.

Later when the worst was over and Amezwar regained consciousness, Takamat told him he was very fortunate since the blade could have easily pierced deeper into his brain, leaving him either dead, or brain damaged. But this console had no effect on Amezwar. He laid quietly for days, not talking, not eating, just sipping the nourishing liquid potion from Takamat's cup.

After two weeks under the fretful care of Takamat, Yeddes finally arranged for Amezwar to return to his own tawshet. Yeddes looked with pity at his pale expression and slumped shoulders when he left. His hollow eye socket was carefully concealed under a black eye patch which Takamat designed, but the void in his spirit would never heal and showed on his face.

Yeddes sighed and shook his head when watching them disappear in the distance, Amezwar's personal guard at his sides and Izza following with a few warriors to ensure he reached his home without incident.

Yeddes pulled the tearful Takamat closer into his arms and whispered something in her ear which made her tears dry up in a smile and turned her cheeks crimson pink.

CHAPTER 26

Hinane often awakened whilst still in lucid dreaming state, waiting for the inner voices to speak and mental images and emotions to make sense. It was part of her morning meditation ritual, and ideas, solutions, and sometimes ethereal substances portraying images of past, present and future, frequently came to her in this way.

But, this morning she was confused with the dream's message. Amezwar was looking at her with one blue eye and one red eye with tears of blood running from it. A creel filled with gold chunks was fastened upon his back which caused him to stoop from the weight. He limped towards her, but the closer he came, the more he sagged into soft desert sand, deeper and deeper he went, pushed in by the heavy load upon his back.

Takamat was standing close to him with a sword held out towards Hinane, the letters of her unspoken words floating on coloured heat waves to Hinane's ears, 'Just kill him now.'

Then the sand totally consumed Amezwar and Takamat dropped the sword in the sand. Aete dived down from the sky, clawed the sword from out the sand, brought it towards Hinane and dropped it, Hinane instinctively holding out her hand, catching it on its way down. Her hands felt sticky around the hilt and when she looked closer, it was smeared with blood, the red liquid covering the inlays of blue coloured gemstones, copper and gold.

Upon waking, Hinane contemplated the dream's meaning with a pressing sense of urgency to return to the Ahaggar. But finding no sensible cause for the

disquiet feeling, she shifted her mind from the dream to the matters that kept her from going back. She scanned for suitable ways in which to conduct her affairs to fully honour her agreements with Chikae, Usem and Tedus, and still turn a handsome profit of her own.

But again, her thoughts drifted to the one thing that plagued her mind for the past two days since being back at their camp at the outskirts of Carthage.

She still experienced difficulty figuring out why that intense jealous feeling jolted through her when Tuberon laid eyes upon the exotic Tala. She was not more beautiful than Hinane, but Hinane knew appearance was not the issue. What was it then? She frowned. What did Tala have that she didn't?

Freedom, answered the voice from deep within. Freedom to do as she pleased, not bonded by tribal obligations, not bonded by love, not bonded by ethics. Her frown deepened. Hinane was bound to Amezwar with gratified obligation, to Chikae with love, and to her people with a pledged commitment to provide a safe home and a prosperous future.

Hinane's inborn and inherent need for personal freedom was challenged and shackled since the day Lunja died. She became even more enchained by a hopeless love that had no future, a responsibility towards a friendship and alliance, an onus to build a nation, a tribe, a community who would look up to her, and a strange new burning desire to build wealth.

And Tala was free to do what she liked, with whom she liked, when she liked, and where she liked.

But why did this jealousy become so apparent at the moment with Tuberon? Hinane had asked him to show her the way to riches. Did she maybe think a liaison between Tala and Tuberon would threaten that?

She shook her head with a sigh, jumped from her sleeping pad and poured water from the jar to refresh her body from sweat and her mind for clarity.

The voice further meddled in her thoughts, 'Jealousy thrives on negative emotions. Take the negativity out and it will barely survive. Direct this jealousy energy into something you can benefit from. Let it push you to improve, make it work for you, use it to your advantage.'

Hinane ran a hand through her tangled hair while staring at the water in the bowl.

'Or,' giggled the voice, 'It's a sign to pay close and continuous attention towards the subjects.'

'Now what does that mean?' she said out loud to herself, 'And how can I get rid of the paralysing feeling the emotion caused?'

'By not comparing yourself to others, to Tala, her journey, her mission, or that of Tuberon's, but to focus on your own as it was planned for you for this life,' answered the voice, 'Get to know exactly who you are, what your mission is. Take only what you must from this to learn what and who you can be.'

With a groan, Hinane splashed the cold water over her face and forced her mind back to Chikae's gold, a subject making much more sense. Suddenly she wondered if the dream of last night bore any correlation to it?

Chikae. The deep lines on her worried face immediately softened into a bright smile whilst thinking of how he made her feel. But her thoughts kept

trotting around, now suddenly wondering why she loved him and what love really meant?

'Love only means, relating to the other's values,' came quickly from the voice, 'You admire his values, what he stands for, what he can mean to you, as it is directly in line with what you want to achieve, or be.'

But what about her racing heart each time when she thought of him, or saw him, or the sweat breaking out on her palms and the weakness in her knees when they touched?

She shook her head to order her mind, forcing herself to think about their business concord, running it all through her mind so she could identify opportunity. The terms of her agreement with Chikae were actually simple, trade the ivory and gold ingots for textiles, tools, ornaments, iron and copper.

Copper was used for manufacturing tools and weapons, ornaments, mirrors and jewellery. In low concentration, it was important for sterilising wounds and water, and treating headaches, burns, itching and wood preservation. Its compounds were commonly encountered as copper salts, which often imparted blue or green colours, widely used as water-soluble pigments and as a hard coating to protect or decorate a surface.

The substance Chikae actually valued more than copper was iron. Pure iron was soft but significantly hardened and strengthened from the smelting process when carbon was added. A certain proportion of carbon in iron produced steel, which were up to a thousand times harder than pure iron, perfect for manufacturing the takouba, knives, daggers, axes and swords. Other uses for iron were making styluses, furnaces, chariots, nails, saws, and cooking utensils.

Hinane remembered with a fond smile how Yeddes' face lit up when telling her about this metal and its uses. Iron was surely useful, but also rare with many traders already controlling the markets, asking ridiculous fees. And her promise of obtaining it was also exactly the reason why Usem and Tedus entrusted their goods and fortunes to her.

But where would she find iron at a reasonable trade? She had to make a move fast. The urgency of the dream again pressed upon her temples and the muscles in her belly contracted nervously.

Hinane removed Lunja's sword-belt from her pack, carefully caressing her hand over the hilt. Lunja's voice echoed in Hinane's mind, retrieving the words she whispered moments before her death, 'It's yours now, all the strength contained in it.'

At the time Hinane heeded no attention, the pain too sharp to comprehend the true meaning of her words. But why think of it now? The crystal and emeralds sparkled when she tilted it to one side.

Hinane recalled the conversation Lunja had with an old and wise tradesman years before, 'Gemstones are the most concentrated form of wealth known to man. A gem fits in the palm of your hand, yet weighs less than a coin. A similar value in gold would be difficult to carry and nearly impossible to conceal. If you need a portable, non-detectable asset, gems are an excellent vehicle.'

Lunja always loved stones, smiled Hinane while getting dressed, 'They are significant for their beauty, colour, brilliance, and of course, their intrinsic

mythical properties. Throughout the ages, the Amazons held them in high esteem as something of exquisite and superior nature,' she said. 'Gems were so adored that people of all countries, beliefs, languages and communities, have always been enchanted by their marvellous uses, fulfilling the need for eminence with a sense of identity and self-esteem.'

'There was a reason why overthrown emperors took their gems with them,' she continued, 'or travelling traders established considerable gemstone niches in the markets, or explorers brought enormous amounts of jade and diamonds from the east. Gemstones had been the gifts and ransoms of kings and queens, the motive for violent crimes and the overthrow of rulers.'

'Why,' Hinane had asked?

'Obviously because of its intrinsic value, but mostly because gemstones harbour fascinating properties, intricate chemical compositions and act as stimulus objects. Gemstones took eons to create, a product of nature that no human could emulate, which was the leading motivation to have them, an acquisition for eternity. In essence, gemstones hold a specific quality that other commodities simply do not have,' Lunja said.

Hinane closed her eyes, mulling the memory over and over. At the time her mother's voice just droned forth in her mind, going on and on about the stones, while Hinane was keener for the hunt. But now she was thankful for the lesson.

The voice resounded in her mind again, 'Use Chikae's gold to ...'

But Bahac interrupted, 'We are ready Hinane, Ahina already waiting on your saddle.'

Hinane's mood lifted at once and she grinned with anticipation, 'Well then let's not linger any longer. Let's hunt.'

Bahac, Danya and Kwela joined her and Tala on the voyage to Carthage, which pleased Hinane as they proved to be amusing and stimulating company. The twins' cocoa tinted skins made them conducive to long travels in the desert and they never complained. Their clean shaven heads, black eyes, and iron and copper ringed earlobes conjured a look that scared curious peddlers away. And Kwella with her huge jesting emerald eyes, the fun and joyous one.

Hinane stepped from her tent and grinned at the way her horse and cheetah interacted. Ahina had grown so much in the past few weeks, she already was almost her full-grown size, thus, it was easy for her to lunge onto Burn's back with one stride and a jump.

Ahina gave a few short churrs in staccato, an expression of her impatience, while Burn rolled his eyes backwards and hoofed into the sand, tiny stones splattering about.

Hinane's heart swelled and a warm feeling curled around it. These two were her joy. They bonded nicely and she couldn't ask for a better way spending time out than riding with them on their customary hunt.

'Burn's fancy is with foal,' said Bahac.

Hinane exclaimed with excitement, 'Your mare, Zaide?'

Bahac nodded with a smirk, 'Burn and Zaide will make a worthy offspring,' she said while jumping in the saddle and Ahina urging them on with another high pitched chirrup.

In nature, a cheetah mother would bring her cub live prey to practise its hunting skills until it was about six months old. But Hinane taught Ahina to make her own kills since she was just a few weeks, just when she started to lose her mantle of long, fluffy grey hair.

Ahina was small with a slim build, entirely designed for speed with virtually every part of her body adapted in some way to run faster. Special paw pads and semi-retractable claws provided great traction, large nostrils and lungs for quick air intake. Light bones, small collarbones and vertical shoulder blades helped to lengthen her strides and a very flexible spine worked as a spring for the powerful back legs that gave it additional reach, so much as five human paces in a single stride, with the tail acting as a rudder for quick turning and balancing.

Ahina was now lying elevated in a tree, waiting, her tail whipping slowly from side to side. The dark tear stripes, running from the inner corners of her eyes towards the jaw, enhanced her visual acuity by minimising the glare of the sun, therefore able to zoom in solely on the prey.

The sight of Ahina hunting was spectacular and Hinane watched her every move intensively, trying to comprehend the cat's thoughts. Ahina was focused on finding the least vigilant prey on the fringes of the grouped antelope around a water pan. Hinane searched for Aete in the skies, but today she didn't dive in to offer her support as she usually did.

Speed was not the only trait Ahina required to hunt successfully, stealth played just as important role. Sprinting put a great deal of strain on her with body temperature rising so high, it could be deadly to continue long chases. Therefore she was to approach the prey from downwind and get very close before pursuing.

Ahina jumped from their lookout point and slowly approached her target. Hinane and the others remained high up in the tree, watching silently while Ahina stalked closer and closer. She remained concealed in the grass, moving gracefully, smartly obscuring her position until she was close enough for the chase, about thirty paces from the full grown buck with the long spiral horns.

'What is she doing, she's too small to catch that beast,' said Damya.

Kwella whispered, 'Our pup has a lion heart indeed.'

Suddenly Ahina shot from the grass, speeding up her chase in a second, her claws blunt and exposed giving better traction as she went. She was striding so fast it looked like none of her feet were touching ground. The buck heard her coming and jumped, advancing into an opposite direction. But Ahina caught up quickly, trying to trip the animal with her small forepaws, but failed miserably. The animal escaped and Ahina abandoned the chase, immediately falling back into a slow walk, then slowly went down to lay flat onto her belly among the grass.

Ahina had to wait a while for her body temperature to decrease, and she took the time to rest, watching, searching for her next prey while her breathing slowed down to an even rhythm.

'Come on kitty, choose carefully next time,' whispered Hinane.

It took a while before Ahina gathered enough wits for the next chase and identified another prey to stalk. This time she aimed for a young jackal that fell

into her scope when it approached the water.

'That's better,' came from Bahac, 'This should be easy now.'

Ahina lunged forward when the jackal was level with her aim and sped forward like an arrow from Hinane's bow. She knocked the animal off balance, grabbed it by the throat, and suffocated it with a clamping bite to the underside of the neck.

But a hyena spotted the spectacle and approached with caution. Kwella moved to save the kill from being snatched from Ahina's paws, but Hinane restricted her with a hand on her arm, 'No, she must learn to fend for herself.'

'But the hyena....'

Hinane just shook her head, keeping her eyes on the two animals.

Ahina started to feed off the groin where the skin was thin, eating the meat off one thigh, then moved to the belly and intestines, leaving the skin.

Hinane whispered, 'Look about you Ahina, be aware my pup.'

But the cat couldn't hear the warning and only jumped alert with a loud barking growl and snarl when the hyena barked behind her. Ahina was still very exposed due to her inexperience, small build and small teeth, and yet, she snarled with courage, trying to scare the hyena away.

But the hyena was an experienced old hack and moved in quickly, snatched the half-eaten carcass with no difficulty and hurried off. The confused look on Ahina's face was comical to watch. She growled and slapped the ground with her forepaws, and the girls giggled.

'And so we all have to learn my honey cake,' smiled Hinane.

After bursts of speed and a successful kill that sometimes only happened one out of every ten tries for cheetahs, the meal could be grabbed anytime from under their noses. Each kill was a huge gamble if not on guard.

Then suddenly Hinane was crystal clear on what she must do with Chikae's gold. Her grin widened, her eyes sparkled, 'And so will I also gamble with the outcome.'

CHAPTER 27

It was intriguing to watch the cattle move backwards as they grazed. The formation of their horns, which bended forwards then downwards, prevented them from moving forward in the ordinary way, for if they did, their horns would shove into the ground. But apart from their unusual horn formations and the firmness of their hide, they were no different from any other cattle group.

Hinane, with her caravan train following, passed them in silence, the long journey from the city Leptus Magna southeast from Carthage, taking its toll on their energy reserves.

Tuberon moved into Hinane's earshot on his chestnut stallion, informing,

'This is the Phezania, the Fezzan region of the Sahara Desert. My city Garama, I mean the capital city of the Garamantes, my people, is just over that hill.'

Hinane gestured at the cattle, 'And these?'

Tuberon laughed, 'Peculiar hey,' and then said more solemnly, 'They will be extinct soon. For ages they roamed over our territories, but now only a few hundred are left.'

Garama was about eight days' travel south of Sabratha, Pepcis Magna and Leptus Magna, the three sister cities of Tripolitania. Hinane looked at the outskirts with curious interest, recalling what Tuberon told her about his people over the past two weeks since they'd left the coastlines.

In 19AD, Lucius Cornelius Balbus, then the Proconsul of Africa, invaded the Fezzan and occupied the cities, towns and oases of the Garamantes. It was at Garama that the Romans reached their farthest southward incursion into the African continent.

The Garamantes were fierce, powerful and warlike people who skillfully employed the horse and the chariot, and quickly regained control over their former territories. This resulted in them eventually establishing lucrative trades with the Romans, linking the central regions of the great desert with the shores of the Mediterranean.

But the Garamantes somehow never fully recovered to their earlier strengths and battled for centuries to recoup their magnificent wealth and power. Until the Roman Empire started to demand more and more slaves for their households and wheat for their armies.

To feed the slave demand, the Garamantes embarked on slave capturing raids on the troglodytes of Lake Chad, Tibesti mountains and Ethiopia. Soon the Garamantes were feared and respected among all the tribes across northern Africa. Garama once again became powerful and prosperous.

The Garamantes gained complete control over the trading routes, becoming one of Rome's main trading partners from the south. The easiest of the three routes, the Garamantian road, also known as the Bilma trail, passed south of the desert near Murzuk before turning north to pass between the Ahaggar and Tibesti Mountains before reaching the oasis at Kavar.

From Kavar, caravans passed over the great sand dunes of Bilma, where rock salt was mined in great quantities, before reaching the savannah north of Lake Chad where they frequently raided slaves and ivory.

The westernmost of the three central routes was the Ghadames road, which ran from the Niger River at Gao north to Ghat and Garama before terminating at Tripoli.

It was for wanting to explore these two routes that Hinane accepted Tuberon's invitation to first accompany him to his homeland before returning to the Tamanrasset.

Hinane was unaware that so many economical and agricultural activities were present across the deserts. It was important that she got acquainted with all of it in order to discern her own course of action, also trying to establish what challenges, dangers or allies existed.

And from what she'd learned so far since being on the road with Tuberon,

was priceless. He would become her most valuable collaborator in most of her dealings within the northern cities, and her intent was to establish several alliances through him.

Garama was surrounded by a wall with a dugout ditch. It contained a square market, entertainment forum, and public baths crafted in natural stone. Several houses, some built from salt blocks and others with mud, surrounded the six tower forts in the centre of the city which were used as lookout points. In the adjoining valley, stood temples, tombs and cemeteries, which depicted a nation that cared much for the afterlife.

‘The ancients called us the first of men, and today about ten thousand people live in Garama,’ said Tuberón when seeing the interest on Hinane’s face.

Hinane had left her party, with Tala in charge, on the outskirts of the city to set up camp while she followed Tuberón through the entrance gates, totally amazed at the actual size of the metropolis surrounding it.

Apart from those wearing a tunic or long robe, which appeared to be marks of rank and dignity, the Garama citizens were dressed in scant clothing or half naked since the heat prohibited extensive covering.

When riding alongside Tuberón through the wide and open streets, the people bowed respectfully towards him as they went past.

He said, ‘Most of the populace are adept agriculturists living in village settlements around the city and even far across the arid landscapes. Others are well skilled in metallurgy, glass making, salt refining, medicine manufacturing and stone cutting.’

‘Plants and stones?’ asked Hinane with more interest.

Tuberón pulled his mouth into a devious grin, ‘Yes, our realm bears splendid wonders for the covetous Romans. One of our prime products which we grow is silphium, a species of giant fennel, part of the parsley and wild carrot family, which is a rich food seasoning and potent medicine. It is so critical to the Cyrenian economy that most of their coins bear a picture of the plant. The plant’s resin, known as laser, is used to treat coughs, sore throats, fever, indigestion, aches and pains, warts, and all kinds of other maladies. But it is used mainly as a contraceptive, to promote the menstrual discharge of women, and as an abortifacient, the termination of pregnancy.

‘Interesting.’

Tuberón nodded, ‘Silphium was used widely by most ancient Mediterranean cultures, and legends told it was a wonder gift from god Apollo. But when Roman provincial governors took over power from Greek colonists they over-farmed it. Given the difficulty of growing the plant, the size of the contraceptive dose needed to take effect, and the number of people using the plant for other reasons, it was heading for extinction. It was told that the very last known stalk of silphium found in Cyrenaica was given to the Emperor Nero in 68AD.

‘Couldn’t they farm it in other areas?’

‘The plant only grows in the wild and cannot be successfully grown as a crop in tilled soil, but,’ he said with a wicked grin, ‘We’ve found a way to cultivate it. And because the Romans don’t know where, or how we grow it, we have

established a very lucrative quality product for trade.'

'Ah,' remembered Hinane, 'Market a product of rarity and high value.'

'Exactly. But what is really the predominant factor, is how well I can manipulate the demand with myth and speculation.'

'Speculation?'

'Yes. We once spread the rumour that the connection between silphium and the traditional heart shape symbol is remarkably similar to the Egyptian heart soul. The sexual nature of that concept, combined with the widespread use of silphium for birth control, and the fact that silphium seeds were heart-shaped, helped tie silphium to sexuality and love, supposedly acting as the cure for being in love, viewed by most as a mental madness.'

Hinane snorted sceptically, 'A fable you no doubt started. The fact that a lot of mopes desperately want to believe it doesn't mean it works.'

'Exactly my little dove, exactly. But the Romans are credulous and they will still use it, just perchance it does.'

Hinane's lips curled into a smile, suddenly grasping how she could use this strategy to her own advantage. But didn't ponder too long on the epiphany and gave her full attention to Tuberon's chattering as they rode deeper into the city.

The most decisive factor that made it possible for mankind to settle in permanent communities was agriculture. After farming was developed, tribes or family units did not have to be on the move continually searching for food or herding their animals. Once people could control the production of food and be assured of a reliable annual supply of it, they established permanent communities. This made it possible to domesticate animals that provided other sources of food and uses.

With more food available, more people could be fed, and population numbers increased. With more people available, the development of more complex social structures formed which led to supporting a variety of other practices and services to make living conditions more favourable. Heavier pottery replaced animal-skin gourds as containers for food and liquids, cloth could be woven from wool and flax, and more permanent structures made of wood, brick, and stone could be erected.

With the growing number of people, augmented agriculture practices were again necessary. But to sustain agriculture and to serve domestic uses, dependable water supplies were essential, which meant utilising rivers and streams or regular rainfall.

'So how do you maintain these extensive farms and crops in this barren desert area if there is no rain or rivers?' asked Hinane.

'Foggaras systems,' answered Tuberon, 'I will show you tomorrow,' but did not branch further on the subject.

With growing populations, the issue of land ownership moved to the foreground along with who will work the fields. In most societies, all land was owned by the state or the ruler, but here in Garama the land was free to anyone. However, commercialising and working the fields were complexly structured with many forms of bondage and servitudes that varied from slavery to nobility.

'That's why slave trade is one of the few, if not the only way, in which

individuals or lineages could increase their wealth and status.' said Tuberon.

Slaves were employed in many ways as servants, concubines, soldiers, administrators, and field workers. Sometimes there were whole villages of enslaved dependents that were required to pay tribute to their ruler and supply their needs.

In a number of situations, these forms of servitudes were relatively benign and were an extension of lineage and kinship systems. In others, however, they were exploitative economic and social relations that reinforced hierarchy and allowed nobles, senior lineages, and rulers to exercise their power.

Despite considerable variation in societies and the fact that slaves sometimes attained positions of command and trust, slaves were denied choice about their lives and actions, especially the women.

Although slaves were used in many ways in societies, domestic slavery and extension of lineages through the addition of female members remained a central feature in many places. The excess of women led to polygyny and the creation of large harems by some rulers and merchants, whose power was increased by this process while the position of women was lowered.

'Centuries ago, one former ruler of the Garamante had an army of twenty thousand slaves as part of his household which gave him great power. The trade in slaves is the business of kings, rich men, and prime merchants,' said Tuberon.

Hinane remained silent.

Tuberon watched the grimness on her face and said, 'In most cases slave masters provide his slaves with a life far better than what they were used to. They grew accustomed to it as a way of life, their way of life, not considering freedom as a privilege anymore, but rather as a struggle to survive. Many choose it above freedom for the security it provides.'

'How could anyone value enslavement more than freedom?' she frowned.

'Those not equipped to think for themselves. Throughout the world as we know it, that counts for about eighty percent of the populace. Most people need a ruler, a leader who knows better, someone to tell them what to do.'

'And to be delivered to the mercy of a cruel master, being tortured to death?'

'The how is not important, it is the what, that makes them bow to their fate.'

Hinane looked at him, a little confused. And suddenly, for the first time she wondered what his stance in this huge society was. Was he a noble, or merely the trader she got to know?

'And you Tuberon, where and how do you fit into this grand scheme?'

'I am merely a pedlar,' he said with a smile and a flip of an eyebrow as he stopped in front of a big building. But the obedient servants who came running to relieve him of his horse and load, painted a different understanding.

His golden red curls lifted in the breeze like a plumed crown around his head. His pointed chin was proudly pushed out, his imposing body frame towered lofty and erect, giving almost the appearance of an Egyptian pharaoh thought Hinane, astounded by the ambiance of his fortress.

She felt in him now, a force running, a strong undercurrent of superiority, previously concealed by his childlike, uncaring nature, like a theatre role he

played.

A cold shiver ran up her spine and neck.

CHAPTER 28

The Garamantes appeared to have had an advanced system of faith and mythology, considering the sacrificial stones, pyramid-like burial chambers and tombs, thought Hinane as she rode passed.

Some of the royal cemeteries consisted of several hundred tombs divided into four groups, the first being circular tombs, 'In which the bodies were covered with leather and put into a vertical hole. The hole was then filled with sand and covered with a flat stone to form a burial chamber,' explained Tuberon.

The second type was a square two-step-style tomb that was plastered and painted with white chalk. The third type, pyramidal tombs, were constructed of mud-bricks with the burial chamber beneath the pyramid, and the fourth type was similar to the mausoleum form.

Hand shaped offering tablets, which were used for sacrificial purposes during worship, were widely found in the valley and in the city.

Tuberon explained, 'The hands symbolise offerings to the gods, denoting a pledge of faith, sincerity and justice, a symbol of support and strength. The left hand was used to receive and the right hand to give, thereby representing the many polarities of the universe, the positive and negative aspects of divine action within the soul.'

Hinane added softly, 'The hand symbolism also conveyed knowledge, influence and power to those who understood the secret teachings. The three phalanges on each finger symbolising the threefold divinity of mind, body and spirit.'

But before Tuberon could give further comment, Hinane feigned a lost interest, and not wanting to elaborate on the subject, fixed her gaze upon the men fishing in the small lake pools with net baskets.

Tuberon followed her stare, 'They fish for shrimp.'

Hinane's jaw dropped, 'Sorry?'

Tuberon explained.

The Garamantes have constructed a network of hundreds of underground tunnels and shafts below the limestone layer just beneath the desert sands to mine fossil water, known as foggaras. This system allowed direct water flows from underground reserves into lake pools, larger lakes and to their farms.

'And sometimes they find shrimp,' said Tuberon with a boyish grin.

'Coming from where?' asked Hinane.

Tuberon just shrugged his shoulders and carried on talking.

The materials used for the construction of the foggaras came from the

surrounding areas. Blocks of stone were cut, clay and straw were combined to make a binding mix, and palm trunks were used to consolidate the underground galleries.

The channels, generally being very narrow, were dug out and maintained using a series of regularly spaced vertical shafts, about one every thirty feet. There were about a hundred thousand channels in total which were directed to the various users via distribution weirs, each weir feeding a separate user. The drainage tunnels caught only the quantity of water that could freely reproduce to supplement the fossil water supply, fed by catchments of humidity and rainfall.

The high temperature in the vertical shafts caused air to rise, which in return caused a draft to enter the foggaras. The moist air of the agricultural areas was drawn into the foggaras in the opposite direction to the water run-off. In the foggaras, it condensed on the tunnel walls and the air passed out of the vertical shafts. This condensed moisture was available for reuse.

The system used a jet watering mechanism that was ill adapted to desert conditions, meaning the degree of evaporation was very high while the tube openings were at risk from being obstructed by sand.

The level of groundwater reserves often decreased to a critically low level due to the vigorous pumping of large quantities of water to the immense agricultural areas which were cultivated for the production of wheat. Thus for the system to work, the water-fed reservoir was located in a valley or at the foot of a rift so that it was below the level of the underground source.

A water congregation was formed which decided on who received water among those who possessed water rights, and who was responsible for the correct distribution thereof.

Thousands and thousands of slaves maintained the channels and vertical shafts to minimise in-blown sand. The channels were periodically inspected for erosion or cave-ins, cleaned of sand and mud, and assured for ample airflow.

‘The channels were also used for cooling and ice storage.’

‘Ice?’ exclaimed Hinane in disbelief.

‘Yes,’ Tuberon explained further.

For cooling storage, channels were used in conjunction with a wind tower, which was a chimney-like structure positioned above a square structure. Of its four openings, the one opposite the wind direction was opened to move air from out the inside. Incoming air was pulled from a channel below the house. The airflow across the vertical shaft opening, created a lower pressure and drew cool air up from the tunnel.

The air from the channel was drawn into a tunnel a short distance away and was cooled by contact with the cool tunnel walls and water, and by the latent heat of evaporation as water evaporated into the air stream. This resulted in a great reduction in the air temperature.

‘Wow,’ said Hinane.

‘In 400BC Persian engineers had already mastered the technique of storing ice in the middle of summer in the desert. I was fortunate enough to obtain their methods through an alliance in Carthage.’

‘How did they do it?’

A wall was made along the east-west direction close to specially designed, naturally cooled refrigerators called ice pits. In winter, the channel water was directed to the north side of the wall. The shadow of the wall made water freeze quicker, and the ice was stored in the ice pits. A large underground space with thick insulated walls was connected to a channel. The wind towers were used to draw cool subterranean air up from the channel to maintain low level temperatures inside the space, even during hot summer days. As a result, the ice melted very slowly and ice was available year-round.

'But come,' said Tuberon, 'Enough of this for one day. Let me entertain you with a ride on a chariot.'

His face lit up, 'Or are you sporting enough to challenge me in a race, steering your own chariot?'

Hinane's adventurous spirit jumped alive and she accepted the challenge without a second thought, 'Shall we put something at stake?'

'How about a share of that generous profit you harvested from Carthage?' ventured Tuberon with a wry smirk.

'And what would you wager?'

'A hundred female slaves.'

Hinane whistled with raised eyebrows, 'That's a high pledge, you're quite a gambler.'

'Not more than you. What you've pulled off in Carthage was quite a risky exploit,' he teased, reminding her of the risk she had escaped.

'Deal,' she shouted recklessly as she heeled Burn into a trot to where the chariots were already waiting, her dark hair tucking and tailing behind her in the wind.

The racing chariots were made of wood, designed to be as small and lightweight as possible. But it afforded little support or protection for the charioteer who basically had to balance on the axle.

Each chariot was pulled by either two or four horses. But for the race, Tuberon selected four horses suitable for a vigorous ascent up the hills, then down again, around the beacon on the far side of the practising field, then back to the starting line, repeating the round eight times before finishing.

A nervous tuck pulled in Hinane's belly. But there was no way backing out now, and she looked around for support from Tala, Bahac and Damya who already waited at the chariots.

Tuberon invited them the day before and they were analysing the chariots since early that morning already, eager to learn its mechanics.

'Here, put this on,' Tuberon handed her leather knee and shin pads, and an old steel roman helmet.

But Hinane shook her head, 'Not needed.'

He shrugged his shoulders and walked to his chariot after showing her how to work and drive it.

The horses stood ready, and the handler dropped the white cloth for the race to begin. The horses thundered away at his signal, but Hinane reined them in a bit, her strategy to avoid running too fast in the beginning of the race. But she still maintained a position close to Tuberon, rounding the turns as tight as

possible without crashing into his chariot. It was a tricky endeavour and Hinane's mind raced for accurate approaches.

The reins were wrapped around her waist so she could lean back and whip the horses without falling, holding the reins in her left hand and the whip in the right. A curved knife was fastened on her back at easy reach so she could cut herself free in the event of a crash. Judging by the shuffling of the wheels over the rough, small rocks, ground patches and sand, a calamity was easily bound to happen.

Hinane kept her eyes focused on the path, staring through the opening between the leading horses' heads. Even at this speed, she could not help but admire their stealth and magnificence, their manes combed and decorated with colourful cloth and beads.

The horse on the left, referred to as the funalis, was tied separately from the main tiller of the chariot so that it could move and be steered with greater freedom when approaching the turns, without slowing more than necessary. The other three horses provided the power.

Hinane tired quickly from the unusual strain, the effort in piloting the horses around the bends taxing her muscles to the fullest, and by the time of entering the last round, sweat was streaming from her face and torso. And yet she endured, centring her mind on the finishing line, knowing to give it all in the last stretch. She managed to pull past Tuberon with a smart manoeuvre in the last corner, but only taking a head lead, then whipped the horse team into a win with a mere stride.

When the chariots drew to a halt, Tuberon was already down from his rig and came running with a laugh.

He lifted her from the axe-board, 'Well done you rogue, I've never seen a greenhorn so capable.'

The buoyant feel of her win still lingered when they joined Tuberon for the evening feast. With a wine goblet in hand, her trusted warriors sitting to her left and Tuberon and his mates to her right forming a huge celebration circle, she got up to recite the poem she formulated while washing off the dust in preparation for the occasion.

*The young charioteers with thumping hearts,
Rushed into the race with feverish hopes and chilling fears
They pulled the reins and whipped with force,
Controlling the horses with compelling sneers
Flying high and low on its uneven course
The hindmost charioteer sped rapidly past
To blow sand upon the leading cast
Such is the love for praise and flirt
That the winner turns to be the one with the skirt*

The crowd burst out laughing, Hinane laughing the loudest already mellowed out from the wine, but then raising her hand for silence to finish the prose.

*And yet the enchanted charioteer had her in a charitable con
He let the female warrior won*

Tuberon spurted a mouth full of wine all over the table when bellowing with laughter, 'How did you know?'

'No ways a novice like me could beat an expert like you on a contraption like that.'

Their eyes met in friendly fashion.

The longer the night went on, the more wine she consumed. The louder the shindig got, the more excitement and joy filled her being, which in turn heightened and loosened her usually well-guarded sexual desires.

And much later, when most of the partying sounds had died down and most of them asleep, it was as if Tuberon had smelled the longing scent from her being.

With one movement he lifted her off her feet, and without any protest coming from her lips, dragged her soused-footed to his bed.

CHAPTER 29

It must have been the wine, shovelled into Hinane's guilt. A heavy dull pain lingered in the lower back of her head and she battled to concentrate.

She tried hard to stay focused on the variation of landscapes before her, from the Acacus mountains and differently coloured sand dunes, to arches, gorges, isolated rocks and deep ravines and wadis. The most predominantly were the magnificent arches of Afzejare and Tin Khlega told Tuberon, and she searched for them with weary eyes.

They were traversing through an area southeast from the Tassili N'Ajjer to Ghat where Tuberon would engage with traders and introduce Hinane to his connections. From there they would part ways, Tuberon back northwest to Garama and Hinane with her convoy southwest to her home in the Tamanrasset, about a ten days journey from Ghat.

Although this area was considered one of the most arid in the desert, there were a number of springs and wells, wild animals such as giraffes, ostriches and interesting vegetation like the medicinal Apple of Sodom.

It was a tree ten to fifteen feet high with a greyish cork-like bark with hollow green globes and strange fruit resembling a large, smooth apple or orange. Its flesh contained a toxic, extremely bitter milky sap with a sort of ash also present.

'It is mainly filled with air, which gives it the round form, so when pressed or struck, it explodes with a puff, leaving only shreds of the thin rind and a few fibres,' told Tuberon. 'Our people call it, that which dissolves into smoke and ashes. In the centre, a small slender pod runs through which contains a small

quantity of fine silk, which we collect and twist for filling sitting pads.'

Hinane only listened vaguely as her interest rested more with the striking mushroom-shaped rock formations with ancient rock paintings and carvings. The formations were in sharp contrast to the smooth orange sand dunes. These jagged basalt monoliths, sandstone, granite cliffs and orange sand, stretched far into the south with countless wadis zigzagging their way through the desert. The effects of wind and sand on the sandstone produced rock formations of staggering artworks, like the Adad finger-shaped rock.

'We will camp at the Wadi Tashwinat, one of the main wadis here. There are high cliffs with numerous drawings at the bottom of the rock formations, and several side wadis branching off towards more formations and prehistoric cave treasures for you to explore,' said Tuberon.

'And of course, this is where we will engage in one of the best adventures I can offer, and a favourite pastime of mine,' his eyes glowed brightly when explaining, 'Riding ostriches.'

Hinane wondered how he managed to stay so perky after all the wine he consumed during the past days, but instead she asked, 'Ostriches?'

Tuberon nodded, 'This is their habitat. They live here wild and free. Just wait and see princess, wait and see, you'll love it.'

But she didn't.

When the slaves prepared their camp for the night they were taken to the huge birds, Hinane eyeing them closely with quiet reproach. She doubted remaining seated upon the ostrich's narrow spiny back in her state, yet alone rode it.

But Tala, Kwella, Bahac and Damya were already mounting with eager anticipation, and she could hardly escape the challenge without looking like a pansy.

She sighed. If only she didn't drink so much, it had been three days since starting, trying to be respectful of Tuberon's generous hospitality, but because she wasn't accustomed to it, the wine and beer had an inimical effect on her healthy physique.

The experience of that first night in Tuberon's room brought a guilty twinge to her stomach when she thought of Chikae. But then she shrugged the thought, he had many wives of his own, and sure as daylight was not celibate among his wives. Besides, the incident with Tuberon was insignificant in the big scheme of things. It was merely playful fun with no emotional attachment.

One of Tuberon's countless slaves who accompanied them on the journey held the bird's wings back so she could swing her legs over, a sack covering its funny looking head to keep it docile.

'Hold tight here,' said the old man pointing to the wing pits, 'Cross your legs tightly around its romp, keep your feet tucked in under the bird's front for a secure position. Keep your legs locked for balance as it sprints around like a bucking wild horse, but it sure is nothing like one.'

Hinane shuffled in position and the man instructed further when she was unsure of where to grasp, 'Grab hold of the top part of the wings closest to where it joins to the neck. At the start of the race, I will remove the sack from its

head. The bird will start running, and then, well, just hold on tight. It's fun you'll see.'

'Ghmff,' snorted Hinane, not sure if she would derive any enjoyment from it.

But then she saw the flushed faces and smiles of the others and tried to alter her mood and slacken the tension in her limbs. She looked at the bird's flimsy neck coiling like a thin feathery snake in front of her, which was nothing like Burn's sturdy, mane-ly one, and immediately abandoned the idea of grabbing it there for support during the race.

The ostriches weren't trained to be ridden, so there was no prescription of control or any rules for the race. The ostriches stood about agitatedly while the riders mounted, eager to be let loose.

While waiting, Hinane inspected the wings. Its feathers were wonderfully soft, and for a moment she worried about hurting it.

But then Tuberon's voice startled the riders into readiness and there was no more time to ponder, 'Remove the sacks on my word go,' he instructed the slaves.

Hinane hooked her legs tightly around its body, she tightened her grip on the wing pits and leaned back, anticipating the flight with a thumping heart. The slaves yanked the sacks off the ostriches' heads and the birds exploded into a scurry down the alley between the cliffs.

It was nothing like Hinane had expected, and any attempt in preparing for it would have been futile. She almost tumbled off when slipping to one side, but with effort managed to rebalance back on its spine. The birds scattered ahead with the riders in cascading hysteria, their wild cries echoing against the rocky walls.

The path which Tuberon had selected, zigzagged through the mountain alleys. It often appeared that a bird would collide into rock faces that frequently narrowed in the gorges, but then managed to scurry through unscathed with a twisted foot turn and a high jump which would trigger hysterical laughter. It took considerable willpower to maintain a grip on the wing pits and not to snatch it around its neck.

Tala's ostrich was in the lead, bobbing its head back and forth as if deriving extra speed from the motion. Tala jockeyed it with a wide grin as if the bird's rambling had no effect upon her and was the first one to pass the finish line at the end of the rock alley before open ground.

But the ostriches had no sense of rules, regulations, or realising there was an endline. They kept on charging, not running in one straight path as they did between the cliffs anymore, but branched out into different directions.

Hinane had no idea how to bring the bird to a halt or how to turn it around, she forgot to ask. She tried to use its wings the same way she would a horse's reins. But it took many minutes before bringing it to a halt, and at no part of her efforts. If it wasn't for the slaves obstructing the path to stop the bird, she had no idea how her sprint would have ended.

'Ostriches are cherished for their meat and skin, right?' she asked Tuberon when joining the rest of the riders, her limbs full of dust and sand caked in her hair.

He nodded with a wide grin, knowing where this was going, 'We could have yours as steak tonight, would that do?'

She mumbled something and sauntered back to camp.

Later when they were seated around the fire, feeding on succulent lizards and hedgehogs, she watched the flirt and jest between Tuberon and Tala with an empty heart.

And when they disappeared in the dark on their way to Tuberon's tent, Hinane felt that sharp jealous sting again. Why did their personal relations have such an effect on her?

She also couldn't unriddle why he took her to his room that night after the chariot race when it was crystal clear that he favoured Tala? Was it merely promiscuity or strategy? Nausea pushed into her throat. She shot up and disappeared behind a rock to vomit.

She wiped her mouth from the stench. She had no affection towards Tuberon for sure, they became very good friends yes, but she loved Chikae, and then there was also Amezwar. She certainly received enough attention, there was no short of it, so why be bothered so?

She was also very certain that her trading alliances with Tuberon were secured by the networking events of the past few weeks. So why was she so begrudged?

Maybe because she could not control Tuberon the way she could control anyone else, she thought. But her inner voice had a different answer, 'Tuberon is not good for you. He is not what he appeared to be, and not to be trusted. Your intent deep down is to protect Tala.'

She sighed, yes, she did feel some apprehension towards him on several occasions. But she needed him. And Tala was big enough to fend for herself.

Suddenly she felt tired, lonely, drained, trapped and disconnected.

When losing the chariot race with Tuberon, she forfeited a small part of her profits. Although not very significant, it still left a hole, not in her purse, but in her trust. At first he insisted she take the wagered hundred slaves as prize, but she refused. Her moral values would never allow accepting such a gift, moreover, she sensed his true intentions were obscure. He betted a huge prize then let her win. And although he refused ardently in a showy manner to take her staked profits, he accepted anyway.

The last thing she wanted was to be more indebted to him than she already was.

The weariness crept deeper into her limbs which made her feel miserable and thwarted. She shrugged her shoulders in trying to shed the negative thoughts. Her hands trembled and she balled her fists. What was wrong with her?

She had to regain control. She had to reconnect with herself, her purpose, her gods. She had to get clear of whom exactly she wanted to be as all her future decisions would depend upon these choices. The trip into Carthage confused many of her original ideas and she had to readdress her course of action.

She went to her tent, got undressed, and for the first time on the trip, missed

the cool, pampering hands of Takamat that always aided her to relax and unwind. She had been gone too long, she thought.

Kwella asked permission to enter her tent, with Ahina following her inside. After a short recounting of Ahina's movements during the day with a quip and banter, she wished Hinane a restful night and left.

Hinane smiled at Ahina when she settled on her sleeping pad. She neglected her pup on this trip but there were enough volunteers to keep her trained, stimulated and fed with regular hunts.

Later, when lying next to the closed eyed Ahina while listening to the sounds of the jackals and hyenas, she considered their journey and transactions made in Carthage and the other coastline cities.

Chikae's gold and ivory posed a huge weight problem for the camels. She either needed to lessen the load for future trips or take on more camels. More camels would mean a longer procession with more safeguard. Or she had to break up the sizes of the convoys, dispatching them on different routes on different dates for safety sake. So whatever her future arrangement would be, would actually make no difference on the amount of camels employed, it would only mean different goods for different markets which would make more sense.

She traded only a little of Chikae's gold and ivory for what he wanted, textiles, tools, ornaments and gemstones, but could not make satisfactory deals for obtaining iron and copper, and brought most of his gold back with her.

She frowned. She still needed to devise a plan in resolving this as her reputation depends heavily in obtaining these elements. She already figured out what to do with the rest of Chikae's gold, but did not find the ideal platforms and methods yet.

Luckily, she obtained goods already manufactured from iron and copper, similar to what Chikae wanted to manufacture himself, such as weapons, axes, swords, nails, saws, cooking utensils and mirrors. The only thing was, he valued the art and capabilities of his own craftsmen very highly and might not be satisfied with what she brought instead, although she chose carefully with a sophisticated eye. No, she must find iron and copper too to woo his satisfaction, besides, her other two alliances also bargained for it.

She narrowed her eyes when thinking of her own future trades. Gemstones would surely be her favourite commodity of trade due to its light weight in transport and concentrated form of wealth. And with her knowledge of the Amazon teachings, she could easily manipulate markets with superstitious beliefs bestowed upon it to amplify buyers' interests.

Hinane started to relax and fell into a deep recollecting and reengineering trance. At will, she brought back the feelings of jealousy and other concerns to dissect properly while in this state of open understanding and higher being. She concentrated on how it made her feel exactly, once again experiencing the hurt and rejection, the stress and anxiety. She acknowledged it, then finally accepted it as merely a message of warning. She released it, waited for it to dissipate, the calmness returned, the confusion left and peace and quiet filled her being.

She suddenly understood it. Her purpose was something far bigger and grander than Tuberon or what he stood for. Although he would remain a friend

with qualities she admired, audacious and adventurous, and a trading alliance, rich and influential, he was merely another pion on her chess board. The warning was not to let him get too close. This knowledge made her elated and calm, feeling lighthearted and airy.

To recharge her being and to refocus her course, Hinane started a powerful technique. She focussed on the solar plexus just below the chest, thinking of gold and fire. She acknowledged the conflict of her ego with her higher purpose and true identity, power and free will.

She breathed deeper and focused on the spot between her eyes, thinking of a bright indigo light, calling upon her archetypes Athena, the warrior and war strategist, Artemis the hunter and protector of the wild, and Hestia the homemaker and safe keeper of fire. She replicated qualities from each of them within herself to act more intuitively, to open her psychic faculties and insight.

The energy moved up into her crown while she focused on a bright golden light for higher thought and universal identity. This was where she delved deeper for wisdom in a physical and universal sense, connecting with the ultimate source, the connection to the greater world beyond all their gods, into a timeless place of all-knowing. Hinane waited for her being to be filled with knowledge and wisdom, experiencing that spiritual connection and profound bliss.

Her future's path was charted out in her mind's eye and she whispered, totally inspired by higher forces, before falling into a deep sleep, 'I am the totality of everything, the ultimate energy of the universe perfected in a human nervous system. I am from a source that was never born and which would never die. I am a warrior princess, I am the leader of my people. I accept my obligations and responsibilities, and in order to protect them, I will become unstoppable.'

CHAPTER 30

Takamat ran towards Hinane as she appeared over the last hill just before the oasis, riding far ahead of the convoy. Yeddes followed Takamat at a slower pace, walking with a huge welcoming grin. Izza with a bunch of warriors appeared over the hill, and the sight of their wind milling arm greetings made Hinane feel cherished and missed.

The joy of Hinane's return streamed in tears down Takamat's cheeks, 'You're back, oh I missed you so, so much.'

Takamat's expression brought a smile to Hinane's lips, thrilled to be surrounded in the simplicity of her friend's company. She bowed down from Burn's back grabbing Takamat's outstretched hand and pressed it fondly. Hinane jumped from Burn and embraced Takamat then Yeddes .

Takamat walked-ran next to her and Burn led by his rein, eagerly chattering in a disorderly fashion about events during Hinane's absence, making it

impossible to figure out exactly what had happened when and to whom. When at the outskirts of their encampment, a desert owl circled above them and Hinane squinted her eyes slightly against the sharp sunlight, thinking that even the birds were happy to have them back.

Hinane saw Menna hopping on one leg from her tent, her hand in a cheery wave and her light brown hair lifting with each hop. A servant brought her a walking stick and she shuffled-hopped closer. Hinane wondered what happened to the fake replacement they'd manufactured for her.

With the concentration being on her people milling about, running to and fro the packed convoy, she, nor any of her warriors, saw or expected the trespasser arose from out his hiding place behind a palm tree.

He charged towards Hinane and Burn, his black face painted with white and red paint, naked torso and a huge sword in his lifted hand. He hurled into the air with a vicious cry, grabbed the sword in both hands and brought it down in a powerful blow.

Nobody could later accurately account for what happened in the next few seconds. When the sword sliced through skin and bone like a warm knife through lard, separating head from neck with blood spurting like a fountain from the vein, time stood still in a blur. Shock busted everyone to a standstill, gasping with flared eyes at the scene unfolding.

Burn's head fell to the sand, a loud ring buzzed in Hinane's head and ears, and her heart thundered in her chest. She shook her head in quick movements for clarity, but the gruesome vision before her remained and she screamed and screamed when the headless Burn plunged onto his front knees. His bulk followed in a crashing motion, tumbling to one side with Hinane slumping next to him in the sand.

She scampered to her feet, wanting to deal with the attacker, but Ahina had already lunged upon the black man when Burn fell. The cheetah brought him down in one snarl and growl, pinning him to the sand with her paws pushing on his collar bones. She gave another growl, preparing for the kill, which would come in a deadly bite to his throat.

'No Ahina,' shouted Hinane while towering over them, her sword already in her hand.

Ahina immediately obeyed the command and sagged onto her belly on top of the black man who looked at the cat with raw fear in his eyes.

'Who are you, who sent you?' hissed Hinane with slight hysteria.

But Nokoto remained silent. His order was to kill the white woman's horse to detract attention from the attackers waiting on the outskirts of her camp.

Before Hinane could speak again, an ignited arrow hit a tent, instantly setting it alight in high burning flames. This exploded the warriors into action and Tayri who was just stepping from her tent to greet Hinane, ran back in to fetch her axes and weapons.

The warrior women who accompanied Hinane still upon their horses, charged towards the assailants and dragged the rest from their hiding places, but not before they set another few tents on fire. The other warriors in camp joined the bout and soon the commotion was detained.

They brought the group of half-naked men towards Hinane where she sat in the sand, staring at the decapitated Burn, tears rolling down her cheeks in uncontrollable floods. When she saw her warriors take charge of the assault, her attention moved to Burn, and the sense of loss brought her to her knees.

Ahina was still lying on top of Nokoto, keeping him from making any unexpected move, until Tala ordered her off. Izza and Tala pulled Nokoto to his feet.

Tala shoved him in his back with an axe while bending his arm backwards, 'Talk you stinking imbecile. Who sent you?'

He kept quiet and Hinane answered for him, 'There is only one man with the audacity, Atisi. He is the only one that could be so cruel.'

The pain ripped in her chest, leaving a large dark chasm. The only way she could fill it was with anger and revenge. She directed it towards Nokoto, 'Kill him.'

'No,' shouted Nokoto with a deep raspy voice. 'I was only following his command. If I didn't, he said he would kill my wives and children.'

'And you killed my horse, you bastard,' Hinane was shaking and eagerly searched for more balance and control.

Nokoto held his hands together above his head and looked down into the sand, 'Yes. It is a shame that this magnificent horse must perish by the command of a deluded man. He will surely suffer the consequence.'

'He is your master,' frowned Hinane.

'He is no such thing. He raided my village, killed my men and captured the rest as slaves, my women and children also. He is not my master. I will kill him by first chance.'

Uncertainty pulled in the corner of Hinane's mouth and Nokoto continued, 'I will be your slave. From this day on, please take me, free me from that man. I am yours.'

Tala lost her patience and scorned, 'You want mercy? Look at what you've done, look, look,' she screamed while pulling him to his feet and dragged him towards Burn's carcass.

'This was the beloved sacred horse of our queen. Not just a beast but her friend, her family, my family. Look,' she was hysterical by now and Hinane placed a calming hand on her arm, 'Enough.'

Tala looked at Burn, and sagged onto the sand, her hand in her hair, the fatigue in each fibre of her face.

'Damyā, Bahac,' called Hinane, beckoning them closer from where they stood watching among the other warriors, 'Take him away and kill him and the others, I have no use for these savages.'

Nokoto rebuked quickly, 'I know where to find iron and copper.'

Hinane stood stunned. When Bahac pulled him roughly to his feet she held up a hand, 'Wait.'

Hinane turned to Menna, gesturing to the disrupted campsite, 'Order this chaos,' and to Yeddes, 'Dismantle the convoy, offload the cargo to the stores and take stock. Get the records from Tala and synchronise the lists.'

Hinane glanced towards Burn and said in a softer tone, 'Tala and Izza,

please prepare a place for Burn. I will see to his burial myself upon my return.'

She turned to Bahac and Damya, 'Bring him.'

They took Nokoto under his armpits and dragged him along. Hinane led them to the closest row of palm trees and sat down in the shade, and out of earshot.

For a long time, she stared at the chaos transforming back to order as Menna and Yeddes took charge, and she looked for that same order within. Hinane had to take her next move carefully and contemplated all her options with all the knowledge she could recall.

The image of Burn's head tumbling into the sand kept stinging in her mind and heart, but she had to force her thoughts back to Nokoto, trying to keep her emotions out of reason.

This black man was merely a pawn in the game between her and Atisi, only acting on orders. He, himself, did not scare her. He was no real foreseeable threat, and did not evoke any bad feelings inside her either.

Hinane sighed and pinched the skin between her eyes, closing them in thought. Nokoto sat quiet, waiting, not trying to make any move.

'What's your name?'

'Nokoto.'

'Who are you?'

'I am the king of my tribe, one tribe of many of the Hausa nation.'

'I thought you said Atisi killed them.'

Nokoto nodded, 'He did, But only my tribe, there are still many others.'

Hinane looked at Bahac and Damya, 'Go help the others, I will manage him.'

They shoved Nokoto into the sand, and walked away. Hinane leaned back against the palm's bark, grateful for the support it provided, but kept quiet. The minutes dragged.

'Why did he kill your tribe?' came finally.

He gazed at her with dark black lifeless eyes, 'I did not want to help him fight the white warrior women who penetrated his territories.'

It pulled a guilty pang in her belly. So she was the reason why Atisi killed his family.

She sighed.

They sat quietly for a while before she spoke again, 'How did you know I want copper and iron.'

'All kings and queens want copper, iron and gold.'

'Why did you not offer gold?'

'Other more powerful tribes from the south hold the power over the yellow metal, it is not in my reach, but I know where to get white gold.'

Hinane remembered then they referred to salt as white gold in Carthage.

'How much of it do you have?'

Nokoto didn't answer immediately, assessing whether she was worthy of the answer.

Then he said, 'I can take you to the mines.'

Hinane nodded slowly and frowned slightly.

She reached a conclusion, 'Can you ride a horse?'

He shook his head, 'No but I will run with the horse.'

'Then come with me.'

'As your slave?'

'I don't take slaves. What you do for me you will be rewarded for, the same as for all the servants in my household. If you want to go, go as a free man now.'

'You grant me my life, and my freedom, after what I have done to you?'

'If freedom is the option you choose, yes.'

'What's the other?'

'Fight with me against Atisi.'

He struggled to his feet but then fell onto one knee again before her, 'I am grateful. My life is now your life.'

He followed Hinane to where the warriors grouped upon her shouted command and continued, 'I will go now to confront the bastard who killed my horse.'

Hinane gestured towards Nokoto, 'This man, Nokoto will run by my side as a free man, fighting with us.'

Tala shouted, 'He deserves to die.'

Hinane said with a sombre face, 'It is because of me that Atisi raided his home and killed his people. We are even.'

Tala threw her hands up in the air, she could not understand Hinane's stance in this matter, but it was not her place to question her queen and said instead, 'Great, adopting another concern.'

Hinane smiled wryly, 'Yes, and what is his, is now also mine. But first, we go to Atisi. Find me a horse.'

'Now?' Asked Izza but Tala supported Hinane, 'Yes why not. Let's go poke the bear.'

Takamat pleaded, 'Wait till morning Hinane, you're tired and emotional.'

'Don't tell me what to do Takamat,' answered Hinane with slight irritation. 'What I have to say can't wait.'

Menna also tried to reason, 'You're not thinking straight after Burn, let's...'

'Don't restrain me Menna,' and with that, she turned the mare Yeddes brought her around and pushed into a gallop.

Takamat wriggled her hands nervously in Ahina's fur as they disappeared from sight, Nokoto and the handful of his surviving men running next to Hinane, the column of warriors following.

Ahina purred her satisfaction to be in Takamat's pampering comfort, not nearly worried that her mistress had left.

Takamat turned her attention to the cat, 'I'm going to give you a bath right now, you stink.'

Ahina's eyes shined brightly and yawned while rolling onto her back, Takamat tickling her fondly on her belly.

Hinane totally ignored the required decorum when arriving at Atisi's camp. She rushed into his tent, strangely enough, no one around to constrain her. Atisi sat at a low table enjoying a meal with Soho, the house slaves standing in wait to deliver upon his every beck and call.

She halted in front of them, her eyes dark with rage.

Atisi looked sneeringly at her, 'What gives you the right to barge in here?'

'You killed my horse.'

Atisi lifted a brow, 'I assume you have proof?

'I don't need proof. Your hand stinks all over it.'

'Come on now little girl, you can't make such a claim without putting yourself at great risk.'

Hinane snapped her fingers and Nokoto came through the tent door. He threw the sword Atisi gave him to fill out his order at Atisi's feet.

Atisi's face turned grey, 'And you show me this black savage because?'

'He is witness that you gave the order.'

Atisi burst into an ugly laugh, 'Aaawwe, look at you, having to turn to a black slave for alliance. Where's your one-eyed puppy Amezwar? He paid the taxes you owed me you know. Where is he now, tired of being your...'

'Shut up,' sneered Hinane and Nokoto took one step towards Atisi, his short assegai clutched in readiness.

Atisi's mention of Amezwar shuddered through her. She remembered vaguely from Takamat's chatter when they arrived that morning, that Atisi came to her camp and demanded taxes which Amezwar paid with gold, but she said nothing of Amezwar's eye.

Atisi eyeballed Nokoto with slight hesitation, but then mocked Hinane further, 'You do know it was this man, your new savage playmate's men that took Amezwar's eye, that beautiful sapphire blue just a red pulp after...'

'I said shut your mouth,' gritted Hinane.

She looked at Nokoto, 'Is what he says true?'

Nokoto dropped his chin slightly, 'I do not know this man of which you talk, but there was a fight, I did whatever he ordered me as his slave.'

'You still are, you black bastard,' spat Atisi.

But Nokoto continued, 'I was still suffering from the wound this man gave me when he raided my village. I was weak that day and was shoved into the soil. My men only later helped me up before running away from your warriors. But I did not see the man you talk of.'

Hinane suddenly had enough and took a deep breath, 'You don't deserve to be my, or anybody else's Amenokal. You're a sadist and a killer.'

Atisi finally got up, his anger building like a volcano on the verge to erupt, 'You forget yourself.'

Hinane pushed her shoulders slightly backwards, lifted her chin and straightened her spine, 'I will never bow to you.'

And as she said that, Aete flew inside the tent. The eagle settled upon her shoulder, giving her more confidence, but it didn't hinder his step as Atisi moved closer to Hinane.

He was ready to explode, 'How dare you come to the Tamanrasset with your witchery, your poetry and your warrior women to upset my community with your talks of abundance for all. Who gave you the right to worm yourself into what I have built during the past decade.'

'You mean what you took undeservingly,' dared Hinane.

Atisi balled his fists, his fury flaring his nostrils wide, his eyes turning red and he sissed, 'You've made a mock of me for long enough. We'll settle this once

and for all at daybreak two days from now. Let's see if your so-called warriors can defeat my men.'

Hinane raked his back with her eyes when he turned upon her, dismissing her with the gesture as he disappeared through a divide deeper into his tent.

Her chest heaved up and down when she called after him, tears beginning to bridge her eyelids, 'I will take all that you own and dispense it to all the tawshets. Your reign is over.'

She left the tent with Nokoto following, her bravery of moments before transforming into fervent hand shaking. She grabbed them closely together, and her hands stopped trembling but her insides did not.

* * *

They buried Burn at sunset, following the same ritual as prescribed for any human member of their clan. It was quickly concluded with a graveside prayer led by a marabout, followed by iwichken, or condolences. Normally relatives and friends gathered at the home of the dead person, and the marabout offered a prayer and blessing after which guests ate a memorial feast.

But nobody was in the mood for a gathering or a feast, and after the last soil filled Burn's grave, they wordlessly dispersed, each into their own tent.

Hinane remained sitting next to Burn's grave for hours till she eventually fell asleep, the fatigue finally taking the overhand. It was only long after midnight that Nokoto carried his new mistress to her tent. She did not wake up when he picked her up, or when he laid her onto her pad.

He lowered onto the floor next to her and fell into a guarded sleep.

CHAPTER 31

Hinane walked back and forth in her tent, the uncertainty and anxiety rushing vigorously through her mind. Had she been too assertive in challenging Atisi like that?

Takamat must have picked on her thoughts when she said, 'You can't just challenge Atisi like that.'

'He provoked me.'

'That's exactly what he wanted. You've become a threat to his position.'

Hinane jumped from Amezwar's voice coming from the entrance of her tent, she had forgotten how much energy and nuance were contained in his voice. Her heart leapt from joy, much more than what she thought it would.

'Amezwar,' she cried out and rushed to him, her eyes fixated on the patch covering his left eye.

She embraced him, holding him tightly for a long while, drawing upon the supportive energy his closeness provided. She pulled away slightly and touched the black patch with care, 'I'm so sorry.'

Amezwar smiled, left emotionally weak from her embrace, 'It's nothing.'

But it wasn't. Takamat told her how he slumped into depression afterwards. Hinane sighed and turned away.

Amezwar looked at her long hair sweeping about her as she turned, and he put his hands on her shoulders, massaging it slightly when he felt her tension, then said, 'Atisi is scared of who you've become.'

Hinane closed her eyes, enjoying his fingers kneading into her muscles, 'Thank you for assisting with the taxes. Where did you get it?'

'I also have trading alliances with the king of the Ghana Empire,' he answered drily.

His words shocked through Hinane. Chikae.

He felt the shudder in her shoulders, and thinking it was because of Atisi, said, 'You have the alliance of most, I would say more than half of the tawshets in the Kel Ahaggar.'

Hinane turned to Takamat who watched their interaction in silence, 'Gather Yeddes, Izza, Tala and Menna.'

When they were alone, Hinane turned to face him, and they stared at each other, Hinane filled with sadness and anger at what he'd been through, and might still go through on her account. Amezwar, filled with love. The others entered and the comfortable silence between them dissipated.

Menna hopped to the inside supported with a wicker.

Hinane pointed to her missing limb with a question in her eyes. Menna brushed it aside with a wave of the hand, 'A story for later.'

Hinane didn't press the matter further as it was not important now, 'The final count of our warriors?'

'Almost two thousand strong.'

Hinane's eyes widened in surprise, 'What?'

Menna hid a smile which would have been inappropriate at this time and kept her face stern.

'Are they useful?'

Menna shook her head, 'No, we have only about five hundred fully trained and skilled warriors, the rest only came with willing hearts and hopeful spirits.'

Hinane looked at the floor, her hand brushing over her chin while thinking, then turned to Takamat, 'Go, and find me the dyers.'

Takamat hesitated, and Hinane insisted, 'Go Takamat, you can ponder later,' then softened her tone, 'For now please do as I ask.'

Then Takamat realised her panic had no place in the greater scheme of events. She threw a glance at Yeddes who gave her a nod, and she left in a hurry.

Hinane turned to Izza and Tala, 'You know what to do in preparing for battle, report back as soon as it's done. There is not much time left, and we still have to practise our main act.'

They left, but Hinane called them back, 'This would be the biggest confront

we had so far, make your preparations count.'

When they were gone, she turned to Yeddes, 'The camels and livestock... move them to safety far from here. Then help the warriors with the horses.'

Yeddes nodded and turned to leave but Hinane called him back, 'And after Takamat and I were done with our part, console her, keep her away from all of this, it is not healthy for your unborn child.'

'You know?'

Hinane nodded with a faint grin. Yeddes shook his head as he left the tent.

She turned to Amezwar who stood silent, waiting. She took his hands in hers and he lowered his chin slightly when searching her face, waiting for her orders which he would readily accept, 'Go to the Amghar you think we can trust, those who have the guts to join us and bring them here.'

He nodded, waiting for the rest.

Hinane suddenly dropped her guard, anxiety roaming freely on her face, her voice a little raspy, 'What are our true chances?'

'That depends on the belief in yourself, the strength of your army, and us as your allies, and your faith in the gods.'

'Do you believe?'

Amezwar cupped her face between his warm long fingers, the one eye peering into hers, 'The people will follow you Hinane. You showed them only respect, compassion, dignity, and empowerment, all the things Atisi did not.'

He paused before continuing, 'They will return it a hundredfold.'

But Hinane insisted, 'I ask again, do you believe we can prevail?'

'Yes. Conflict had been looming since long before you arrived. But the gods waited for you.'

He brought her hands to his lips and whispered, 'My liver fights with yours.'

Hinane smiled weakly at the reference of his liver, the custom of the Berber people when they wanted to show their depth of feelings.

Amezwar left without another word or hesitation.

She turned to Menna, 'Did you prepare the wands?'

Menna nodded.

'Do not reveal this part of the strategy to the Amghar, they would never understand it.'

Menna grimaced.

'And the main group knows our formation?'

'Yes.'

'And we have enough horses?'

'We could do with lots more but we will manage.'

Menna was cold and calculated in planning strategies, and after they carefully went through the tactics for this battle, Hinane's confidence returned.

'Go, now, and return when Amezwar has grouped the Amghar here.'

Hinane walked to the sleeping area in her tent and lit a few candles. She knelt, closed her eyes and prayed to her gods. She asked for guidance and strength, then waited for the voices from the energies which stated, 'When you and your people gather in alliance, know that you can create and unleash vast and powerful realities.'

Takamat interrupted, 'The women are here Hinane.'

Hinane walked to the women outside her tent, a group of about twenty, 'They all know the arts of dyeing very well,' said Takamat.

'Take all the fabric I will send you and dye them indigo blue. Work swiftly. Work through the night if you have to. Takamat, help them with whatever they will need to accomplish this swiftly.'

Takamat nodded with a frown, 'Why indigo?'

Hinane paused to answer, 'Indigo increases profound insights, and instant understandings. It's for inspirations that seem to come out of the blue,' smiled Hinane.

Takamat giggled.

Hinane turned serious again, 'Because it's the colour of pride and dignity, the colour of unity,' she paused for a little bit then sighed, 'And by veiling them, I protect the identities of those who fight with me, so if we should fail in our cause, they could still pledge their alliances to Atisi if they so wish, without him knowing who stood against him.'

Takamat gaped with wide-eye understanding, amazed at Hinane's furtive and compassionate gesture in protecting the people. She walked towards Hinane, took her hands in hers and kissed them, her sudden empathy weakening Hinane's resolve.

Hinane trembled, the tension almost too much to bear, and her eyes dammed with tears and fear.

Takamat soothed, 'Don't fear my queen. You're the most powerful woman I know. You can do anything.'

Hinane tried to compose herself. She wiped the tears away and straightened her shoulders, smiling weakly at Takamat, 'Did you prepare the white honey when I was away, exactly in the manner I've asked?'

Takamat nodded, 'It's ready.'

Hinane jested, 'I'm sure Yeddes made a fuss about the bees?'

Takamat giggled, 'He eventually warmed to the practice.'

'Thanks, you can send me the hawkers now. And Takamat, tell no one.'

Hinane waited only a short while for Takamat to group them before her tent. She ordered Takamat away before addressing them, 'Go now Takamat, and when you've finished overseeing the fabric dyeing, go to your husband and keep your baby safe.'

The knob in Takamat's throat prevented her from saying anything, tears welled in her eyes and she could only manage a nod when leaving.

Hinane called after her, 'And say the prayers for us Takamat.'

Later when she watched as the several Amghar arrived so Hinane could brief them, Takamat walked to her tent and prayed.

CHAPTER 32

The wind carried Hinane's voice over the multitudes to the back of the column, 'Be present in only this moment, be now the best that you'd ever been, keep focus on the prize that awaits, as it will set you free.'

Hinane turned to smile encouragingly at Nokoto and his handful of men at her left side. His fight today, was to free the spirits of his wives and children. They covered their entire black bodies with red copper oxide that reflected the sunlight. The ritual represented aggression and liminal boundaries between tribes, the redness symbolising life giving powers and transition.

She propelled her axe in a make ready movement, Nokoto grinning back while hitting a clenched fist against his heart to show his eagerness and allegiance.

Aete sat on Hinane's right shoulder, Ahina crouching on hind legs next to her on the warm sand. Amezwar and her closest warriors in a long line at her right, they, along with Nokoto's tribe, the only ones not covered with the blue veils.

Her gaze scanned over the veiled crowds with only their eyes and the top of their noses visible, making it impossible to identify who were warriors from Hinane's tribe, or who were the Amghar with their own fighters. Their disguised, but unified appearance with swords and lances glimmering in the sun, made for a frightful and intimidating sight.

The blue cloth was wrapped about their heads to form a low turban. The one end was then brought across the face, the top line of the cloth draped across the nose, and the bottom hanging well below the chin.

She stood with a grateful heart that so many supported her. She was also surprised to learn that Tedus and Usem were in the veiled lines since she did not expect them to join in the actual battle fight. She smiled inwardly, maybe because there was not much action like this around here and everybody wanted to be a part of what would happen today.

Today, Hinane chose to fight on foot without a horse, the thought of taking another mount into battle felt like betraying Burn. The memory of Burn's slaughter jolted through her, intensifying the reason for this fight.

Hinane scanned the horizon for any movements, the sweat already running from underneath her full warrior dress. She pulled slightly on the sword-belt, deriving some encouragement from it, when Atisi and his columns appeared in the distance with a huge dust cloud looming behind them.

Hinane frowned a little. One would think a man like Atisi would deploy better battle strategy than just charging blindly.

She calmly watched them as Atisi and his men drew closer. She was ready and in control, the soft wind and Amezwar's heavy breathing next to her the only sounds in her ears.

'You don't have to stand with me unveiled Amezwar.'

'I fight openly with you my love.'

Hinane glanced at him quickly, then turned to face her warrior front lines, the most prominent being Menna, Izza, Tala, Bahac, and Damya, Siman, Kwella,

Tayri and Kitah who stood in the lead, the lot of them also fighting on foot.

Upon her signal, they now quickly formed a procedural circle about her. They lifted and swung their axes above their heads, then held it out to meet Hinane's axe while chanting, 'May courage brace our hearts and Athena put wings to our spirits. In the outstretched hand of Athena stands Nike, our goddess of strength and speed, the mediator of our success. May we walk this wary path with insight and valour and may those who wish us dead perish at the tips of our swords. Today, let Nike carry her palm wreath as the messenger of our victory.'

They moved closer to each other and lifted the axes into a pyramid from above their heads, the blades still locked into each other. Each of them dropped to one knee and stooped to a bow, 'And in this vow, Athena of the sun is our sentry and protector.'

They broke the circle to face Atisi's oncoming forces which were now almost upon them. Hinane gave the signal and the warriors on horses charged forward, launching their slings filled with poisoned spiked mud balls.

The mud balls had little immediate effect, but it still brought some men down, the poison on the spikes would spread through the ones pierced within minutes.

The archers immediately followed and arrows soared like a swarm of bees upon Atisi's men, hitting into their bodies with thudding impacts. The next lines, Nokoto, his men and the veiled troopers, charged in and pulled their rivals from their horses, forcing them to meet their sharp swords, assegais, spears and brutal axes in one on one combat.

When the bulk of Atisi's columns reached them, the majority of the unskilled fighters in Hinane's legion jumped from where they were buried underneath the sand on the backlines and sides of Atisi's men. They attacked them unexpectedly from the sides and rear, which was the last formation to encircle them into a loop trap with no way to escape the onslaughts from Hinane's forces.

Hinane's attention was fixed upon Atisi and his closest guards as they approached her. She narrowed her eyes, the maddening honey would soon have the desired effect, she thought. Late last night, the peddlers reported back that her orders were followed exactly. The previous day Hinane sent them to Atisi's tawshet to peddle the sweet white honey, a very rare find in the deserts and most men would grasp any chance to obtain this valuable delicacy.

Hinane grinned cunningly. The white honey produced from the nectar of Andromeda flowers, the rosemary heath, contained grayanotoxins which could have hallucinogenic effects in the mind, paralyse the limbs, and eventually the diaphragm which resulted in death. The flowers contained alkaloids, organic compounds, that were poisonous to humans but not to bees.

Hinane learned from Lunja's book that in the first century BC, honey produced from these plants poisoned Roman troops under Pompey the Great when they attacked the Heptakometes in Turkey.

The peddlers sold it only to the households of Atisi's legions and she was told it would be served on Atisi's table with his evening meal. She frowned, if Atisi had any at all, he should be feeling the effect any moment. But he showed no traces of it and charged towards her with a callous look upon his face. But

before he could reach her, he got intercepted by veiled fighters in a bout.

Hinane gestured towards Menna that she was ready for the stick wands. Kitah, who acted as Menna's second, together with several others, brought the sharpened sticks and left them in heaps and heaps packed in one long row. Izza and Tala moved to Hinane's sides where she stood in the middle of the row sticks. She closed her eyes, Izza and Tala following her lead while taking her outstretched hands.

By great effort of their minds, they raised their bodies' energies. When their bodies were scorching hot from the charge, they caused the energy to flow towards the wands. The energies entered the wand sticks, which started to vibrate slightly.

They started to chant, 'Wood supports, alike the vital force. Wood breathes, alike the vital force.'

Upon the words breathe, the sticks lifted from the ground, hanging there in mid-air in their hordes when Hinane opened her eyes. She lifted her arms higher, her hands still clasped in Tala and Izza's. With her mind she pointed the sticks towards the approaching men and they shouted louder, 'Alike the vital force wood fires.'

The sticks set aflame in an instant and flew like discharged arrows towards the men. The sharpened and poisoned heads pierced through chests, arms, necks and across their faces, knocking them from their horses and feet, and immediately combusted into flames upon impact.

Atisi was quick enough to duck the oncoming arrow swarms. He slid from his horse unharmed when he lost his balance when one of the sticks rubbed against his upper arm. But the shock numbed his entire arm and made his head swim.

Soho also ditched a blow but remained seated upon his horse. With that, Aete flew in and knocked him through the face with a wing. The motion was so amusing that Hinane almost burst out into hysterical laughter.

Izza and Tala engaged in heated contests with two of Atisi's other men who broke through the lines and escaped the flaming wands. Hinane picked up her axe at the helm but left the head resting in the sand, when Soho stopped his horse next to her. The moment when he jumped off, she brought her axe straight up between his legs. The sharp blade sliced through his genitals and cut his pelvis bone in half.

While this was happening Atisi approached her from behind with his sword raised in an attempt to bring it directly down upon her head. But he lost his footing, the maddening honey finally taking effect. His eyes glazed and his mind became infected with wild psychoactive forces. But his maddening state gave him an upsurge of energy to launch another attack. He ran into Hinane and shoved her upon the sand, his strength almost inhumane. But the toxins restrained his motions and he dropped his sword. Hinane shot up to her feet and raised her axe for the final blow.

She did not see the man lunging towards her from behind, but Amezwar did. He hurled forward and pierced his sword through the attacker's back, the blade jutting out in front, stopping a few fingers width from Hinane's torso.

When her axe separated Atisi's head from his neck, she stared with shock at

the sword-pierced man who still stood upright behind her when she spun around from the motion of her strike.

The attacker fell forward against her and Hinane gazed at Amezwar, immediately realising he saved her life. All around them bodies dropped, those not dying from the honey, or the poisoned spikes, arrows and sticks, perished from sword and assegai attacks. And by the time the sun reached midday, the fight was over, the handful of Atisi's surviving men disappearing over the dunes with no leader left to defend.

The blue veiled warriors shoved and waved their swords into the air, cheering, shouting as they ran towards Hinane. They picked her up, lifting her high on their arms while yelling, 'Our queen, our mother.'

With a blood and dust sullied face, Hinane laughed and screamed their victory cries with them.

After they have quieten down and put her back on her feet, Hinane turned to them and shouted loudly over the crowds, 'From today on, all who have stood with me in this battle, all who have joined me before, all who wants to follow me now and hereafter, will become known as the Tuareg, the freemen, the blue people of the desert.'

They cheered and Hinane lifted her axe, 'Proudly united in strength and honour.'

Another roar went up and the ones in the front lifted Hinane on their shoulders once more and carried her away to her tawshet.

Ahina sat quietly on a dune hill all the while the action unfolded before her. She was commanded to stay there the moment Atisi appeared upon the horizon. She remained still at her post for the duration of the battle, it was not her fight to fight and her mistress did not need her today, she was in total control.

As her mistress was being dragged away by her people, seemingly totally forgetting about her, Ahina gave a short bleat when the hunger growled in her belly.

She raised and straddled towards the battlefield with her tail swinging between her legs. Aete came flying towards her, landed upon her spine and together they walked through the bloodied corpses. The sweepers Menna had left to clean up, tried to scare off the huge colony of vultures but they just kept on coming, squawking excitedly for the unexpected feast.

Birds were a common food for Ahina, and without effort she caught a vulture unaware where it was picking the eyes from a cadaver.

When Ahina crouched down upon her tummy to start feeding, Aete gave a satisfied cry and disappeared into the blue sky, flying free and high towards the mountain ranges in the distance, her duty was done here, for now.

CHAPTER 33

It took them a week to prepare a proper celebration feast for their new queen and tribal identity. A huge tent was erected for the occasion and servants scampered about with preparing ample food and drink.

Takamat fiddled around for days trying to design and fabricate a suitable tunic for Hinane. She chattered non-stop with rosy cheeks and stars in her eyes, driving Hinane to the end of her nerves. But she managed to endure the overload of attention with Ahina's calm purring and silent presence.

When the initiation day finally arrived, Hinane felt a nervous pull in her stomach. She overthrew Atisi's rule, but it only meant that she was now responsible for the entire confederation's prosperity and future. But the feeling dissipated quickly when she entered the tent, it was a concern for another day.

Today she would celebrate her new status and she beamed towards the attendees. Crowds of people already sat engaged in light-hearted conversation, eating and drinking. Laughter filled the tent from corner to corner, food lined the tables, dancers entertained, and a music band played jovially in one corner.

Hinane took her place at the table prepared for the Amghar and her most trusted warriors. She took Amezwar's proffered arm and allowed him to settle her comfortably on the sitting pad. She looked about her with a happy glow and contentment warm in her heart.

They looked upon her with respect and veneration. The past week's murmuring throughout the oasis, was deliberating about her supernatural abilities, the willing and controlling of those hundreds of lifeless wands to move on its own and kill in droves.

From across the table, Tedus smiled at her then hammered on the table.

While getting to her feet she lifted her cup, 'To our new queen.'

She made a courteous bow towards Hinane and a roar went up.

Tedus waited till the sounds died down and continued, 'You have shown compassion towards us all. You've displayed your strength, your integrity, and your ability,' she lifted her cup higher, 'And I pledge my alliance and tawshet to your ruling of the Kel Ahaggar.'

The other Amghar stood up, saying one by one: 'And I.'

When all of them had made their pledges, they shouted together, 'To our Tamenokalt, to Tin Hinan.'

Hinane stood up, gave a long respectful bow then straightened and brushed her gaze over them all the while she spoke, 'I look at you who once had your pride and possessions stripped away by a selfish ruler. My mission now will be to change this confederation from a self-gaining politically inclined mind, to an economically inclined mind.'

They cheered but she signalled them to be silent, 'Because true empowerment is economic empowerment. And if we work together, prosperity would be inexorable.'

She could not contain the roar that followed and had to wait several seconds before continuing, 'We will build this confederation together and be known from

this day forward as the Tuareg.'

Hinane lifted her cup and saluted, 'For many centuries to come, we will stand beautiful, proud and strong, striking chords of respect in all who might behold our advance.'

They thundered their reverence with slams on the table and cheerful cries. Amezwar looked at her over the brim of his cup with his love disclosed openly on his face. Hinane felt his stare and looked at him. He tilted his head slightly and she stared at the patch covering his one eye, thinking of how he defended her honour and saved her life. She sighed inwardly and gave him a skewed smile while nodding in gratitude.

Takamat, sitting at Hinane's other side, saw the interplay and whispered in Hinane's ear, 'No doubt his loyalty has made you queen. You owe him much. If it cannot be your heart's true love my queen, then at least let it be your respect in the way he would appreciate it.'

Hinane thought about this for a while then slowly nodded in agreement. She met Amezwar's gaze again and smiled with a silent promise in her eyes. The sun broke on Amezwar's face, his happiness like a dagger in her heart.

And exactly at this moment, much bigger threats loomed which would later invade the territories of the Tuareg. Threats much bigger than what Atisi's menace had ever been. Dangers that would redirect the spiritual strength and future of the Tuareg forever.

* * *

In 439AD, the Vandal king Geiseric chose to break the peace treaty with the Roman Empire. He invaded the entire province of Africa Proconsularis and laid siege to Carthage, capturing a large part of the Western Roman navy docked in the port of Carthage. Most of the Carthaginians were attending the races at the hippodrome, and Geiseric captured the city without a fight.

Geiseric made Carthage his capital, and styled himself as the king of the Vandals, the Alans and of the Diocese of Africa. This territory, incorporated all the provinces of North Africa, except Mauretania Tingitana, including Africa Proconsularis (Zeugitana) covering the territories of the north, Byzacena the south, Mauretania Sitifensis, Mauretania Caesariensis, Numidia and Tripolitania, in essence the entire coastline of Algeria and Tunisia, including some mountainous hinterlands plus the western half of Libya's coastline.

Other large and important cities that befell under his rule, included Hadrumetum, the capital of Byzacena, and Hippo Regius near the mouth of the river Ubus. Hippo Regius was the royal residency for former Numidian kings and home of the philosopher and theologian Saint Augustine of Hippo.

In that year of 430AD, the Vandals, then already ruled by Geiseric, besieged the city of Hippo as the aged bishop, Saint Augustine, laid dying within.

Shortly after his death on 28 August 430AD, they took over the city after an eighteen-month siege in 431AD, which was the capital of the Vandals until they moved to Carthage.

The Vandals controlled the country as a tyranny force, imposing a policy of

strict separation and totally suppressed the local Romano-African population. Since the Vandals were adherents of the Arian heresy, the semi-Trinitarian doctrines of Arius a priest of Egypt, they ruefully persecuted the Catholic faithful.

Previously in 426AD, the Alan king, Attaces, was killed in battle against the Visigoths, and this branch of the Alans subsequently appealed to the Asding Vandal king Gunderic to accept the Alan crown.

The separate ethnic identity of Respendial's Alans dissolved and although some of the Alans were thought to have remained in Iberia, the sovereign states of Spain, Portugal, and Andorra, most Alans went to North Africa with the Vandals in 429AD.

Geiseric issued his own coinage as a symbol of independence, but otherwise they totally adopted the Roman way of life, its administration, buildings and culture, except their religion. Geiseric tried to impose the Arian beliefs upon the population, persecuting churchmen, seizing church treasures and appointing only Arians to positions at court.

Geiseric only had one weakness. He was unable to vault upon a horse because of a fall he had taken as a young man, therefore he tempered his desire for military glory upon the seas.

Thus, for the next thirty years, Geiseric and his soldiers sailed up and down the Mediterranean, living as pirates and raiders, leaving only destruction in their wake, even as far as the Hoggar.

CHAPTER 34

430AD - HIPPO REGIUS - NORTH AFRICA - CATHOLIC CHURCH OF SAINT AUGUSTINE - NINE YEARS BEFORE HINANE'S REIGN

Bishop St Augustine sat with his head bowed forward, his lips moving silently as he prayed in front of the altar. The statue of Mary stood cold and lonely upon it with a Jesus Christ effigy hanging from the high walls on a wooden cross behind it.

The candle flames moved slightly in the little breeze that came through the door with Possidius, St Augustine's biographer and very good friend. Distorted shadows of Possidius were reflected across the walls as he walked towards the old bishop, his shadow images portraying strange and ominous illusions of a looming tragedy.

Possidius looked away in agony when seeing the tears running down the

cheeks of the old bishop. He stood silently in respect, then walked closer when the last words of St Augustine's prayers died down.

Possidius helped St Augustine to his feet and with a deep sigh from the bishop, supported him with shoulder under his armpits through the doors to the rooms in the back of the church. St Augustine sat down behind his desk, slowly shifting into a comfortable position while Possidius filled a chair on the other side.

Possidius' mind wandered while St Augustine took out his scribes and letters, folding through them with care, searching for the documents he was busy with last.

Four years before in 426AD, St Augustine, wishing to spare his city the turmoil of an election after his death, forced the clergy and people to select another deacon as his auxiliary and successor. St Augustine transferred to him the entire administration of the church so that he could devote his time to meditation and prayer.

In 427AD the disgrace and revolt of the warlord Count Bonifacius, caused the empress Placidia to send the Vandals into Roman Africa to oppose Bonifacius. Bonifacius controlled six whole provinces, but suffered serious problems as governor, among them, disappointing St Augustine by marrying an Arian, having bad relations with Berber tribesmen and several legal disputes.

Because of this, the Roman general Flavius Aetius considered Bonifacius as a rival. Aetius persuaded Empress Placidia, who acted as regent for her son the future Emperor Valentinian III, that Bonifacius was disloyal to her and had tyrannical aspirations for himself in North Africa.

She summoned Bonifacius to the imperial court at Ravenna to reassure his loyalty and to explain his failures in North Africa. Aetius secretly sent Bonifacius a private message informing him that Placidia was planning a plot against his life. Aetius was pleased to see his plan succeed as Bonifacius declined to appear at the court and was subsequently accused of treason and declared a rebel.

Placidia sent the imperial army to arrest Bonifacius but he managed to elude them. Placidia contracted the Vandals to fish him out and they drove Bonifacius to seek refuge in Hippo, where many bishops already shrouded from the Vandals.

Being deeply grieved at the devastation of Roman Africa, St Augustine tried to reconcile Count Bonifacius and Placidia. Peace was reestablished between the two of them, but Geiseric, the Vandal king, made no peace with Placidia or Bonifacius. He invaded Hippo, and even though the city was well fortified, it still suffered the horrors of an eighteen months' siege and destruction.

During this time, St Augustine had opened the doors to his monastery-home to welcome episcopal colleagues who were asking for hospitality and protection.

Possidius smiled softly when recounting what St Augustine suggested in his response to Honoratus, Bishop of Tiabe, who had asked him whether a Bishop, priest or any man of the Church with the barbarians hot on his heels, had permission to flee in saving his life.

St Augustine had replied that when danger is common to all, that is, for

bishops, clerics and laymen, they were not to abandon the people. Either let all depart together to safe places, or let those who must remain not be deserted by those who must provide for their necessities, in things pertaining to the Church that is. And so let them share life in common, or share in common that which the father of their family appointed them to suffer. Such conduct was especially the proof of love.

St Augustine became the Christian Catholic Bishop of Hippo Regius, but in his early years, he was heavily influenced by Manichaeism and the Neoplatonism of Plotinus. After his conversion to Christianity and baptism in 387AD, Augustine developed his own approach to philosophy and theology, accommodating a variety of different perspectives.

Possidius took a while to realise St Augustine was watching him.

Then the old bishop asked, 'You've received word from the northern territories?'

Possidius smiled at the old bishop's never ending insight and patience, but then turned serious when saying with a nod, 'Although the order to end the struggle against Donatism is long gone, the sect is far from being defunct. In some urban centres, we are making progress, but our successes are limited due to their influences. And off course, the Vandal attacks complicate the issue even more by forcing Arian Christianity upon the people.'

St Augustine glanced at Possidius without expression, his eyes bleak and a faded grey, his thoughts returning to the start of the Donatist struggle.

The Donatists was a Christian schismatic sect in North Africa that broke with the Roman Catholics in 312AD over the election of Caecilian as bishop of Carthage. The primate of Numidia, Secundus of Tigisi, who claimed the right of consecrating the bishop of Carthage, arrived with seventy bishops, declared Caecilian's election invalid and appointed Majorinus to replace Caecilian.

The Emperor Constantine the Great ordered arbitration of the controversy and finally gave a decision in favour of Caecilian in November 316AD. By that time, Majorinus had been replaced by Donatus, who gave his name to the schism which was to divide North Africa for more than a century.

During the final decade of the fourth century, Donatism was at its peak with over four hundred bishops. But more trouble was brewing when Primian, a more extreme and less able leader, succeeded Parmenian. Then in 396AD Optatus, the Donatist bishop of Thamugadi, joined forces with Gildo, the imperial appointee in Africa, in a revolt against Rome and attempted to establish a nationalist government in North Africa.

An invasion force was assembled, the forces met in 398AD and Gildo's army was routed. Optatus was seized and executed, Roman rule was restored and the Catholics were able to recur under the leadership of two very able men, Aurelius of Carthage and himself, St Augustine.

St Augustine was an influential figure during this period, calling for reform and renewal, and writing books against the teachings of Donatus. But the lead was taken by Aurelius, who decided to hold annual councils in order to maintain momentum and keep the leadership of the churches in close contact. Over the next few years, able bishops were appointed in many Donatist centres of

influence. Gradually they won over the local inhabitants and some Donatists bishops even transferred allegiance to the Catholic churches.

The Donatists movement was now under the leadership of Primian of Carthage, Emeritus of Caesarea and Petilian of Constantine. Their resilience, determination and courage ensured that Donatism would survive, but they were no match for the new Catholic leaders.

In 399AD laws against heretics were, at St Augustine's instigation, applied to the movement even though it was not yet officially designated as a heresy.

Frustrated by the continuing resistance of the Donatists, and secure in their enjoyment of imperial support, the annual council at Carthage decided in 403AD on a policy of persecution. But they chose to apply economic pressure rather than making further martyrs.

These measures had hardly been implemented before the emperor, Honorius, issued an edict of unity in 405AD proscribing Donatism as a heresy. He prohibited services, confiscated property and exiled the clergy, not with the death penalty, but by flogging.

But by 410AD, it was clear that persecution in trying to suppress Donatism was no more effective than throughout the past century. A Catholic delegation requested Honorius to convene a conference in Carthage to settle the conflict once and for all. The emperor agreed and sent Marcellinus as his mediator to convene this.

There was never any doubt about the outcome of this conference as Marcellinus was a friend of St Augustine and declared in favour of the Catholics. The decision was broadcasted throughout northern Africa, forbidding Donatists meetings and confiscating their property.

Between 412AD and 429AD, before the Vandal invasion, St Augustine led a concerted campaign to enforce the decision and to reunite the churches throughout northern Africa. But Donatism was still active, and resisted in various ways.

To complicate the work of St Augustine even more, Pelagius and his disciple Celestius had sought refuge after a council held at Carthage in 412AD, condemning Pelagians for their attacks upon the doctrine of original sin, the very first sin that Adam committed. The consequences of this first sin, was considered the hereditary stain with which people were supposedly born as descendants from Adam.

Pelagius believed it to be different. He denied the primitive state in paradise and original sin, and insisted on the naturalness of sexual desire and the death of the body. He ascribed the actual existence and universality of sin to the bad example which Adam set by his first sin.

As all his ideas were chiefly rooted in the old pagan philosophy, especially in the popular system of the Stoics rather than in Christianity, he regarded the moral strength of man's will when steered by asceticism, as sufficient in itself to desire and to attain the loftiest ideal of virtue.

The value of Christ's redemption was, in his opinion, limited mainly to instruction and an example which Christ threw into the balance as a counterweight against Adam's wicked action, so that nature retained the ability

to conquer sin and to gain eternal life even without the aid of grace.

By justification, people were indeed cleansed of personal sins through faith alone, but this pardon implied no interior renovation or sanctification of the soul.

Although the Pelagian heresy was banned in 418AD, the combat was continued in writing against Julian of Eclanum, who assumed the leadership of the party and violently attacked St Augustine.

Towards 426AD the relics of the Pelagians emerged. The first members were monks of Hadrumetum followed by others from Marseilles led by Cassian, the celebrated abbot of Saint-Victor. Unable to admit the absolute pointlessness of destiny, they sought a middle course between St Augustine and Pelagius, and maintained that grace must be given to those who merit it, and be denied to others who didn't. Hence goodwill had the precedence, it desired, it asked, and God rewarded.

Informed of their views by Prosper of Aquitaine, St Augustine once more accounted in his letter *De Prædestinatione Sanctorum*, how these first desires for salvation were due to the grace of God, which therefore absolutely controlled predestination.

St Augustine closed his eyes, rested his head back against the high chair and sighed deeply, suddenly tired of all the different and distorted viewpoints. Who knew with absolute certainty, what was true. Only God knew.

Possidius frowned when he saw the hopelessness on St Augustine's face and said hesitantly, 'But we have a pressing, and possibly more serious problem than the Donatists and the Pelagians, don't we bishop.'

He paused, then said, 'Arianism.'

St Augustine nodded and replied with a hoarse voice, 'Continue with what's upon your mind.'

'This Arian Christianity as presented in Europe and which the Vandals brought here, might just curb all that we have achieved. There is no limit to Geiseric's savage atrocities and cruelties. Everything within his reach is laid to waste. Looting, murder, torture of all kinds, brigandry and countless other unspeakable crimes, without any mercy to men, women, children, priests and ministers of God.'

St Augustine suddenly looked very old and fragile, 'This could mean a total shift for the Catholic Romans, a total shift for Roman Africa,' he said with a somewhat thwarted tone.

Later when he sat alone, St Augustine's mind wondered from being raised as a Christian, then becoming a hedonist, then adopting the Manichaean religion much to the despair of his mother Monica, to having an affair with his lover for over thirteen years who gave birth to his son Adeodatus.

At the age of thirty, he had won the most visible academic position in the Latin world and moved to Milan. Here, he changed to embrace the New Academy movement and studied Neoplatonism. His mother arranged a society marriage, for which he abandoned his concubine. He truly loved her, sighed St Augustine as he remembered their life together. He was deeply hurt by ending this relationship, and the experience eventually produced a decreased sensitivity

to pain.

He had to wait two years until his betrothed fiancé became of age and in the interim took another concubine. St Augustine eventually broke off his engagement, left his second concubine, but also never renewed his relationship with his true love.

In the summer of 386AD, after having heard the story of Saint Anthony of the Desert which greatly inspired him, St Augustine underwent a profound personal crisis, leading him to convert to Christianity. He abandoned his career in rhetoric, quit his teaching position in Milan, gave up any ideas of marriage, and devoted himself entirely to serving God and to the practices of priesthood.

Upon his return to North Africa, St Augustine sold his patrimony and gave the money to the poor. The only thing he kept was the family house which he converted into the monastic foundation. In 391AD, he was ordained a priest in Hippo Regus, in 395AD he was made coadjutor bishop of Hippo and became full bishop shortly thereafter.

Later that night St Augustine was stricken with a fatal illness that lasted three months. But he still performed one of the few miracles attributed to him. When he was confined to his sick bed, a desperate man visited.

He begged, 'Old bishop, please lay your healing hands upon an ill relative.'

St Augustine replied, 'If I had any power to cure the sick, I would surely apply it on myself first.'

The visitor declared, 'I was told in a dream to come to you so my relatives could be made whole.'

St Augustine no longer hesitated and asked that his relative be brought to him. He laid his hands upon the sick man, and the man departed from St Augustine's presence completely healed.

St Augustine spent his final days in prayer and repentance, requesting that the penitential Psalms of David be hung on his walls so that he could read them all the time. He also directed that the library of the church in Hippo and all the books therein should be carefully preserved.

After three months of admirable patience and fervent prayer, he passed away on 28 August 430AD at the age of seventy-six years.

Shortly after his death the Vandals lifted the siege of Hippo, but returned not long thereafter and burned the city to the ground. They destroyed all of it, except St Augustine's cathedral and library which they've left untouched. Among his greatest works, were the book Confessions and fifteen volumes on the City of God which took him thirty years to write.

Possidius admired St Augustine as a man of powerful intellect and a stirring orator who took every opportunity to defend Christianity against its detractors. Possidius also described St Augustine's personal traits in detail, drawing a portrait of a man who ate sparingly, worked tirelessly, despised gossip, shunned the temptations of the flesh, and exercised prudence in financial stewardship.

Late one night when Possidius was filed to seclusion he wrote:

More tears than usual were his bread, night and day. And when he had reached the very end of his life, his old age caused him, more than others, grief and mourning. Indeed, this man of God saw the massacres and the destruction

of Hippo Regus. Houses in the countryside were pulled down and the inhabitants killed by the enemy or put to flight and dispersed. Private churches belonging to priests and ministers were demolished, sacred virgins and religious scattered on every side. Some died under torture, others were killed by the sword, still others taken prisoner, losing the integrity of their soul and body and even their faith, reduced by their enemies to a long, drawn-out and painful slavery.

He bequeathed to his church numerous clergy and also monasteries of men and women who had taken vows of chastity under the obedience of their superiors. He left to a nation, libraries containing his books and discourses where the faithful always found him alive.

He put the scribe down and frowned. It appeared that St Augustine had refined his beliefs during his lifetime, although he caused some confusion.

St Augustine did not envision original sin as originating structural changes in the universe, and even suggested that the bodies of Adam and Eve were already created mortal before the Fall. Apart from his specific views, St Augustine recognised that the interpretation of the creation story was difficult, and remarked that believers should be willing to change their minds about it as new information arises.

Then in controversy, in his City of God scriptures, St Augustine rejected both the immortality of the human race as proposed by pagans, and contemporary ideas of certain Greek and Egyptian ages that differed from the Church's sacred writings.

St Augustine wrote:

'Let us, then, omit the speculations of men who know not what they say, when they speak of the nature and origin of the human race. For some hold the same opinion regarding men, that they hold regarding the world itself, that they have always been. They are deceived too by those highly mendacious documents which profess to give the history of many thousand years, although, reckoning by the sacred writings, we find that not six thousand years have yet passed.'

Possidius sighed and whispered to himself, 'All these philosophies but no sure answers. So many individual dictators manipulate scriptures to enforce control over the masses, all for power, territory and gold.'

Then while packing away St Augustine's scriptures, preserving it for generations to come, his thoughts trailed to one of St Augustine's quotes which he mentioned in one of his sermons...

'Love God, and do what you will.'

CHAPTER 35

PRESENT DAY, 453AD, ABALESSA, AHAGGAR

'The serpent is evil, remove it,' yelled the customer, angry at the ironsmith and threw the dagger back on the working bench.

'The serpent has always represented the womb of mother earth,' answered the ironsmith with narrowed eyes while scrutinising the intertwined snake and angel design he crafted on the dagger's hilt.

'You can't depict God's sacred angels along with it,' ranted the customer further without hearing the ironsmith's justification. He picked up the dagger again and looked at the image more closely, then blasted, 'And these angels are not right either.'

The ironsmith sighed. These days he'd received all sorts of requests and demands, becoming more and more difficult to satisfy patrons' whims.

The angel which his customer requested at first, was widely depicted exactly the same as the pagan victory goddess Nike, so he answered, 'The angel image you wanted was originally the angel Nike which you Christians also adopted. Nike has wings and is portrayed with the victor's wreath and palm, and so are the angels of the Christians. So see it's all the same.'

The effigy of Nike, the goddess of strength and speed, the mediator of success between gods and men, became very popular in designs since Hinane took over reign fourteen years ago. According to her closest followers, Hinane and her warrior army were shielded by Nike in the battle against Atisi, and the use of the image was considered by many as a form of protection.

Artists frequently portrayed the goddess hovering with outspread wings, wreaths and palms over the victor in a struggle. For her functions referred to success, not only in war or battles, but also in all other challenging undertakings. But since the Christians copied their representations of their God's angels from Nike, it became an object of confusion.

The customer's face bulged and reddened. He grabbed the ironsmith at his shirt's collar, 'I don't want that pagan bull on my dagger, you hear.'

His loud voice already attracted a couple of curious bystanders and they clustered around them.

The ironsmith lifted his arms in an apologetic manner while saying, 'It's one and the same my friend and....,' but the customer interrupted him with a blow to his nose, causing blood to splatter in droplets all over his shirt.

A bystander who followed the argument closely, lost his nerve and punched the customer on his jaw. The customer fell to the ground while his hitter yelled, 'You Christians are nothing but trouble.'

Yeddes, who walked passed on his way back to his homestead, paused when the customer first hit the ironsmith and now cut in with, 'Enough.'

Yeddes saw the iron disk glitter on a chain around the customer's neck as he struggled back to his feet. It was the same as the one Amalu always wore on his wrist and Yeddes didn't question further about the bout.

The anchor-cross symbol had become a favoured relic among Christian believers in their community, the cross resembling their faith, and the anchor their hope for salvation. But it also became the centrefold object whenever

trouble was brewing in the settlement, frowned Yeddes .

In the past few years, since Amalu took on the Christian faith, becoming an avid supporter and spreading the teachings of the bible among the confederation, frequent breakouts occurred with Amalu quietly fuelling the upsurges. Christians and pagans became increasingly in conflict and Yeddes, Hinane and Yattuy had discussed the issue at length lately, considering it as a perfidious manifestation.

Yeddes turned to the bystanders, 'Go home. Busy yourself with more useful things.'

The gathering dissipated and Yeddes attended to the ironsmith's broken nose while he recounted the quarrel upon Yeddes' request.

Afterwards, Yeddes walked home at a slow pace, reminiscing about the happenings in the Kel Ahaggar settlement since Hinane took reign as Amenokal.

The confederation had grown considerably in size, population and wealth, and the streets were lined with stalls and booths occupied with ironsmiths, leather makers, fabric dyers, weavers, goldsmiths, stone cutters, fruits and vegetable produce, and salt, millet and wheat merchants.

It was a happy environment, except for the increasing conflicts between the followers of different religions. Citizens were sitting calmly in groups in the streets as Yeddes walked past. They played games like the tiddas, a game performed with small stones and sticks. The izagag was played with small stones or dried fruits, and the iswa played by picking up stones while throwing another stone.

With the teachings and influences of Hinane, a more complex society formed. The Tuareg was divided into different groups, laggaren nobles or Imajeren warriors, and the Imghad or vassals, also called Imrad, the freemen, with a series of tribes, tawshets which bonded together under Hinane. The rest of the community was divided into different levels of Iklan, servants or former slave captives incorporated into the different tawshets.

Although Hinane insisted all her people be taught the Tifinagh language, they still used several dialects spoken in the different regions which they conquered. Most of them could speak Tamajaq, Tamasheq or Tamahaq, the southern Berber languages native to all the inhabitants who joined Hinane's Kel confederation.

The Tuareg's most famous symbol became the Tagelmust, the indigo blue-coloured veil Hinane introduced when overthrowing Atisi. It was also referred to as a cheche, so named by the joining Berbers. The Tuareg became widely known as the blue people of the desert since the indigo pigment in the textiles of the veil, robes and turbans, stained their skins dark blue.

But generally, the Tuareg wore clothing and turbans in a variety of colours, using the indigo veil only for special occasions. Tuareg women didn't really warm to the veiling custom, but occasionally used their shawls to cover their lower faces as a sign of reserve.

Yeddes smirked when a couple of goats came running down the street passing him by, almost knocking him over, their owner following with wind-milling arms, screaming, 'Stop you stupid goats.'

The goat became one of their main sources of income, revered for its skin,

sinew, meat, milk and cheese. Goats were extremely curious and intelligent, that's why they could easily be trained to pull carts and walk on leads. But these fleeing goats now created frantic havoc, trying to nibble on almost everything that lined the streets, much to the dismay of stall owners and the goat herder.

They created absolute chaos and Yeddes still smiled when he pulled the curtain divide aside that led to Hinane's reception quarters in the front of her residence tent. The tent was huge, and a little separated from the other tents, and took on a grandiose look of wealth and opulence.

Yeddes found Hinane in deep discussion with Yattuy. They carried on, uninterrupted by his entrance and Yeddes smiled softly. The two have become serious philosophers over the past years, spending lots of time in each other's company.

When Hinane first met Yattuy as an accomplished metalsmith in the souq when they just arrived in the Ahaggar, the day he penetrated her mind with his own, she ensured to guard herself each time they convened afterwards for the manufacturing of their weapons. Until one day, three years after they had won the battle with Atisi, she invited him to her tent, the curiosity for his knowledge, too much to ignore any longer.

Their talking of late mostly considered the art of being and the essence of all things, continuously seeking more wisdom and enlightenment.

Hinane once explained to Yeddes, 'According to Epicurus, the purpose of philosophising was to attain the happy tranquil life characterised by peace and freedom from fear, the absence of pain, living a self-sufficient life surrounded by friends.'

Yeddes nodded inwardly, Hinane did indeed look happy. Only a selected few were allowed in her private quarters and Yattuy was the most favoured, the only one who stimulated her enquiring mind on a higher level. Even when sitting quietly in each other's company, Yeddes could sense the underlying communication between them.

Yattuy took a drag from his long pipe, the smell of cannabis circling around them. Hinane often allowed him to smoke as a symbol of her hospitality, and sometimes she herself sealed trade deals in a puff of cannabis smoke, if the host insisted, or when she needed inspiration and guidance.

The ritual was adopted from the Mediterranean shores which acquired it through their trades with wandering tribes of Aryans, Mongols, and Scythians. In the Aryan religion marijuana was sacred, seen as a gift from the gods since it lowered fevers, fostered sleep, relieved infectious diseases, and cured various other ills. It also stimulated appetite, prolonged life, quickened insight, and improved judgement, according to its users.

Hinane had her doubts about the truthfulness of all these claims about the plant, but found the ritual of preparing the dried seeds and flowers, lighting the pipe, and watching the smoke curling upwards with the intoxicating smell tickling in her nostrils more pleasant than smoking it herself, since the ceremonial ritual aspect alone already brought calmness and serenity to her senses.

It was Takamat and her helpers who applied its several uses to more beneficial practices. Adopted from the Greeks and Romans, Takamat used the

plant's stem fibres for rope, sail textiles and paper making. The root was used for medicine in preparations for malaria, beriberi, constipation, rheumatic pains, female disorders and to relieve pain of broken bones and surgery.

The leaves and flowers were used for intoxication and medicine, and the seeds for food and oil. Cannabis oil, much like linseed oil, could be used for cooking, to fuel lamps, as a lubricant, and as a base in soap making. After oil extraction, the residue or hemp cake still contained a little oil and protein, a nutritious supplement to their diet used in sauces and vegetable dishes.

Yeddes' eyes brushed over Hinane's calm face with her blue eyes shining in thought. His eyes moved towards her informal tunic and loose hair tumbling over her shoulders, a look she only wore in private when she presumed to be herself. The warmth and affection for her spread through him, she had been good to her people, especially to him and Takamat and gratitude filled his heart.

Their voices hummed in the background as he scribbled down the numbers of his latest market findings in the book Hinane kept for all their commercial dealings. Yeddes was the only one Hinane entrusted this task to and he took pride in every little detail.

He listened absent minded to Hinane and Yattuy's theorising, which almost always turned to religion, politics, alchemy, and often referred to the teachings of Greek philosopher Epicurus, who lived between 341BC and 270BC.

Epicurus taught that pleasure and pain were the measures of what was good and evil. The gods did not reward or punish humans, events in the world were ultimately based only upon the motions and interactions of atoms moving in space. Epicurus was a key figure in the development of science because of his insistence that nothing should be believed, except that which was tested through direct observation and logic deduction.

Epicurus indeed participated in the activities of traditional Greek religion, but taught that one should avoid holding false opinions about the gods. According to Epicurus the gods were immortal and blessed, and men who ascribed any additional qualities that were alien to their immortality and blessedness were impious.

He viewed reciprocity as the foundation of ethics, emphasising that the abating of harm to oneself and others was the way to maximising happiness. It was impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely, well and justly, and it was impossible to live wisely, well and justly without living a pleasant life. He affirmed that religious activities were useful only as a way to consider the gods and to use them as an example of the pleasant life.

He was one of the first Greeks to break from the god-fearing and god-worshipping tradition common of his time. The gods did not punish the bad and rewarded the good as the common man believed. The opinion of the crowd was that the gods sent great evils to the wicked, and great blessings to the righteous who modelled themselves after the gods. Epicurus believed the gods did not concern themselves at all with human beings.

Epicurus' philosophy was based on the theory that all good and bad derived from the sensations of pleasure and pain. What was good was what was pleasurable, and what was bad was what was painful, the basis for the moral

distinction between good and evil. If pain was chosen over pleasure in some cases, it was only because it led to a greater pleasure.

Although Epicurus had been commonly misunderstood when advocating the rampant pursuit of pleasure, he actually meant that the absence of pain, the state of being satisfied and tranquil, and free from fear of death and the retribution of the gods, was ideal. When humans did not suffer pain, they were no longer in need of pleasure and entered a state of perfect mental peace.

He also believed that death was not to be feared. When a man died he did not feel the pain of death since he no longer existed and therefore felt nothing. Epicurus said, 'Death is nothing to us. When we exist death is not, and when death exists we are not. All sensation and consciousness ends with death and therefore in death there is neither pleasure nor pain.'

From this doctrine arose the Epicurean epitaph: *Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo* (I was not, I was, I am not, I do not care) which was inscribed on the gravestones of his followers and seen on many ancient gravestones of the Roman Empire.

Epicurus' school, which was based in the garden of his house and thus called The Garden, had a small but devoted following in his lifetime, including women and slaves. An inscription on the gate to The Garden stated, 'Stranger, here you will do well to tarry, here our highest good is pleasure.'

As Hinane had found in Yattuy a good and trusted friend, so did Epicurus emphasised friendship as an important ingredient of happiness, and his school resembled in many ways a community of friends living together trying to fulfil the highest good.

St Augustine in his *De natura boni* described the highest good as a mere feature of the Christian God. St Augustine also denied the existence of bad or absolute evil, describing a world with God as the supreme good at the centre, and defining different grades of evil as different stages of remoteness from that centre.

He maintained that bad existed only as a privation or absence of the good. Ignorance was bad, but was merely the absence of knowledge, which was good. Disease was the absence of health, callousness and absence of compassion.

Hinane also learned a related view from the far east stating that bad and good were metaphysically real, but complementary opposites, where the existence of one was dependent on the existence of the other. Compassion, a valuable virtue, could only exist if there was suffering. Bravery only existed if faced with danger. Self-sacrifice was called for only where others were in need.

Hinane concluded that for her, the existence of the Christian God, good, or his Satan, evil, was similar to any other large-scale hypothesis or explanatory theory that aimed to make sense of some pertinent facts. To any extent that it failed to do so, it was not confirmed. And to date, she could not confirm anything the Christians preached.

Lately, it was more intriguing for her to debate about Alchemy. At first she, like so many others, misunderstood the practice for transmutation of metals, thinking alchemists were men who could transform base metals, such as copper and iron into gold. With Yattuy's teachings, Hinane found this not to be true as

alchemists were serious minded men practising art and science, and saw no benefit in changing iron into gold for personal gain.

Not many people knew exactly what alchemists were doing because they conducted their activities in total secrecy. But their science stated that matter changed shape through the transformation of the spirit qualities of the elements within the matter.

The Aristotelian theory of the four elements of matter was based on a creation hypothesis. All matter was assumed to have come from *prima materia*, or prime, chaotic matter, which might only come into actual existence if impressed by form.

The form rose out of the chaos of prime matter forming the four elements, fire, air, water, and earth. Creation was the result of blending these simple bodies together in the correct proportions to produce the infinite varieties of life.

According to Aristotle, the four elements were distinguishable from one another by their qualities. The four primary qualities were fluid or moist, dry, hot, and cold. Each element possessed two of the primary qualities while the other two were contraries, and could not be combined.

The four possibles of paired qualities were hot and dry from fire, hot and fluid from air, cold and fluid from water, cold and dry from earth. In each element one quality predominated over the other. In earth it was dryness, in water it was coldness, in air fluidness and in fire it was heat.

Alchemy transmutations were the obvious consequence of this theory. Any element could be transformed into another through the quality which they had in common. Thus, fire could become air through heat, just as air could become water through fluidity. Also two elements could become a third by deleting one quality from each. By deleting the dry and cold qualities, fire and water became air, and by parting with the hot and fluid qualities, the same elements became earth.

Thus, material transmutation was processed through quality changes in matter. These changes were purposely made so to purify matter, and were achieved through burning, calcination, solution, evaporation, sublimation, and crystallisation.

Aristotle also recognised that certain types of changes did not occur, a horse did not change into a lion or into a stone for instance. Change, therefore, was naturally regulated, the way many primitive people saw the coming-into-being organisms.

The first problem was to find why new creatures in complete form could arise where no creature was before. They knew or suspected there was a cause for this and they named this cause spiritus. Another term of the Greeks for spiritus was *pneuma*, meaning breath. They believed a god or some supernatural being breathed life into the new creatures which gave them existence. Therefore, to them, everything had a spirit, or spiritual life, but only the main god or supernatural being was purely spiritual.

Such same belief was previously recorded by the Egyptians. They noted that their gods Isis and Osiris, by their nature, contributed much to the generation of all things. The one being of a hot and active nature, the other moist and cold, but

both having something of the air. And by these, all new things were brought forth and nourished. Therefore, every particular thing in the universe was perfected and completed by the sun and moon.

The alchemical process was following this natural course. Old matter wore out and decayed. Through decay it became the raw material once more malleable so as to be able to take on new qualities.

The alchemist thought of this malleable material like a new seed of a plant, when the plant died it turned to seed, the seed germinated in the ground giving birth to a new plant. This new plant was usually the rejuvenation of the decayed plant and when the new plant, or other forms of life, was entirely different, the alchemists said the new form of life had been breathed into it by some supernatural being and helped in its growth by the sun and moon.

This knowledge was the evidence why alchemists' could not change base metals into gold as so many uninformed people believed they could do. They simply did not have the inspiring breath to make it come to pass.

'The art of alchemy was more about describing the supernatural being or main living source and its relationship to nature and its creatures,' said Yattuy.

Hinane nodded slowly, 'And it is man's biggest obstacle to learn, or relearn, his proper place within life's natural cycles, its chemical marriage of body, or matter if you will, soul and spirit.'

Yattuy added with a frown, 'According to Christian belief, man lives in the world but is not of it. Maybe that's the reason why they're ravaging land and nations so, taking more than what they could ever give back.'

Their minds drifted with sadness to how pagan ancients, when cutting a tree for firewood or for some other uses, would pray over the tree stump asking the spirit of the land for forgiveness. When they killed an animal for food, they would send its spirit back with sacrifice to its place in mother earth, its remains to be transformed again into other matter.

Yattuy said leisurely with a hazy look in his eyes put there by the cannabis, 'This new faith qualities that entered the gardens of our sacred ancient beliefs, is breathing a restraining and disempowering spirit into our homes. This new faith gives life to a transformed entity that threatens me.'

Hinane knew from experience Yattuy's mind now wandered upon faraway planes, sent there by the envisioning effect of the cannabis.

She smiled fondly at this now familiar, pleasurable ritual with Yattuy, leaned back on her pad and closed her eyes, enjoying the peace and calmness of his closeness while contemplating the full meaning of his profound words.

CHAPTER 36

Hinane didn't look her age. She was forty-six years old, but her skin was

smooth as silk that shined a light honey colour from the desert sun. She was dressed in a pale purple caftan, the sleeves meeting several antimony and copper bracelets at her wrists, the bottom seams softly touching her bejewelled toes.

A single takaza, necklace of gold and copper beads, decorated her slender throat, and loop earrings, the tizabaten manufactured from thin golden strands, framed her face.

A cream coloured chiffon veil covered her dark hair slightly, kept in position with a pin that held a light blue Amazonite stone as big as her thumb nail. The green quartz crystal of the same size underneath it caught the tiny little green specks in her blue eyes, a feature no one saw before, until Hinane started wearing the pin.

A servant was feather-cooling her face with a peacock plumage fan, the signatory indigo blue and burgundy eye-spots on the tip of the feathers a colourful contrast to the servant girl's eggshell white tunic.

It was hot underneath the overhang canopy of Hinane's community gathering tent, but she looked totally unaffected by it. Her full attention was with reciting her latest poem while the Tuareg women sat enthralled by her voice.

From her padded den in the corner of the tent, Ahina purred with content, watching her mistress with soft brown eyes as if understanding every word. In the wild the cheetah would only reach fifteen years, but in captivity and the plush way in which Hinane spoiled her, Ahina could easily survive another five. Although not quite as lithe and zestful as when she was a young cub, now taking every opportunity to loaf about, she remained a ferocious hunter.

Takamat sat on Hinane's right hand side weaving, not nearly clothed as elegantly as her queen, but still portraying a picture of affluence. Hinane cared for her household and people very well.

Her domiciliary tawshet was a cheerful gathering of families with children playing joyfully about, their screams and laughter now softly audible from where they sat. Their parents worked together in loving communion and babbling servants were busy with their daily tasks.

The many different tawshets in the confederation lived in peace, together forming a society with richness and wealth acquired from the cross-Saharan trade and industry, implemented and fostered by Hinane and her council.

Several noble women were present in the circle under the tent listening to Hinane, including Tedus, Hinane's senior by twenty years and the same generation of Amezwar.

Just when Hinane became queen, Tedus was a trusted friend. But Takamat was not so sure about her intentions of late. She touched on the subject at an earlier time, but Hinane ignored Takamat's concerns as she sometimes did when a lack of interest was present.

Hinane's voice didn't lose any of its youthful energy when she recited with melancholy...

*'The splendour of waving dunes dance in your eyes,
The infinite space of the deserts captured intimately in your disguise.'*

*Your solitude mirrors the silence of the tinariwen nights,
In all of this open space, no boundaries to your mights.
Suffering and hope are...*

Three girls interrupted by running in, yelling excitedly in their flight, 'Mother.'

The youngest girl of twelve years, Kella, stopped before Hinane to catch her breath just enough to speak while the other two girls, three years older than Kella, squatted at Takamat's feet.

Kella was already a splendid image of her mother Hinane, lovely and bright, fearless in her approach. 'Can we go play with Ikir at the fountain, and can we take ink? We want to draw the sunset,' then pleaded further when Hinane hesitated slightly, 'Please mother. We promise to be back by nightfall.'

The other two supported her quest, tugging at their mother, Takamat's, sleeve, 'And we want to gather more herbs and plants for our lessons tomorrow.'

Hinane and Takamat smiled at each other, then Hinane hugged Kella, 'Off course... go,' and gave her an affectionate slap on the buttocks. They run off, laughing and bumping into each other in play.

Tedus looked as they disappeared and said in kind and proper conduct, 'They've grown so big and so beautiful Hinane. How is Amezwar planning on keeping the tomatos away?'

Hinane frowned slightly at the mention of Amezwar's name but said toneless, 'He had a protection arrangement set out since Kella was two months.'

The women laughed with a little shyness as they all knew how Tuareg men courted with passionate diligence, no matter their age, teen or adult. Tuareg men were strong, fearless and proud, and usually took what they wanted. And even though Kella was still only a teenager, many of the young boys have already braved a peek at her.

Tedus said as a jesting afterthought, 'Talking about Amezwar, he is such a handsome man, everyone absolutely adores him.'

Caution tweaked in Hinane's belly, not sure if the comment was mentioned innocently or particularly to provoke her. Even though Takamat thought she didn't notice, Hinane was fully aware of the many affections she showed towards Amezwar when she thought no one was looking.

Hinane's smile froze, 'All Tuareg men are beautiful. Or didn't you notice them with your eyes so gripped on Amezwar.'

It came out with a sharp stab, not etiquettely correct in the group's presence, but Hinane continued relentlessly, 'We are indeed lucky to have such men in our midst, especially one so brave and loyal as Amezwar as my husband. My next writing will be contributed to their pleasing complexion and attributes for certain.'

She thrust deeper, peering into Tedus' eyes with a warning, 'You enjoy the company of my husband quite often Tedus, hopefully it's not a matter to spend another thought upon?'

A gasping whisper resonated through the group, but without waiting for any response from Tedus who turned white, Hinane leaned towards Takamat who sat with heavy frown, openly disapproving of her mistress' behaviour.

'Takamat, we should discuss the transfer of the property deeds to your

daughters.'

Hinane squared her shoulders and said with pride, 'The oasis of Silet and Ennided will be theirs. Their abilities and natural instincts with the healing plants, which they inherited from their mother no doubt,' she added with a smile, 'Can be practised with much care in that fruitful land for all of their remaining years and beyond.'

Takamat smiled weakly, still apprehended, dropped her head in grateful recognition, 'And I'll make sure it stays in close family lineage, passing it on to their descendants for centuries to come.'

Hinane reached her right hand out sideways and Takamat took it with her left. They squeezed their fingers together and smiled warmly at each other, the interlude of seconds before quickly forgotten.

Tedus sat unresponsive, unhappy and cold, the loneliness of the passing years engraved in deep lines around her mouth which made her look older than her age.

Takamat observed this with pity and empathy. It was unfair of Hinane to treat her like that. And suddenly Takamat was angry again. Hinane had never stopped loving or seeing Chikae, without considering how it might have affected Amezwar. That's if he knew. Takamat wasn't sure, but in any case, if he did, he concealed it masterfully.

Tedus loved Amezwar with all her heart, although Amezwar once thought she favoured him only for his wealth, it was now about love for the man and not his possessions. While Hinane lusted after Chikae and held Amezwar only in obligation and imperial rule, selfishly feeding upon his puppyish loyalty, as Atisi once put it.

Amezwar was a strong and dignified man, cherished and admired by their people. But with matters concerning Hinane, he was like clay, prepared to be squeezed and moulded to her every whim.

Takamat sighed. But then again, what was Hinane supposed to do? What choice did she have? How could one choose whom to love and whom not? Takamat shook her head and returned her attention towards the group's chattering.

Hinane looked at them and sighed. She found it more and more difficult to communicate with these noble but shallow women in proper decorum. It's all the studying, all the learning she acquired, she thought. She outsmarted herself from this hum-drum society and she felt now more lonely than ever.

She felt out-of-place and bored with these social unimportant gatherings. And may be the reason for attacking Tedus. She had no real objection to Tedus' feelings towards Amezwar, as her own affection directed elsewhere, and if she could, she would gladly hand her Amezwar. But he was a man of strong principle and he loved Hinane, not Tedus.

Hianen sighed again. She missed her warriors, their ways, their simplicity, and their straightforwardness. She pulled irritably on her caftan, feeling uncomfortable and plump. It was time to get back into shape, she needed to start training again, and maybe, it was time to visit Chikae and enliven another adventure with her warriors. Her thoughts put a smile to her face and she rose

hastily to leave the women.

But first, as their custom described, it was that time of the year again to organise the festival honouring the sun and earth. She would have it together with the Ostara, celebrating the spring equinox, the symbol of new life.

CHAPTER 37

The Tuareg caravans only operated during winter when the days were cooler and more tolerable. During winter, their camels could go fifty days without being watered, only deriving moisture from green scrubs, while in the heat of the summer they would last only five days. Any good camel shepherd knew that to get the most from their humped creatures they would have to be watered every couple of days in winter and every day in the summer.

Munatas chuckled in thought of how the camels approached the spring earlier that day. When they smelled the water, the usual orderly train rushed towards it with high pitched bellows and rumbling growls, ignoring all commands and overrunning anything in their way without effort, the heavy loads on their backs seemingly not to be a strain at all.

He slowly walked through the herd, his devotion for them shining softly in his black eyes set wide apart in a dark tanned forehead and nose bridge, the only parts of his face exposed from under the veil.

Camels were ruminants, cud-chewing mammals, sometimes releasing foul breath and gases when regurgitating, just like now, but not even this deterred Munatas from his affections when checking their straps.

He considered himself extremely lucky since the day Yeddes gave him employment as camel master on these trading journeys to Carthage, and back at Tamanrasset, acted as Yeddes' manager. The two of them had grown into a fine breeder's alliance, becoming a close-knit team together with the rest of the shepherds in Yeddes' employ.

Taking care of the camels required the ability to constantly find the best available grazing along the route and to avoid poisonous plants. It involved not letting them drink too much water, how to properly distribute the load so as not to inflict any hurt, how to treat minor injuries such as blisters or pack-sores, and how to park them for the night allowing the best possible shelter from wind-blown sand and the odd downpour.

He was a fortunate man, Munatas thought with a grin. These trips also gave him the opportunity to further his studies of the stars and heavens. And sitting together around the fire with the women warriors who guarded the convoy as his accompanies, sharing meals with stimulating conversation, he couldn't ask for a better life.

One of the camels projected the contents of his stomach out in a spit onto the sand, and Munatas walked closer to have a look. When spotting no

malignant substance in the cud, he caressed the hide of the camel to console him.

By Yeddes' carefully planned procreation, the Tuareg produced a strain of excellent camels, bred for speed, size and strength. They were mild-mannered, except in certain cases during the mating season, akin to humans, smirked Munatas.

Camels preferred to live and operate in groups. If a caravan approached a river or dangerous area, the shepherds only needed to force one of the camels across and the others would readily follow. Even if a camel at first refused to cross the spot in question, it would follow the rest when seeing them cross so as to remain part of the group.

On this trip, one of the biggest in a long while, Munatas controlled hundred and fifty camels in eight files, each with two camel pullers in front and several down the column to control them. He loured slightly, his queen should have known better than to send so many camels out at once. The dangers were ever present from different means, and it was difficult to protect such a huge band, even though a considerable number of warriors accompanied them.

But then again, Queen Hinane's reasoning of having many goods to deliver before retiring for the five month summer break, made somewhat sense to him too. Besides they were on their way back to their oasis close to Abalessa in the Ahaggar now, not long then they would be home.

Since the caravan travelled at the walking speed of man, the distance made in one day was usually slow, depending on the route, weather conditions and distances between water sources.

A one-way trip from the Ahaggar to the Mediterranean coast took anything between three and six months. Tonight would mark their ninth month away from home, so the mountain ridges would come into view anytime soon.

Izza and Siman were the supercargoes on this trip, in charge and responsible for the cargo and its delivery, sale and repurchasing of new goods to take home.

Their cargo already delivered over the past years, consisted of commodities that caused Hinane's wealth to accumulate to enormous amounts. The cargo to the shores on this trip included armoury, herbs, medicine, weaved kilims, jewellery, gemstones, copper, iron, antimony and gold. They brought back with them delicate fabric, silk, olive oils and various other goods, and all the Roman coins they earned as profits.

On almost every journey quite a few camels would be lost due to the heavy loads or other ailments. On a particularly exhausting section of the trip, an animal already worn out by many weeks of walking, would kneel and stay down. They would then prepare and eat the meat with much respect for the animal's dutiful life. Its hide would be preserved for other uses and fat from the hump rendered into ghee for cooking. The bulk of the meat was cut into long thin strips and dried in the sun for later use.

Often, some of the camels were with their young, and the death of the one was soon replaced by the birth of another. The mother camel was milked every day, leaving one side of the udder for the calf and using the other for the Tuareg

who regarded it as a delicacy.

Siman took a swig of the warm milk before it was depleted by the rest around the campfire. She wiped the white residue fat from her lips and held the guard for Izza.

Over the years in Hinane's employ, Siman grew stockier and thickened with muscle with no sign of any fat, her pitch black skin now glimmering like charcoal satin in the moonlight and firelight.

Izza's long caramel hair was replaced by a deep-auburn brown, coloured so with Henna to cover the amassing grey. But her hazel-yellow eyes still shined with sharp acumen and her tall physique detained much of its youthfulness.

None of them took a husband, since they preferred the openness and freedom the desert provided over the boring duties of a domestic life. Their coffers grew with that of Hinane's and they could find no valid reasons to be bonded by husband or brood.

A small desert wind blew up swirling sand bits that carried over the dunes. Izza's horse whinnied, in which another mare replied with a snort. This should have alerted the two warriors, but it went unnoticed as they joined jovially in the discussion around the fire, excited about the prospects of being home again. Their guard weakened the closer they got to the oasis as the journey was uneventful, and they were now very far from where plunders usually launched attacks.

It was two hours before midnight when they finally took their leave to their canvas overhangs, leaving only Izza on guard and four warriors with two handlers at each of the eight groups of camels.

It wasn't a difficult or long fight when the vandals invaded their camp. They were many and came from all directions masked by the dark, two hours before sunrise. They overpowered the group with very little effort and killed most of the warrior women, who did not go down without a hearty and long fight, leaving only Munatas, a few handlers and Siman alive.

The vandal band leader glared at Munatas, 'You will turn about, order your camel pullers and follow me. You are in my charge now. Utter one word of protest and you will lose your pathetic life.'

He turned to Siman who was held down by two grotesque vandals, 'Take your horse and go to your queen. Tell her of her mammoth loss, leave nothing out. Tell her how sweet her warriors tasted at first but were left dry for the vultures. Tell her these camels with the cargo they carry now belong to the vandal king Gaiseric.'

He turned with a sardonic laugh, kicked his horse into a jump and galloped away shouting orders to his military column.

When the two brutes released Siman to follow their leader, she struggled to her knees and searched for Izza. Shock ripped through her when seeing her sprawled open a few perches from her.

She crept towards her body and lowered her head into the sand at Izza's side, and tears streamed down her cheeks wetting the sand. She laid like that for hours, without energy, without the courage to get up. The sight of her long-time friend being killed in this undignified, brutal way was a total contrast to

how she had lived her life, and Siman could not bear the agony.

Finally Siman raised herself to her feet and started looking for any survivors among the slain vandals to interrogate. She found one who weaved a story together that evoked more horror inside of Siman.

She again slumped into the sand next to Izza and just sat there, her torso rocking back and forth from grief and wrath. And long after when her tears have dried, and the painted hunting dogs appeared from the direction of the Ahaggar mountains sniffing around the corpses, Siman struggled back to her feet, gathered what she could to make a sled for Izza's body, and started the long walk home, dragging Izza behind her.

CHAPTER 38

The festival honouring the sun and earth was celebrated by everyone, no matter age, profession or stance. The buzz in the streets was alive and zestful, the long awaited celebration joyful on everybody's lips. Groups of young kids played the Melgha, a game in which they hid themselves while another tried to find and touch them before they reached the well to drink. Other groups were occupied with the Takadant, imagining what the others were thinking and earning rewards if guessing it right.

Teenagers were playing shishagheren, writing the name of their lovers on stones and scrolls to see if this person would bring good luck. Those youngsters without romantic inclination occupied themselves with Maru Maru, where they mimed everyday tasks of the Tuareg for others to guess.

Groups of elders sat with audiences about them in circles, engaged in the taqqanen, telling myths and stories of divinities and enigmas of the various cultures they came from.

Close by, adjacent to the main festival grounds where Hinane had laid out the locations for all sports performances during the day, two men were wrestling in the tabillant way, the traditional Tuareg manner. Other wrestlers were occupied with the alamom, a form of wrestling while running. All over and in between were throngs of spectators, placing bets and cheering their favourites along.

Everywhere were stalls laid out with food of all sorts like dates, melons, olives, and dried fish. Eghajira, a very sweet, thick beverage made of pounded millet, dates, and goat's cheese mixed with water, were consumed in abundance as it was only presented during festivals and special occasions.

At first when Hinane arrived at the Ahaggar seventeen years ago, she introduced the zayanes, now a traditional and tasty meal based primarily on corn, barley, ewe's milk, goat's cheese, butter, honey and game.

But the Berber original Tahrict, sheep offal with brains, tripe, lungs, and heart meats rolled up in the animal's intestine tubes and cooked on an oak stick

over coals, still remained the most favoured dish, especially when the meat was coated with ghee to heighten its taste.

Many couscous dishes lining the tables, called tajine, were served in various forms with chicken, lemon and olive, or lamb meat and caramelised plum, or legumes and endive, a widely cultivated herb with serrated blanched leaves, served with pastilla bread.

Over the years, Hinane insisted on nourishing her populace very well, believing that the liver, heart and soul meant to serve all divinities, could only be sustained with good food and sweet delights. Some of her own favourites included the bouchiar, fine wafers soaked in ghee and honey, and the bourjeje, pancakes made with flour, eggs, yeast and salt.

The humming of the festival was underlined by the Tuareg music genre, takamba which had two major components, the moncord violin called anazad, and the tende, a small tambour covered with goatskin. The drums would be played during the camel races, one of the highlights of the day before the main ceremony would start just after nightfall.

The Asak and Tisiway poems, performed in song by mainly women who paraded in rhythm to the drums, were meant to inspire the camels before the races.

Hinane and Takamat were staged on an elevated canopied platform terrace, watching as the competitors readied for the start of the first camel race. They mellowed in the shade with Ahina stretching comfortably on her tummy next to Hinane.

Ahina never dropped a litter. In nature, males tracked down females from the smell of their urine rising up in the heat, their first approaches being aggressively rebuffed, spray-marking heavily and scratching up small mounds of loose soil to urinate or defecate on top of it.

Even after two weeks of such courtship Ahina never became receptive to males as other females in natural environments did, and she never invited copulation. Tala often jested with an outburst of laughter from her fellow warriors, that the thought of crouching in front of a male and being mounted from behind with a bite in the neck and urine stench in her nostrils, would disgust her evenly so.

Ahina's purr portrayed her pleasure of being a spinster and she looked upon the festivities with mild interest, totally pleased with the royal life next to her mistress.

Takamat admired the new necklace draped around Hinane's slender neck, 'How soothing is that stone, I'm always amazed when you wear it,' she said.

Hinane took the gemstone in one hand, displaying her affection towards it with appreciation as gemstones were the main reason for her great fortunes. A gemstone created a special bond with its owner, conveying a significant message, and displayed its magic with focused attention, it channelled inspiration and a sparkle of eternal light, her mother used to say.

Hinane smiled back at Takamat, 'Amazonite had always been my favourite.'

She first acquired the stone from Tuberou's mines, but as the years passed and Tuberou's supply depleted, she formed more profitable alliances with the

Toubou peoples which had trading relations with Carthage since 500BC. The Toubou operated from their main town Bardaï near Tibesti mountains, the largest and highest range in the Sahara with an endless supply of stones.

The Amazonite stones brought her considerable returns since her promotional ploy advertised it to enhance creative expression and unity with life. It improved self-worth and offered confidence, hope, and became known as the stone of courage, a quality sought during battles and defence bouts.

But it was actually the quartz stones that weighted her purse, along with copper and its by-product silver derived from Nokoto's mines in the region of the Aïr Mountains in Niger. When they started mining copper there, it was not long before they discovered the special quartz stones embedded along with tourmaline in the copper bearing ridges.

The quartz had several patterns rooted inside, faces resembling ancient gods and unexplainable geometrical patterns. To this day Hinane couldn't figure out its true composition, meaning or its implications, but she used it to her great advantage in creating myths and legends about its origins and meaning. The gods fearing Romans fell for each and every ruse, and her wealth quadrupled in the process.

Also in the Niger valleys, then perennial flowing Niger and Bani rivers teeming with fish, were bordered by seed-bearing grasslands with the Bozos and Bobos ethnic groups living in villages along it. They were known for their fishing skills and artistry in carving beautiful ritual masks. They became avid traders with the Tuareg and were renowned for their love of dog meat for which they offered handsome rewards.

She sighed with some level of satisfaction when thinking about her own people. She built a resilient nation and provided well for them over the years. Even though it came with a high price, it was still the path she was meant to walk, and she did so in the best ways she could, although she hurt some people along the way.

The blowing horns announcing the lining up of the camel racers broke through her thoughts, and all attention turned towards the sandy track laid out by the marshals and by the camels at the starting line.

The Tammazaga camel race became an exciting highlight during the festive celebrations with huge betting at stake which caused sporadic uproars from the betters and supporters. The hordes crowded down the long winding path that led to the finishing line and stretched their necks to get a glimpse of the proceedings.

The race was everything but fair. Riders tried to outsmart each other with trickery, each attempting to win the race no matter what with a hungry eye on the finishing line with its grand prize as reward.

At the blow of the horn, the camels shot forward in an instant and a roar went up as several camels quickened to the front.

Amezwar and Yeddes reserved their camels as a strategy till the overly eager ones have been eliminated by either trickery, falling off, or overexerting their animals.

In the second last round Amezwar fell in the lead with Yeddes a close

second. But they still had a great distance to cover and raced in a crazed fever towards the end whilst being cheered on by the masses.

As the camel-race was nearing its end, the crowds went mad from excitement and tension of possibly losing bets. Amezwar and Yeddes were still in the lead with others following closely in trying to prevent the two from crossing the line before them.

One of the competitors fell from his camel when he tried to bump Yeddes from his second place. The crowds laughed hysterically and then applauded when Amezwar broke through the finishing line first with Yeddes only a camel's head behind him.

The masses ran closer to congratulate them and Takamat turned to Hinane with her lips in a wide smile, 'Our husbands did well as always.'

Hinane kept her eyes fixed on Amezwar, admiring the high placed favour he earned from the Tuareg as they lifted him upon their shoulders and carried him towards her on the platform. He was surely not only favoured for winning the race, he was also respected as a worthy and fair ruler at her side.

Mixed emotions of sadness, remorse, but also deep affection, played off in her eyes as she rose to welcome him beside her where they would remain for their banquet before the main ceremony would start at sunset.

Amezwar sat down beside Hinane on soften pads covered with their distinctive household designs of purple and blue woven into the fabric, the overhead tent tarpaulin a welcomed shelter from the searing sun.

'You look radiant as ever my desert rose,' complimented Amezwar when he took Hinane's hand in his own. Hinane acknowledged his tribute with a tilt of the head and replied with one of her own, 'An appearance only acquired by the constant loyalty of her husband.'

He beamed lovingly at her with one stormy blue eye and the other covered with the black patch, his complexion framed by the blue veil. With the plight of his devotion, Hinane forced the sudden pang of guilt back into the nooks of her subconscious. Although they shared the same values, and Hinane still being grateful for the roles he played in acquiring her prominence, she wished for another at her side.

Their guests were approaching to share their banquet and they turned their attention towards them, a selected few from the federation council, some of Hinane's warrior consorts and several elite from different tawshets.

'Hinane, those bracelets look exquisite. What matter are they from?' asked Tedus with feigned interest, uttered only for appearance sake as she did not forget their last humiliating interlude.

But Hinane long ago forgot about their previous encounter and answered with a friendliness that startled Tedus for a second, 'Antimony. It had been used for ages in Egyptian cosmetics known as stibium or kohl used as eyeliner. But in its metal form, it's actually too soft for other uses, other than in some jewellery pieces, and even so, remains soft, even when combined with iron or copper.'

'I've never seen it before,' replied Tedus politely.

'It's because I've guarded its uses. Because, when heated up, it turns to poison similar to arsenic.' Hinane immediately frowned at herself. She didn't

know why she threw in that last bit.

The women around the low table drew deep breaths in oooooos and aaaas which irritated Hinane tremendously, and found it difficult to contain the frustration that flared within a second.

She forced herself to quickly shake the feeling, as her role as queen on this day was more important than her fickle urges and traits.

She lifted her brows, straightened her shoulders and slowly let the air escape from her lungs. Amezwar took her hand. By now, he was totally receptive to her moods and intuitively knew her inner thoughts.

He redirected the conversation, 'Talk about iron, trading of terracotta pottery on Niger river close to Jenné-Jeno is becoming widely popular.'

All eyes on him prompted his next sentence as this was news to them. They all knew that the iron-smelting industry was the main economy of the natives living there, even long before their mud-brick buildings replaced huts and tents. Terracotta was an obvious diversion as a means of trade for them because of the clay found there.

Jenné-Jeno was built on a flood plain on an inland delta which was flooded every year. The river silted up its own beds and floodplains and created marshes, lakes, and little raised areas leaving rich, moist land and mud on which to grow rice and raise cattle.

The first step in ironworking was to smelt the ore. Workshops on the periphery of the Jenné-Jeno settlement were used for smelting and afterwards brought into the city to be forged into tools, ornaments, and weapons. As there were no apparent sources of iron ore in the Niger delta area, it was brought in from a foreign source nearby, although its location remained a secret.

The Tuareg made good use of this iron-industry to plump their own stakes, and they now excitedly expanded on the subject of incorporating the terracotta into their existing iron trading channels.

'But then of course,' concluded Amezwar vaguely after a lively debate, 'The rising kingdom of Ghana would also be well placed to threaten our alliance with them.'

He threw a short glimpse at Hinane, but she remained unaffected and he continued, 'It is said the kingdom is gaining a monopolised exchange of gold with all other trading nations at the steer of their king Chikae, which would pale any other trading commodity, even for us.'

'What drivels you speak Amezwar,' said one of the older Tuareg nobles, 'Iron is more valuable than gold, one can't make strong tools with gold.'

Agreeing murmurs went up. The techniques used to extract and shape iron were well-guarded secrets, and blacksmiths occupied a very important place in society. Tribes through decades have often credited the blacksmith with the power to see the future. And blacksmiths from the west have been known to act as political advisors to kings, or as judges over village disputes.

They also filled ceremonial roles as diviners and healers, performing ceremonial circumcisions and rain making rituals. They frequently vaccinated patients against smallpox, using the tip of a red-hot poker to destroy the virus.

The old man said a bit out of breath, 'No my good man, gold will never

subjugate iron.'

Amezwar bowed towards him, 'With respect my dear old friend, times are changing. And of what difference is it to the blacksmith if he works with iron or employs other skilled techniques for gold. He would still maintain his position. And just as one can never say from which direction the desert storms would blow, so also are the sources of man's greed or true power unknown.'

This put them at thought, and the rest of the conversation took on a lighter mood as they enjoyed the delicacy spread on the tables with the sun drawing nearer to the horizon which would announce the final ceremony for the day.

The voices faded as Hinane gazed absentmindedly at the sun lowering in the west, thinking that she must make arrangements to be with the ruler of her heart. Amezwar's earlier mention of Chikae pulled her heart alert, causing it to bounce loudly against her ribs even though her exterior displayed no sign of it.

Her cheeks turned rosy as the hot currents in her groin reminded her of the pleasures they shared each time when together, the red and orange colouring now tainting the edges of the night, a passionate reflection of their erotic stimulation.

CHAPTER 39

When the ritual finally commenced, Hinane felt totally relaxed and in harmony with what was to come.

The festival, to honour the Sun and Earth with all their elements, was combined with celebrating springtime in memory of the goddess Persephone who brought powerful messages of awakening and personal growth. She was also known to infuse the motivation and energy to pursue dreams and goals with passion and commitment.

It was celebrated every year on the spring equinox symbolising new life as it was the time for fertility and sowing seeds. For the Tuareg, the ritual became an esoteric and artful, poetic and metaphorical deliverance of its meaning.

As per their custom, derived from Hinane's Greco-Roman social heritage through her father, the pomegranate was known as the 'fruit of the dead' and its crimson seeds springing from its white flesh, the emblem of new life.

Persephone, the goddess of the underworld, prominently featured the pomegranate in her insignia. She was kidnapped by Hades and forced to live in the underworld as his wife.

It was the rule of fate that anyone daring to consume food or drink in the underworld was doomed to spend eternity there. Persephone put no food to her lips in order to permit her freedom, but Hades tricked her into eating six pomegranate seeds. Because of this, she was condemned to six months every year in the underworld during which her mother Demeter, goddess of the

harvest, mourned and no longer gave fertility to the earth.

In illustrating the death and return of Persephone through the seeds of the pomegranate, Hinane opened the ceremony by cutting the fruit in half. She scored each half of the exterior rind six times, then held it over a gourd filled with water and smacked the rind with a large ladle. The arils ejected from the pomegranate directly into the bowl, separating the embedded seed casings from the internal white pulp and peel.

Traditionally the Tuareg used the rind of the fruit and the bark of the pomegranate tree as a remedy against diarrhoea, intestinal parasites and dysentery, also using it as eye drops to slow development of cataracts, with the seeds and juice considered as a tonic for the heart and throat.

But tonight the cutting of the fruit belly, exposing and harvesting the seeds, signified new life springing from red bloody flesh, the representation of death giving birth to life that sprung from the blood drops of Dionysus.

All eyes were upon Hinane as she rinsed the seeds with water in a gourd. No sound was audible, the audience fervently anticipating what's to come. When it was done, Hinane gave the signal and the drums harmonised in soft rhythms with the lotar flutes which announced the start of the performance show.

Several men dressed in green appeared first. They were covered in green branches, vines and leaves, their faces painted green with foliage formed into crowns high atop their heads. They danced a depiction of earth's fertility symbolising resurgence, demonstrating the cycle of growth each spring.

Two virgin goddesses of fire, known as the Vestas, dressed in orange, blue and purple, entered after them. Together with the god of fire, Ignis, they were accountable to combust the ceremonial fire with a flare sent from heavens. Ignis, fully clothed in red, followed the Vestas to the wood bearing altar where they would construct the first flame and ignite the source of all fire to be used the entire night. The green men danced quietly all around them.

Ignis would also serve as the director of the ceremony, leading the procession into their different acts, acting as the messenger between mortals and gods. He took the hands of the Vestas, forming a triangle while looking up into the dark sky where the stars, planets and the moon waited in flickering anticipation for the call upon them.

The drums heightened in tempo and the voice of Ignis filled the surrounds with a deep raspy tone, 'God reveal thee with, and in fire, bless us with hot scorching blazes, the symbol of your wholly spirit, the same spirit that houses in each of us. Give us your warmth, give us your light, give us the fire of your sanction.'

Then all of them said together, 'Let sulphur flame combust the stone on which it burns, let mercury's volatility rise in smoke, let salt be its solidity in remnant ash.'

At that very moment the wood atop the altar exploded in licking flames and bashes of smoke. The audience watched in awe and Ignis said, 'The god of fire, the god of the Sun, our omnipresent god, and god of all the gods, is not likened to the moon with her cool light. His dwelling is in the light of all rising Suns, his mission is fulfilled with intense desire and blazing purposes. Blessed be us.'

Ignis turned to Hinane where she remained standing after washing the seeds.

He bowed towards her in respect, 'God has accepted our union this night. He showed his pleasure by giving us fire to consume the cold days passed. From today, the fire shall be burning, it shall never go out.'

Hinane neared the altar, she took a little jar of incense from one of the Vestas and poured it over the flames which rose higher from its interaction with the oils. The incense sent its fragrance heavenward to the moon, stars and all spiritual entities as a symbol of the path of their prayers to the gods.

Hinane said softly while all eyes were on the smoke twirling upwards, 'Grateful are we, blessed be.'

She returned to her seat next to Amezwar. She met his smile and took his hand in hers before returning her attention to the ceremony.

Eight torchbearers appeared one by one and lit their torches at the altar with the processional drummers working their beating up to a crescendo. They walked to the outskirts of the stage to spread more light over the proceedings.

The drums quickened to announce the entry of the warrior women dressed in white, the warrior men dressed in blue, and following them was the little teenage spring queen.

The spring queen wore a crisp white and silver robe to symbolise purity, and a jewelled diadem signifying her sovereignty. A blowing horn signalled the queen's birth, and the drums picked up more tempo.

The green men rose from where they hunched in the soil and approached the queen with a gift of fertility, a statue covered with red ochre. The red ochre Venus statue was an example of a Palaeolithic fertility symbol, a little woman figurine cowering with wide hips to signify childbirth.

The queen accepted their offerings and they formed a circle all around her while she remained in the middle.

The white warrior women formed a loop around the queen and green men. The blue male warriors surrounded the warrior women in order to form three circles, each within the other around the queen.

The warriors took their swords in their right hands, shoving it high above their heads while chanting, 'Our spring queen, our goddess, our super consciousness.'

Ignis said loudly so all to hear, 'The circle is formed, but yet not complete.' The spring queen broke the circle and proceeded to greet the cardinal element performers with a slight bend in the knees and curtly bow of her crown.

The element performers formed a large circle around the queen while she stood in the middle, embodying where they all came together as one, representing the super consciousness, the all of this, and the all of that.

She curtsied towards each of the five directions, acknowledging each element, four of which described matter, and the fifth element describing aether, that of which was beyond and above the material world.

A little girl appeared with an apple and dagger on a cutting board. The queen cut through its equator, the apple revealing its near perfect pentagram shape inside, with each point containing a seed. The queen held the apple high up for

all to see and the procession said together, 'Let us rejoice in the stars of knowledge.'

The queen handed it back to the little girl who then disappeared behind the performers. The queen turned to the east, where the performers illustrated and represented the spirits of the element air. Their costumes represented creatures associated with air, the eagles, hawks, larks, butterflies, dragonflies, bees and ladybugs.

Ignis' voice filled the air, 'Spirits of air, spirits of the east, guardian of the air, healer of god, fill our lungs and join us.'

The guardian and god of air appeared from behind the air dancers, he was robed in gold, yellow, and indigo. He carried a caduceus, the wand entwined by two serpents used as a symbol of science, knowledge, compassion, and healing.

Ignis commanded of the god, 'Guardian of air, give us your gifts and blessings.'

The guardian of air approached the queen and laid down his gifts of shimmering gemstones on indigo silk in a chest. It was filled with aventurine, angelite, azurite, kyanite and sphene.

He held out his arms over the queen and the procession, saying, 'I, guardian of the south and god of air, bestow upon you these gifts of intellect, expression, science, synthesis, and research. It will bring forth clarity and creativity, diligence and discernment, flexibility and independence. Blessed be.'

The performing air dancers rose up with song, 'All creatures breathe air to live, exhaling carbon dioxide for plants to grow, which in turn give off oxygen, and the cycle of life continues. Breathe in and out, giving and receiving, so that all can live. In air we smell the scent of the flower, the start of the rain, the songs of birds, the wind rustling in the trees, our own voices raised in song.'

The elementals associated with air were sylphs and fairies. Slender and graceful, small winged women creatures dressed in pastel colours appeared from the dark into the performing circle. They carried wands of burning incense in their hands, cleaning the air with lavender, lemongrass, wormwood, fennel and pine fragrances.

Ignis looked up to the stars while they performed and brought his hands together, 'As the archetypes of air reside in the constellations of Libra the scales, Gemini the twins, Aquarius the water carrier, and the planets Mercury and Uranus, show us who we are and lead the way.'

The air performers chanted, 'Guardians of the east, wise and gentle, be the east anchor in this circle and breathe air into it, allow the sylphs and fairies to heal. Bless us with the music and strength of the winds, the clarity and perception of the soaring eagle, and the clear communicating power of our word. We feel you and welcome you. Blessed be.'

The god guardian of air spoke, 'Blessings of the air to you, listen to what the wind brings and accept her feathery touch with gratitude.'

The spring queen moved to the next group and turned to the north, where the performers illustrated and represented the spirits of the element earth. Their drape described creatures associated with earth, bulls, buffalo, rams, antelope,

goats, rabbits and squirrels.

Ignis' voice filled the air, 'Spirits of the earth, spirits of the north, alimental guardians of the earth, give us solid grounding for our footing and join us.'

The guardian and god of earth appeared from behind the earth element creatures, he was dressed in greens, browns, and black, a formidable, quiet figure who walked with justice.

Ignis commanded of the god, 'Guardian of earth, give us your gifts and blessings.'

The guardian of earth approached the queen and laid down his gemstone gifts on brown hessian cloth in a hollow log. It was filled with crystals, onyx, jet, emeralds, turquoise, tourmaline, titanite and berries.

He spread his arms over the queen and procession when saying, 'I, guardian of the north and god of the earth, bestow upon you these gifts of psychics and initiation into mysteries. It will bring about abundance and agriculture, family and fertility, nutrition and endurance, connectedness and self-assuredness. Blessed be.'

The performing dancers added with song, 'Earth our mother, earth our body and solidarity. You are permanent, stable, and secure. You are the soil which nourishes the plants and processes decay into food. Our bodies grow like roots into logs, through the moss that covers the trunk, into the wood itself. Let our roots go deeper and deeper into the soil to search moisture and nutrients for our souls.'

The elementals associated with earth were gnomes and dwarfs. As they entered they depicted the entire spectrum, little ones who nurtured each blade of grass to the larger ones who worked with the trees. They carried wands of burning incense, cleaning the dust at their feet with pine needles, thyme, and cypress fragrances.

Ignis looked up to the stars while they performed, 'As the archetypes of earth reside in the constellations Taurus the bull, Virgo the virgin, Capricornus the goat-fish, and the planets Venus and Jupiter, give us direction and show us the way.'

The earth performers sang, 'Guardians of the north, mighty and strong, be the north anchor in this circle and provide the dust into it. Allow the gnomes to heal, nourish and protect. Bless us with the infinite cycle of food, waste and recycling that support all life. Bless us with prosperity and abundance and the scenic beauty that nourishes our souls. We feel you and welcome you. Blessed be.'

The guardian of earth spoke, 'Blessings of the earth upon you. Go with the healing of herbs and crystals, nourishment for your bodies, minds, hearts, and spirits. Be the peace and strength found in dark mountain corners, be the understanding of our connection with all living things, and be one with the mysteries of nature.'

The spring queen reached the water point, where servants first washed her face and hands before she turned to face the west. The performers illustrated the spirits of the element water, their attire describing fish, whales, dolphins, sharks, seals, sea horses, crocodiles, water snakes, frogs and leeches.

Ignis' voice trembled in the air, 'Spirits of water, spirits of the west, guardian of women's cycles and childbirth, angel of mercy and goddess of the moon, wash us in gentle rain, revive our longing and join us.'

The guardian and god of water appeared with a cup in hand and dressed in blue with turquoise linings.

Ignis commanded of the god, 'Guardian of water, give us your gifts and blessings.'

The guardian of water approached the queen, gave her the cup to drink from and laid down the gemstone gifts wrapped in a shell. It was filled with lapis, amethyst, aquamarine, calcite and kunzite.

The guardian spread his arms over the queen and then the procession, saying, 'I, guardian of the west and god of all water, bestow upon you these gifts of cleansing and forgiveness. It will beget communion with ancestors, beauty and friendships, healing and love, meditation and purification, balance and tranquillity, compassion and devotion. Blessed be.'

The performing dancers added with song, 'Oh moody forces of water, once raging with crystal clarity, then stagnating to a sour pool. Water which nourishes and destroys, be still but also flow rapid, flow deep and shallow, tranquil and fierce. Your surface acts as a mirror but your dark depths distorts. Oh water filling our bodies almost to the full, the brew in which all nutrients and enzymes carry on the functions of life.'

The elementals associated with water were undines, various female water spirits, sentimental and romantic, who next entered the scene. They carried wands of burning incense that filled the air with sage, hyssop, cedar, eucalyptus, rosemary, and lemon.

Ignis looked up to the stars while they performed and brought his hands together, 'As the archetypes of water reside in Cancer the crab, Scorpius the Scorpio, and Pisces the fish constellations, the planet Neptune and the moon, give us direction and show us the way.'

The water performers sang, 'Guardian of the west, merciful angel, anchor this west corner of our circle and let the cool waters flow into it, and send the beautiful undines to heal. Bless us with the cleansing of the mountain streams, the beauty of the waterfall, the peace of the deep lakes, the strength and mystery of the oceans, the soft touch of the mist and clouds, and the love of the water grail. We feel you and welcome you. Blessed be.'

The guardian of water spoke, 'Blessings of the water upon you, I give you the cup and chalice filled to the brim with healing through divine love.'

The queen turned to the south where the performers signified the spirits of the element fire. Their costumes represented creatures associated with fire, cheetahs, lions, tigers, cougars, panthers and wildcats.

Ignis' voice echoed, 'Spirits of fire, spirits of the south, guardian of fire, warrior of god, carry your flamed sword, wield it with justice, balance, and protection, please join us.'

The guardian and warrior god of fire appeared from behind the fire dancers, he was robed in red and burgundy, the colours of fire, courage, and honour.

Ignis commanded of the god, 'Guardian of fire, give us your gifts and

blessings.'

The guardian of fire approached the queen and laid down his gemstone gifts set upon golden silk. It was topped with jasper, garnet, amber, carnelian and rubies.

He held out his arms over the queen and the procession, saying, 'I, guardian of the south, god of fire and warrior of god, bestow upon you these gifts of transformation, protection, and fighting spirit. It will bring about liveness and creativity, light and heat, inner and free will that current within us. In obstacles and challenges we find our path with spiritual courage and strength of purpose. Blessed be.'

The performing dancers added with song, 'Fire feeds on anything we give it, transforming it to pure energy, leaving only ash in its wake. Its power for change is immediately apparent. Its heat and passion merge the sexes and combust the fuel for glorious and pleasurable acts that reproduce the species.

The elementals associated with fire were salamanders. The ephemeral creatures entered with brilliance, dancing with flaming torches. They carried wands of burning incense, filling the air with ginger, rosemary, frankincense, sandalwood and saffron.

Ignis gazed to the stars while they performed and said, 'As the archetypes of fire reside in the constellations Aries the ram, Leo the lion, Sagittarius the archer, the planet Mars, Jupiter and the Sun, show us who we are and lead the way.'

The fire performers sang, 'Guardians of the south, god of warrior and warrior of god, be the south anchor in this circle and blow fiery fire into it, allow the salamanders to heal. Bless us with the movement and energy of the flames, with the passion of the Sun's heat, with strength and courage, and the pure clear glow of free will. We feel you and welcome you. Blessed be.'

The guardian of fire spoke, 'Blessings of the fire onto you, walk with courage, speak the truth with little patience for willing victims. May your spirits align your will with the divine will, and your light with divine light. Blessed be.'

At the fifth point, representing quintessence, aether, the fifth element, the spring queen looked up to the heavens. The fifth element performer costumes and acts represented creatures associated with aether, the purest and most concentrated essence of energy in the universe's scalars.

Ignis' voice filled the air, 'Spirits of aether, spirits of up above, guardian of the substance composing all heavenly bodies, ignite us with beingness and join us.' The guardian of aether appeared from behind the dancers, robed in white, silver and black.

Ignis commanded of the god, 'Guardian of aether, give us your gifts and blessings.'

The guardian of aether approached the queen and laid down his gemstone gifts of quartz, calcite and crystals spread on black silk. He held out his arms over the queen and the procession, saying, 'I, guardian of up above and god of aether, spirit of all spirits, I bestow upon thee these gifts of pure and clear sky, the untainted essence where all gods live and breathe, akin to the air breathed by mortals. It will bring about joy and union, power and sovereignty, command

and durability, the eternal ordering of all things articulated into reality as a whole. Blessed be.'

The performing dancers added with song, 'Oh deities of Prôtogenoi, the very first born, the primaeval, born in the beginning of the universe. The very first beings coming into existence, the source, the origin, the root of all things that exist, the very fabric of the gods from which all the other gods descend.'

The elementals associated with aether were arche divinities, the divine core of substance that encompasses and values all things. They carried wands of burning incense in their hands, filling the air with anise, cinnamon, honeysuckle, lotus, magnolia, cacao and vanilla.

Ignis gazed at the stars while they performed and brought his hands together for the last time, 'As the archetypes of aether reside in all the constellations ever known and ever to discover, show us who we are and lead the way.'

The aether performers chanted, 'Guardians of up above, god of aether, arche spirits of all origin, be the core anchor in this circle, breath within it the breath of the gods. Bless us with insight from where everything else appeared, the Apeiron, the endless and boundless. We feel you and welcome you. Blessed be.'

The guardian of aether spoke, 'Blessings of the aether onto you, let arche underlie all of reality and appearances. Let air become fire, let air condensed become wind, let air as gas form as clouds, from clouds to water, from water to earth, from earth to stone. Let aether be the endless space, connection and balance for all to exist. Blessed be.'

The queen bowed to all performers in the circle and walked with the entire following to an arch structure that represented the entrance to the underworld, flanked by two guards dressed in black. She acknowledged them with a short knee and head bow.

The torchbearers lit the arch. The flames jumped alive across it while the warriors around them stirred the air with their swords, gathering the energies of the Earth, while the drummers changed rhythms to indicate the difference in purpose.

The black guards greeted the spring queen and her following, and performed a dance to open a path into the underworld. As the procession passed through the arch, they began to keen, mourning all the losses of the world over the past year.

Persephone was sitting on the throne of the underworld next to her husband Hades, her mother Demeter stood next to her, mourning. The procession performed a dance and Ignis said, 'Persephone it is time to leave, the earth awaits you, free your mother from her duty and let the earth spring alive again.'

Persephone stood up, turned to Hades and said, 'In death we are united in the underworld, but in the recycling of our existence, I have to leave you now.'

She took Demeter's hand and led the way back through the fire arch. The warriors gathered the energies of the awakening earth while all of the participants gathered to unify in trying to restore natural order.

But Hades couldn't let her go without disruption and he ordered chaos to intervene. Men dressed in red robes appeared, representing the forces of chaos,

and started taunting the white and blue warriors, staging a series of charges in order to capture the queen on behalf of their lord Conscious.

The white women warriors warded off the red men, without killing any of them, as any unnecessary deaths would lead to a lessening of the energies needed to bring about the change of the seasons.

Men dressed in purple robes appeared from the opposite direction, representing the forces of power and wisdom, and also started taunting the warriors in order to capture the queen on behalf of their lord Subconscious, but the blue male warriors warded off the purple men, without killing any of them.

Ignis and the Vestas performed a ritual to cleanse the area while the rest formed a circle around the open space surrounding the lifted platform set up for the purpose. The spring queen represented Super-consciousness and omnipresence throughout the performance. One red man Conscious, and one purple man Subconscious stepped up to the stage so the spring queen could begin her ritual to awaken new life.

The queen, and the white warriors below, began to spin around and focused the energies they gathered throughout the performances, with the red, purple and blue men circling the stage while humming, increasing the power further.

Overcome by the queen's beauty and goaded by the presence of the heightened energies, the red and purple men could no longer resist and caught the queen in between them, shoving her from side to side trying to win the battle for her.

The white women warriors stepped in and killed both of them. But the Super-consciousness queen took pity on them and brought them back to life. Overwhelmed by the new life that filled them, the red and purple men danced, presenting themselves anew to the five elements, repeating the bowing actions of the queen into each direction as done in the beginning of the procession.

Afterwards the queen crowned the two men with leaf crowns and led the procession to the fire on the altar. Again they made the three layered circle around the queen and the fire, while they all said, 'The circle is casted, the ritual has spun, may the powers of the source of all creation, the powers of our gods, the bright goddesses of the moon, great hunters of the sun, the guardians of our spirits, rulers of the elemental realms, the powers of the stars above and the earth below, bless this time, this place, and all who gather here.'

Ignis handed the queen an unlit torch. She turned to the altar and spoke for the first time that night in a deep voice that did not suit her age, 'I am the omnipresent Super-consciousness, lighting this torch for all creation, the presence of all, for I am ever represented everywhere, in all ways always.'

The procession in the circle said in union, 'We greet you with love, we greet you with light, we greet you with gratitude. Blessed be.'

The queen formed a closed triangle with the red man and the purple man whom she had resurrected.

Ignis announced, while Hinane stood up and approached them with the pomegranate seeds, 'We rejoice in the burgeoning springtime, winter is bedded. The seeds of new life are born and we bargain with a new time.'

Ignis took the seeds from Hinane and put them in the mouths of the queen

and the two men straddling her sides. Hinane remained.

Ignis continued, 'As you eat, feel your kinship with Persephone. Feel the strength that comes from above and below, a part of the great and endless cycle of death and life.'

Hinane said, 'With Persephone, we have journeyed to the land of the dying winter cycle, and returned safely to the light and warmth of the growing spring. May we grow with the brightness of the new young gods, and open ourselves to the energy of creation. Goddess of winter, god of darkness and death, keep us close in your embrace till the next season, accept us as your offspring. We thank and honour thee for the new world that spawned from your belly and blooms anew within us.'

Everyone said, 'Blessed be.'

Hinane continued, 'Goddess of spring, god of life and growing light, we thank you for the warmth, for the power, for lengthening the day, for the energy that surrounds us, for your presence within our circle.'

'Blessed be.' said the audience.

Hinane turned to Amezwar and held out her hands. Amezwar approached with a golden sash and gave it to Ignis.

Hinane took his hands in hers and Ignis folded the sash around their hands binding them together and said, 'Rejoice with the gift of gold, the gift of the Sun, the bringer of light, heat and fire, the symbol of wealth and success, happiness and prosperity. Obstacles fall away in the light of joy. It brightens all things and adds a sense of optimism and good cheer. This gold symbol will increase your power and promote your courage, confidence and willpower.'

Hinane and Amezwar dipped their heads for the last blessing, 'Be dynamic and inspiring, be influential leaders whose light shines for all to see. Show the world who you are and what you have done. Express yourself so that everyone encountered can feel your warmth.'

Hinane took the sash, draped it around Amezwar's shoulders and he returned to his seat.

Hinane proceeded, 'Spirits of the east, south, west, north, of above and below, we thank you for your presence and ask for your blessing as we part, may there be peace between us, now and perpetually.'

The circle procession said, 'The circle is complete, but open, and yet unbroken, may the love of all gods circle forever in our hearts.'

The last, 'Blessed be,' was said in high pitches with drum beats and shouts, the festival was now open for celebration with wine and food, music, dance and laughter.

'Pardon my queen, for my interrupt,' said a messenger suddenly at Hinane's side. His anxious voice rudely pulled her back from her enlightened and enchanted state. Hinane stared at him from behind a haze curtain and lifted her brows in irritated query.

The man continued with cautioned hesitance and nervousness, well aware of the extent of his disturbance. He waited for a long time, until now when the proceedings were over, before he approached his queen, but the matter was urgent.

He braved it, 'My queen I have news of the caravan that was last traversing to Carthage.'

Hinane paid more attention, 'Yes?'

'There was an attack.'

Hinane's face turned to concern and worry, 'Again? It's the second time this season.'

He lowered his head, not sure how to proceed. She thought for a second then said, 'The vandals?'

The messenger nodded, wringing his hands together.

'Could we save anything?'

The messenger shook his head.

'Nothing? The camels or their loads?'

He shook his head again.

'Izza, Siman? Hinane's voice raised a few pitches higher.

The messenger looked at his feet with a slight shake of his head, saying softly, 'Only one returned.'

Then suddenly Hinane's eagle Aete reappeared after an absence of fourteen years, leaving her side the day she overthrew Atisi.

Aete flew directly to Hinane's shoulder and rubbed her cheek to Hinane's. A foreboding presence came with it and Hinane stood in cold shock.

In other circumstances, joy would have filled her heart upon seeing her beloved bird again. But in the place of joy, her heart slumped. She drew breath when the cold reality of the loss, and what Aete's reappearance signified, struck her in the face like ice water thrown from a bucket.

She followed the messenger in haste, leaving her household and guests with a hand signal to carry on with their celebrations.

Hinane's face grew stern when looking into the grieved face and atrocious physical appearance of Siman when entering her tent. Steel fingers groped in around her throat and ripped her entrails apart when listening to Siman's account of Izza's death and the sacrifice of her trades. A feeling of great loss and anger settled in her chest.

But Aete perching on her shoulder signified a much bigger dread which resonated in Siman's next words, 'The vandal leader had an accomplice close to your heart and purse my queen,' she wavered and looked at her feet, then found the strength, 'Tuberon.'

Hinane exclaimed in alarming surprise, 'Tuberon? How do you know?'

Siman nodded with surety.

'But how? Why would he? We are allies, he has enough of his own.'

'Had.'

Hinane was baffled, 'Meaning?'

'He lost most of his fortunes to the vandals. And then to recoup his losses, joined them.'

'Why do I not know this? Why did no one inform me?'

'I learned this from my interrogation of one of the vandals who attacked us and who was left there to die from his injuries. Dying men do not lie.'

Hinane brushed a hand through her hair, the many little jewels weaved

through it falling on the carpet, but the insignificance of the lost jewels did not distress her.

The noise outside coming from the festival rose in crescendo while the dancers sang and shouted joyfully. Hinane knew how their dancing movements created a connection to the earth, how it was broken and reformed each time when lifting and replacing feet. The raised awareness when breathing, moulding itself into the rhythms of the drums, became one with supernatural forces, the events and beings in total harmony around the fire.

But she felt no connection at this moment to any divinity or being. She felt isolated and lost. She ordered a servant to take care of Siman and fell to her knees.

CHAPTER 40

Hinane laid spread out against the lush and colourful padding in her private quarters, Ahina sprawled out next to her. With eyes half closed, the cheetah was licking her paws, the reticent and repeated movement having a relaxing and comforting effect on Hinane.

Hinane was in deep thought about the happenings of the past few seasons, especially the constant fighting in the confederation's settlements between followers of the Christian faith, and those believing in their traditional gods.

And then off course, there was the devastating attack on her caravans and the loss of her trades she had to resolve. The thought brought back the grieving pain for Izza.

'She deserved a more dignified death,' whispered Hinane to herself in regret. At least they gave her an honourable burial. Siman dragged her back all on her own, and the burial was one of the most difficult she and her warriors ever had to endure.

Along with Tala, Izza was her most trusted and loyal warrior, and over the past few days since Hinane had received the news of Izza's death, her thoughts often trailed back to their teenage years when the three of them first bonded in friendship and warriorhood.

She sighed and shook her head slightly, trying to rid the bareness Izza's memory left within her, and forced her mind into rather finding the reasons for the attack on her caravans.

Was it because of the divide in her dominion? Like the first sack of Rome in 410AD, when some said the influence of the Christian faith was to blame for it, and which also inspired St Augustine to write his letters City of God and City of Man.

'No,' she decided with a shake of her head. The attack on her caravan had nothing to do with religion. Siman was confident when mentioning Tuberon was

responsible, her once trusted trading confederate, and Tala's previous husband.

She frowned and shrugged uncomfortably, her pelvis stiff from lying about. Over the years Hinane and Tuberon forged strong economic alliances and it was difficult to imagine that he could lose his treasures, or sell his soul for a want of more.

Tuberon always had this obsession to be the best, and to accumulate more than others. Like with Tala. After spending that time with Tala when they had first met, the two of them gradually grew closer, eventually got married and had one child.

But Tala remained in Hinane's legion and household, refusing to spend her days in her husband's jurisdiction who took on more and more concubines over the years to keep his swelling desires satisfied. Tala was simply not enough for him. He also enslaved more and more captives to work his foggaras and mines.

Hinane recalled the time when she was jealous of Tuberon and Tala, her gut warning that he was not who he had appeared to be. For this reason she always remained cautious, never getting too close, and their dealings always strictly structured around business and trade. Tala was the one who got deeply hurt.

She wondered what his rudimentary reasons were for deceiving her, and how far his influence stretched with Geiseric. Or was Tuberon also just another seed on the Vandal king's Mancala board?

Regardless of how it came about, the bottom line was, she had been raided and suffered a great cost. Although she always protected her trades through the accompanying warriors, and had contracted superb deal negotiators and asset administrators, she neglected protecting herself properly against deception. Her affairs had always been conducted in seamless order, and commercial processes only had to be duplicated on previous success models to ensure her continuous fortune.

What did she miss? Did she become too complacent? Did she lose focus?

Anger rose in her temples. It's this lying about all day with mindless women and children that softened her skills and acumen. She should have been more acute and alert. She should have remained more closely involved.

She released the air from her lungs, closed her eyes and calmed her emotions, realising knocking herself won't resolve anything. Instead, she should derive a solid plan of reconciliation and a strategic approach to restore order.

She stilled her mind further and let meditation fetch the knowledge she sought. She forced her body to relax, eased each muscle one by one, and focussed her mind to centre in her core. She concentrated on the golden light which she imagined channelling down from above. The light illuminated her heart and she let it drift further down to her solar plexus and navel, down her legs and feet, totally relaxing in the warm comfort and energy it brought.

She let her lucid mind dart from subject to subject, always believing that any crises preceded transformation and she was probing for it now, searching for the elements that would direct her next course.

At first when she was a young warrior, her purpose was only to fight for survival, build a nation, be powerful, become wealthy and respected. But ever since she successfully managed that within the first nine years of her reign, she

wanted more spiritual fulfilment.

As time has passed, and sometimes confusing events raise more and more questions, Hinane delved deeper and deeper into the ethereal realms, wanting to learn all about creation and the gods.

She remembered now vividly, it was after Kella was born, and after the incident with the Barbary lion which almost left her lame, that her focus had changed.

The lion prowled their dominion for months, killing and feeding off the camel and goat herds kept by the farmers. The livestock presented easy targets and for a pariah lion, normally roaming arid landscapes alone, it became paradise.

Hinane and her warriors made hunting it into a game, and for weeks betting on who would be the one to finally kill it. As they hunted in pairs, Bahac was the one at Hinane's side that day, searching for the predator at the foot of the Ahaggar mountain cliffs.

The lion spotted them, stalking them through the cliffs, hiding behind rocks, waiting patiently for the right time to make his move. Finally when they least expected it, the lion jumped with a burst of speed atop Hinane from a rock platform when they passed it.

Hinane was thrown from her horse and since the pathway was very narrow at that point, she missed grabbing the edge and rolled to the bottom, crashing into rocks along the way that fractured her pelvis, lumbar and sacral areas in several places.

The lion remained footed in the path along with the horse, and with Hinane out of the way, Bahac threw her axe towards the lion just as it went for the horse's throat. The axe shattered through the animal's spine between its blades and it slumped lifeless to the ground while the horse struggled back to its feet.

The accident bedded Hinane for months and it took her years to finally walk without a limp. During this time she devoted her attention more towards conferring with religious scholars, spiritual gurus, magi, astrologers, sorcerers, shamans, scientists, philosophers, and other wise men not related to any form of faith or hypotheses.

Her conquest regularly took her to the northern shores of Africa to meet with all nations that set afoot in the ports along the Mediterranean as far as Alexandria and Cairo. She even ventured into the black southern parts of the continent with Nokoto and Chikae, learning about the gods and divinities of their and other ethnic tribes.

To her, after vast collaborations and contemplations, the god of all the gods was everything. This main god as the all and the one, represented in smaller parts by all the other different gods across various mythology, cultures and beliefs, was found in all of nature on earth, trees, flowers, grass, sand, in animals, humans, and the skies, the stars, the moon, the sun, the heavens. The everything, was everywhere.

Nature moved and operated in harmony and silence, and without effort and lots of patience, birthed, grew and died by itself. It constantly changed, its energy forever transforming into other living forms, never really dying, just following the cycles season after season, resurrection and death, forming

nations and destroying nations.

And no matter what man did, nature would cause things to happen with no forced control by any being, not even the gods, as every living thing had its own god-ness.

Man could only control how he reacted towards events and actions of the universe, nature or other men. He could only control certain aspects of his life with free will, personal decisions and choices, but even these were limited in the bigger scheme of creation. What was authored in the stars was already long written on earth.

Where all of these gods have firstly and truly originated from, was the enigma that still puzzled her mind often. On the basic teachings of biology, alchemy, mineral and metal sciences she understood how living creatures may have come about through amino acids, water and lightning, but that first breath that gave forth all life, would always remain a mystery to her. But she did know where to find the god of gods.

For Hinane, religion was not a search for truth, or else many more religious folk would have followed their own hearts and intuition as truth lay deeply embedded in each one. She decided that religion's main function was merely to afford its followers a meaning of life, and a feeling of security while living in dangerous and daunting environments.

Religion was used to calm anxiety, but in contrast and irony, it also mostly tended towards becoming excessive, neurotic, controlling and evil, all things that caused anxiety. That's why a religious regime always became a cruel regime. For rulers, it was important to establish religion in society, to regulate it with some degree of fear, or else humans would have no reason to follow their mandated laws.

For individuals, often when worshipping a specific religion's god, they were merely comforting their own awareness and used its scriptures to feel righteous. Religion provided a sense of belonging within a group where humans tried to live without fear, even though fear always deeply remained.

Hinane never imposed any specific religion upon her people, and she would surely not do so now, even if it threatened the peace in her domain. The mere thought of how many rulers used it as a form of fear based control made her scowl.

Amalu was the usurper in her community that bewildered her people. He was the one who brought the Catholic faith into their midst in the first instance, and the friendship between him and her died on the cross along with the story he told of his messiah's crucifixion.

According to elders and scholars of various religions, faiths and astrology whom Hinane had conversations with, there were many other examples of supposedly supernatural virgin-born saviours who died on a cross exhibiting exactly the same details as the fable of Jesus.

Hinane called to mind her last conversation with Amalu. She rebuked with flushed cheeks after he insulted her non-religion stance, 'Proof to me with absolute certainty that what you say is just, that this Jesus man was sought out as the only son of God and not us all, and I will believe. Tell me why only a

handful is sought out to carry his word in a church and not through us all. If you cannot, then let me believe what I will.'

She turned away without waiting for an answer but then swished around to face him again, 'If your god is the only god, then what god is speaking inside of me? Because it's that god who led my people to safety, that god who gave me strength and courage, that god who gave you a safe home in my realm when you needed it. And it damn well wasn't your Jesus fixed to his cross.'

Since that day Amalu started a campaign against her, whispering damnation that she was a witch, as so clearly evident by the evil magic she heaved when overthrowing Atisi, her unexplainable healing practices, and bizarre rituals. At first she let him be, thinking his accusations posed no real harm. Besides, he could never understand the true mysteries of nature and energy as his ego prevented him from truly listening. She eventually exiled him from her territory when his actions later bordered on malice sedition.

She also now recalled the conversation they had when they just met, that time when she fled from the Atlas through the desert.

Amalu said, 'Follow your heart, as it's the only truthful thing you can ever trust. That voice speaking deep within you always knows the truth, no matter what others advocate.'

His words were true then speaking about their traditional gods as it were today. But he also said, 'There would be many more teachings, masters, prophets and beliefs, but the only one leading you truthfully, is the one in your liver, heart and head. You can only trust your inner voices, nothing else.'

She smiled wryly and said to herself, 'Amalu, you betrayed yourself.'

And if it was Amalu who had betrayed her to the Vandal king, she would have understood perfectly. But Tuberon?

By deceiving her, Tuberon foolishly shut down the income royalties flowing from her trades which were indeed quite substantial. Maybe Geiseric had far more to offer? Best would be to confront Tuberon and question him for the answers, she decided.

She returned her thoughts to Amalu. Even though he left her confederation borders long ago, his influences still infected her community. He started a crusade against all women, saying they do not belong in governing roles and affairs of religion, state or politics. His actions were not uncommon, as Christians over the past two centuries have already destroyed thousands of powerful and mystic women. And all the wisdom and secrets those women contained, their scribes, their methods and teachings, their techniques of transforming man and energy were, with their tortured bodies, buried under stones and burnt on stakes.

Most of these powerful women were pagan worshippers. For Catholics, paganism was the worst delinquency, as it meant there was no need for a saviour god, as earth and nature were simply enough. They had enough faith in their gods who already provided everything. There was no need for the Christian god and no need for Christian priests and their sacraments, as nature knew nothing as sin. This angered the clergy, causing anxiety and a feeling of being out of control.

The Catholic churches used fire as a tool of execution for those who strayed from their teachings, making fire a symbol of eternal suffering as proposed in a supposed hell. It was a weapon to keep people from expressing their individuality and independent spirit, whereas the meaning of fire was actually only to face and overcome one's fears.

Hinane groaned. Many people had already been killed in the name of Christianity, so apparently shown by the bouts between the Catholics, Donatists and the Vandals, who were Arian Christians. How could religion then ever be a good thing?

And yet over many thousands of years, humans had always been fighting wars and killing each other. War and fighting simply had nothing to do with religion, although it later became a proficient tool for controlling nations and getting whatever they desired. Religion was manipulatively used to create legitimacy of nations and kings, and to justify their actions.

But it was the nature of man to want to fight and kill with a hunger for power in trying to prove their worthiness. Hinane doubted that the births and preachings of a few good men like Jesus, Krishna and Buddha, had any real influence in changing that. In any given challenging circumstance, man would use all his current resources to express himself fully in that moment in order to survive.

She gave a deep, overwhelming sigh. To her, Christianity seemed muddled and a doctrine formed only to control the masses. The idea of a suffering Jesus, atoning by his death for the sins of men, descending into darkness and rising again to bring life, was found in the oldest records of the human race as accounted by elders in all of the northern nations she had studied. In all cases, there was a personification of the sun, the father, and the son of that sun, with a virgin goddess as mother.

Among the ancient Egyptians, the earth, fructified by the sun, and the young rising sun, constituted the divine family as represented by Osiris, Isis and Horus. Osiris, the sun, disappearing every night and paling every winter, rose every morning and every spring as Horus who is the son of god and also god himself.

Krishna among the east Indians, Bel among the Babylonians, Adonis, Hercules, Bacchus, and Dionysus among the Greeks, illustrate in the same manner the changes of the earth's seasons and personifying of the sovereignty of the sun. The same idea, that of a divine son, born of the union of the sun and the earth, god and a woman, runs through all the myths which evolved out of the spiritual questioning of man.

Emerging Christianity formed through the uproar of Grecian ideas, blended with Jewish beliefs and through the rapid increase of relations between the Far East and the shores of the Mediterranean.

Although Christianity claimed the cross only took significance with Jesus's placement on it, the fact was that the god-on-the-cross was a pre-Christian sacred motif. Numerous ancient figures in many other civilisations were depicted on a cross or in cruciform, with arms outstretched. Many myths had them punished or killed through crucifixion, such as Prometheus the Greek titan of fire and foresight.

Roman reports of the rituals of Cybele recorded that the son was first tied to a tree and then buried. Three days later a light was said to appear in the burial tomb, whereupon Attis rose from the dead, bringing salvation with him in his rebirth.

Attis worship was centuries older than Jesus worship and was popular in some parts of the Roman Empire before Christianity. In the case of Attis, Hinnel read significant accounts of his death and mourning in the writings of the first century BC Greek historian, Diodorus Siculus. Attis motifs were common in many places and revolved around nature worship, solar mythology and astrology.

She could name many other examples, such as the magi belonging to the story of Mithra, a deity of the ancient Persians, also originally a personification of the sun. He was said to have been born of a virgin in a cave, on the twenty-fifth of December, an allegorical representation of the emergence of the sun from the darkness of the winter solstice.

At the period of the composition of the Gospels of Jesus the cult of Mithra was familiar to the western nations, and had long been established in Rome. The Roman catacombs contained a picture of a seated virgin holding the infant Mithra on her lap, and before them, three men in Persian dress were kneeling and offering gifts. Mithraism, based upon this god Mithra, arose in the Mediterranean world at exactly the same time as Christianity.

The religion of Buddha was also already represented in the province by learned and cultivated priests. And the Brahmins, highest of the four Hindu Varna, also came with their wealth of legends. Especially their story of god Krishna, whose name suggested, the Anointed One, Christos, while his benevolent deeds and wise teachings answered to the moral standards of the philosophers.

Just as the Brahmins represented their god Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Vishnu and also a personification of the sun who was also portrayed as a crucified man with a wreath of sunbeams around his head, just as the ancient Assyrians represented their sun god Baal as a man surrounded by an aureole with outstretched arms, thus forming a perfect cross, so also did the Romans revered a crucified incarnation of their official sun god Sol Invictus which meant Invincible Sun. Many ancient pictures of Jesus bore the inscription Deo Soli, which meant 'to the only god', or 'to the god Sol'.

If one would take away from Jesus all these corresponding factors, his virgin birth, his miracle powers, his teachings only recorded by twelve apostles whom some astrologers claim was merely reference to the twelve signs of the zodiac. With his execution and resurrection similar to that of other deities, only symbolising the changes of the season and the final ascension which in astrology is known as the rising of a star above the horizon, what was there left to account for this man?

She did not doubt for one moment that once there lived an Eeshó, or Jesus as most refer to him, a man who did indeed great things. But she doubted he was a god greater than the ones they've already worshipped.

Through the ages, man had the inclination, when meeting a teacher, or man

of importance deemed so by his followers, to turn him into a god by giving him certain attributes fitting to a god. Hinane truly believed such was the case with Jesus, a god made so by man.

For her, he was a meek demonstration of a god and not suitable as an archetype fitting to her life. In giving her the courage she needed, she required calling on strong gods, like that of Ares and Athena.

Hinane shrugged her shoulders, and turned her mind towards the goddess Ngame of the Akan of Ghana, or as the Tuareg referred to her as the Amanai. She was the shaman who taught Hinane everything about Vodún when Hinane ventured to the south on her infrequent visits to Chikae.

Vodún denoted the spirits and other elements of divine essence which governed the earth. Vodún had a single divine creator, called Mawu or Nana Buluku, which embodied an androgynous creature, and of which Mawu, the moon, and Lisa, the sun, were female and male aspects respectively. Mawu bore seven children and gave them each the power to rule over a realm of nature, animals, earth, and sea.

There was a pantheistic quality to Vodún, the belief that god was the universe and all its phenomena, as a whole, were manifestations of god, since all of creation was considered divine, and therefore contained the power of the divine source.

This was a truer concept akin to what Hinane believed in, and which was vital to medicine and herbal remedies which formed the basis of how Hinane and Takamat could miraculously heal the sick.

Hinane got up to drink some water from a flask and returned to her pad to conclude her thoughts. Each of the religions, no matter how bizarre, was founded in different historical and geographical settings with truths that were universal in nature. These religions did indeed have the potential to bring courage, meaning and purpose into the lives of their followers, also instilling hope, inspiration, revelation, and moral order to their given societies.

Before religions, each successive human generation built upon the knowledge of their ancestors, with each generation becoming more and more inquisitive of how things had worked. This led to a terrifying revelation - personal mortality. Humans became aware that their lives were ephemeral and they would die at some point in their future. This knowledge produced an intolerable emotional drain and a deep rooted fear of what would happen after death.

They developed more questions about themselves and their environment, what controlled the seasonal cycles of nature, the daily motion of the sun, the motion of the stars, the passing of the seasons, what caused floods, rains, dry spells, storms and finally what controlled fertility of the tribe. And as the tribes grew, the question remained what system of morality was needed to best promote the stability of the tribe.

Thus some people within the tribe invented answers based on their personal guesses, hunches and fantasies, which became a belief system and subsequently developed into a religion to serve as an anchor. It gave people a feeling of security in an insecure world, and a false feeling of control over the environment, where there was actually none.

Priesthoods with a council were formed to develop theologies to interpret certain revelations. These formed the doctrines, beliefs, and traditions with a set of behavioural expectations and morals for tribe members who gave direction and sustenance to the religion. Much of the exclusivity that each religion proclaimed for itself came through its doctrine and not through its revelation.

Religion formed an oral tradition which was disseminated among the members of the tribe and was taught to each new generation. Much later, when writing was developed, the beliefs were recorded in written form which resulted in a major loss of flexibility and alteration. Oral traditions could evolve over time, even sometimes changed by priests who added their own personal observations and experiences, as opposed to written documents which were more permanent, inhibiting the room for improvement as their beliefs grew.

Then the quest to find converts to support this belief system became important. The bigger the support system or group, or the more authoritative members formed part of it, the more believable it became. The more believable it became, the more it was supported.

Unfortunately, because these belief systems were based and deeply rooted upon first hunches, the various religions which developed in different areas of the world were all different and in conflict with each other. Because the followers of most religions considered their beliefs to be derived directly from their god, they couldn't be easily changed and inter-religious compromise was difficult or impossible.

Also, because religious texts were often ambiguous, divisions developed within religions, different denominations, schools, or traditions derived different meanings from the same religious texts, thus the numerous conflicts. What were the gods' standing on this then?

And then Hinane also encountered Atheists who denied that any deities existed, believing that the hundreds of the religious creation stories have it all wrong. Deities did not create humans. It was humans who created, and continued to create, the many thousands of gods and goddesses that people have devoutly and sincerely worshipped.

Hinane yawned sleepily. And yet, according to her own revelations, the divine revelation that sparked each religion or belief system was true and universal in itself, whether choosing to be a member of a particular religion, or no religion at all, the super-consciousness were equally everybody's and forever omnipresent inside all of creation, and no being can ever change that.

Every human being had a realisation of manifestation within, revealing at some point in their lives who they were, where they from, and where they were going. When they've reached that strong awareness of the pure spirit within themselves, then they have entered the kingdom within.

She thought of this belief, how it revealed itself throughout her past and in her day to day existence, what she had achieved, how she dealt with matters and how she conducted her reign.

She had strong respect and admiration for the beauty of nature, and a strong belief in the logical simplicity of the order of nature and events, which was, to her, the supreme god who revealed itself in the orderly harmony of what existed.

The most beautiful and most profound that Hinane had ever experienced, was the sensation of the mystical energy, which she believed to be the power of pure nature, science and existence.

She shifted more comfortably against the pillows and turned her head towards Ahina, who was sleeping soundly. Hinane sighed softly, by now she was content with her imperfect knowledge and short of understanding creation in full, as no man could ever say for sure how it truly was.

Therefore, she treated values and moral obligations purely as problems of man and not of gods. She could not accept any concept of a god based on the fear of life, or the fear of death. She could not conceive a god who would pass judgement, or fear, or annihilation upon creatures of his own creation.

If you were born a cheetah, one would surely kill for sustenance, it was in its nature. If you were born a human, you would surely use your wits and given talents, good or bad, for survival. Even if it involved killing, thieving or seducing, it was in human nature to survive no matter the price. If the gods who created humans wanted them to behave any differently, they should have bequeathed a different nature and circumstance on earth.

And yet, man still had the power to choose between right and wrong, and continuously searched for that part embedded inside of him that was not yet fully known, understood or cultivated. It was left to each individual on their own to find the kingdom inside, and not for any religion to enforce it there.

Hinane suddenly felt assured that no matter what happened at the council meeting the next day in addressing all the Tuareg's concerns and their losses, she would handle it as she always did. Her strength and courage was part of her nature.

She smiled at her own thoughts.

She had no fear that anyone could take away what she had built over the years. These were her people, the blue people of the desert, and she would do anything to guard them in securing their survival. The pride, the wealth, and the unity of the Tuareg were pure and protected.

Her final thought before falling into a deep sleep, 'And as for any other god, known or not yet known, let it be clear to them, I am Tin Hinan, a deified goddess in my own right. I am immortal, as I will forever live in the hearts of my people.'

CHAPTER 41

For the first time in a decade, Hinane changed her usual royal raiment to that of a forceful warrior leader to address her council. She was seated at the head of the confederation meeting area with Amezwar next to her, facing the Amghar and their noble aides. Tala and Menna stood behind her, as if in wanting to

protect their queen from the accusations and discontent they all knew were coming.

Tala squinted her upward slanted eyes when looking at the attendees in an icy stare, ready to quash any dispute with the thrash of her axe. Such an act would surely not be appropriate at this formal affair, and yet, the notion and eagerness to defend her made Hinane almost chuckle. Izza's death was a heavy blow for them all, but much more so for Tala, and at this moment her trust lay only with her queen.

Menna was more in control of her sentiments and stood with her hands folded across her chest, her face without any expression or emotion. Her once mousy brown hair was now almost entirely grey, and that, together with her one wooden leg and wisdom lines carved upon her face, made her look much older than she actually was.

One of the amghar, Izem was the first to lift his grievances, 'With respect my queen,' but his voice and attitude carried everything but respect, 'The attacks on our caravans are your fault.'

Amezwar threw a sideward glance at Hinane, who caught his gaze, his sapphire blue eyes like two strong arms strutting her spirits. His calm complexion abraded her nerves and stilled the unrest in her stomach caused by the disgruntled Izem.

Hinane drew breath, cleared her throat and turned calmly back to Izem who carried on rambling incoherently about everything wrong in the confederation.

Izem became more and more insulting, and anger lines deepened between Amezwar brows, 'Curb your tongue, Izem. You forget yourself.'

Hinane whispered softly to Amezwar, 'Let him talk. Freedom of expression is one of our people's most important rights.'

She lifted her eyebrows back towards Izem, trying to listen patiently at the rest of his battering.

'You've allowed the Christians into our midst, with that friend of yours Amalu. His beliefs betray all we stand for.'

Hinane quickly said, 'As you very well know, Amalu is long since no member of this community. But please do continue.'

Izem liked the stir his words created among the confederation leaders who shifted uncomfortably in their seats and said cantankerously, 'The Christian god weakened our gods. Now our gods have forsaken us. They ceased to protect us from the dangers in the deserts that are threatening our wealth.' He paused for a moment for effect, then added, 'How could you permit such an intrusion?'

A divided murmur raised from the audience, some in agreement, some in awe of such brutal disrespect and moral attack on their queen. Hinane coolly stood up, straightened her shoulders and walked around the large congregated group.

Although she had reached some conclusions within her own belief system, she would never impose what she'd learned on her people. It was an area for exploration by each individual on their own.

But when she finally spoke, her voice carried authority and conviction, 'Izem, I do not see any threat or disturbance in what you spoke about. The Jesus-god

was a harmless mortal and good prophet and nothing to concern yourself so. The Christian gods are not to blame, nor are our own gods,' she paused slightly then said loud and clear, 'I am.'

The council drew sharp breath almost as one person in reaction to her blatant claim.

Then with a dismissive tone without elaborating on her meaning, she continued, addressing everyone, 'Tell me every single detail you know of our attackers and everything else you may deem important.'

One of the other Amghar responded quickly, glad to lighten the charged atmosphere caused by Hinane's declaration.

'Geiseric is king to these invaders, the Vandals, or some also refer to them as the Barbarians. Many accounts reaching us say they are killing everything in their path, women, children, young, old, black, white, christian and not christian, and we fear his invasion in our territories every day.'

Hinane nodded, 'Yes he is a brutal savage.'

She signalled a servant to refill her cup with water and took a mouthful before saying, 'The reason why we've escaped his vicious cruelty so far, is because of our distance inland. Our arid territory is not that valuable to an outsider, thus less desirable to control. Geiseric prefers his powerful galleys to float over a large portion of the Mediterranean coast and trading ports, plundering everything he can at sea while his consorts threaten the coastlines.'

She paused then said, 'He knows how prized our trades are in these ports, therefore it's only the goods of our trade which are valuable to him, not our lands, and the reason he attacked our caravans and not our homesteads. Do not fret for your households and families.'

Another Amghar asked with a frown, 'But what caused him to move so far into the desert to launch his attack? Why not attack our caravans closer to the ports?'

Hinane answered vaguely, still nursing the pain of Tuberon's deceit and not ready to share her knowledge until she knew what course to take, 'We might have a collaborator in our midst who advised him so.'

The sharp inhaling and shouts of the Amghar showed their surprise and disdain, but Hinane diffused the slight eruption with a lift of a finger, 'Geiseric's main concern is to acquire wealth and power. His main desire is to take control of the entire Western Roman Empire and specifically Rome and the Germanic areas far up north in Europe with no interest to govern the vast deserts of Africa. According to my councils, the native tribes and savages down south are not part of his appetite and I doubt we are too. But since we, the Tuareg, control most of the trading routes to Carthage, Tunis and Morocco, we carry the luxury he needs to boost this power.'

Amezwar said to affirm, 'To fund his exploits.'

Hinane nodded and turned to the old man sitting next to Yeddes . The old man was the trading route record keeper working closely with Yeddes who commandeered the trades in the confederation and surrounds.

'What are our losses so far?' she enquired with narrowed eyes.

The man with long grey hair and bleak yellow robe fumbled with some

documents before answering anxiously, 'Immense my queen. We cannot afford another raid.'

Hinane instantly frowned in annoyance at his pessimistic account, 'We've only lost some small part of our riches, not our spirit old man.'

He fumbled and let the papers drop nervously. The entire meeting and interaction suddenly irritated Hinane and she declared with finality, 'We'll find the inside collaborator, confront the Vandal king, renegotiate our trade importance and keep our reputation and wealth.'

Then she looked at Izem directly, 'And our gods, all of them, have not forsaken us. It is you who have to strengthen your resolve and curb your fears. It is you who have forsaken yourself.'

Izem moved to talk, but she cut him off abruptly, 'And I refuse to oppose any faith or belief system any of you, or any of our people choose to believe in. It is everyone's right to decide for themselves, and I will hear, or tolerate, no more of this.'

Izem rebuked with sour ridicule, 'What a way to control a nation.'

Amezwar shot up, authority clearly in his stance when he said loudly, 'Enough.'

Amezwar bowed slightly towards Hinane in respect then addressed the attendees, 'Our queen will confer later on how exactly we would proceed. You are dismissed.'

The Amghar stood up and bowed deeply, Hinane not sure if they paid their respects towards her or more towards Amezwar. Regardless of where their affections were most, she was thankful for his rescue.

Amezwar took her at the elbow and led her out into the warm rays of the sun. It was at times like this that her appreciation for him swelled greatly in her heart.

She took a deep breath of the fresh air and let him lead her to the cool waters of the canal where their daughter played.

CHAPTER 42

Each night, whenever she could, Hinane told her daughter Kella bedtime stories based upon the myths and legends of various cultures. Tonight she decided to tell Kella about the spider Anansi which was always portrayed as a trickster in north African folklore, forever stirring up mischief to get the better of other creatures. But Anansi was also considered a god of creation and wisdom, and artfully manipulated events to obtain his ends.

Kella's blue eyes shone brightly in anticipation of yet another enthralling tale. Kella had Amezwar's eyes and nose, but Hinane's lips and jaw. She was much taller than girls and boys of the same age, and for that reason considered herself far more regal than any other, without accrediting her elevated position to her

mother's status. She was an astute girl in her own right, already equipped with bravery and a lively spirit.

Hinane's voice came dusted with drama and conspiracy when relating the story.

Once, there were no stories in the world. The sky-god, Nyame, had them all. So, Anansi asked Nyame how much they would cost to own. Nyame set a very high price, one difficult to master. He said Anansi must bring to him Onini the python, Osebo the leopard, the Mmoboro hornets, and Mmoatia the dwarf.

First Anansi went to where the python lived and wondered out loud to himself, craftily enticing the python, 'Is Onini really longer than the palm branch? Or maybe not, as his wife, Aso says he's not.'

Onini's ego overpowered his reason and agreed to slouch along the palm branch to establish his worth. Because he couldn't straighten out completely, a true impression of his actual length was difficult to obtain, so Onini agreed to be tied to the branch. When he was completely straightened and tied, Anansi carried him to Nyame.

'That was clever,' laughed Kella.

Hinane chuckled with her and continued. To catch Osebo the leopard, Anansi dug a deep hole into mother earth. When the leopard went on hunt and fell in the hole, Anansi offered to help him out with his many web strands. Osebo was rescued from the hole, but now trapped in Anansi's webs. Anansi gave him a sly apologetic wink and carried him to Nyame.

To catch the Mmoboro hornets, Anansi filled a calabash with water and poured it over a banana leaf held over his head and some over the nest, calling out that it was raining. He suggested that the Mmoboro must get into the empty calabash, and when they obliged, he quickly sealed the opening.

To catch Mmoatia the dwarf, he made a doll and covered it with sticky gum. Anansi placed the doll under the odum tree where the dwarfs normally played, placing a bowl with some yam in front of the doll. Mmoatia came out to play and ate the yam. She thanked the doll which of course did not reply. Annoyed at its bad manners, she struck it, first with one hand then the other. Her hands stuck to the doll and Anansi captured her.

When Anansi handed over all his captives, Nyame rewarded him with all the stories of the world which became known as Anansesem.

Kella giggled again and asked inquisitively. 'And how did you get all your stories, mother?'

Hinane removed a lock of hair from her forehead before replying, 'From my mother, and from her mother, and from her mother, and...'

Kella laughed louder, 'How many mothers are there?'

'Plenty and plenty. One day you will also be a mother.'

Kella suddenly pulled a face, 'I'm not going to be a mother. I don't want kids, they are silly and foolish.'

Hinane laughed, 'Luckily then, as you need a husband first.'

'Yak,' came quickly from Kella. 'I don't like boys either, they're clumsy and stupid.'

'Only because you make them feel nervous, my sweet.'

'Why?'

'Maybe because they like you so much.'

'Like daddy likes mommy.'

The guilt riddled through her, 'Yes, like daddy loves mommy.'

Kella frowned, 'What's the big thing about love anyway? I don't understand it.'

'One day you will.'

'Will I feel different then?'

'Maybe, it depends.'

'On what?'

Hinane hesitated to think before answering carefully. 'Well, actually we have to love each living thing, and respect each...'

Kella interrupted quickly, 'Arggg not that lesson again, I know that mom, you told me over and over.'

Hinane tickled her in her sides and Kella squirmed with joy.

She looked at her daughter with much devotion, but then said solemnly, 'You know I have to go away for a while?'

Kella nodded, 'Yes, but I will be okay mommy, Takamat will look after me.'

'Yes she will my dear, always and always, she's like a second mommy to you is she not?'

Kella nodded with a grin that turned into a yawn.

'Yes and don't worry mom, daddy is always here and I'll be as strong as the Gaetulian lion.'

Hinane grinned with satisfaction as she often used the Gaetulian lion metaphor to enforce courage and strength within Kella.

The Gaetulian lion with its fierce reputation originated from Gaetulia, the land of the Gaetuli, a warlike Libyan tribe. Its legend has reverberated throughout the empires, just like his roar shuddered through many hunters.

Takamat entered, 'Your bath is ready Hinane.'

Hinane bent over Kella, gave her a goodnight kiss and tugged her in. She gazed fondly upon her, all the dreams and hopes for her child shining in her eyes, then turned to leave to her quarters.

Steam twirled upwards from the hot bath and the fragrance of the incense and oils Takamat added to the water had a relaxing effect on Hinane's senses. Candles were burning from everywhere and Hinane uttered a deep sigh of contentment.

The clans outside readying for the night, filled the air with peaceful music, soft and happy laughter, now and then a faint moan from the camels, snorts from the horses and frogs croaking in the nearby streams.

Hinane undressed and sagged blissfully into the soothing water. Takamat tied her hair in a roll and washed her back, the devoting act always offering the sense of pleasure and security Hinane sometimes craved. But tonight Takamat's hands were filled with slight tension.

'What is it Takamat, I can feel your disorderly thoughts. What presses on your heart?'

Takamat hesitated somewhat but then continued bravely, 'The tawshets are

in uproar. They're divided in their faith, Christian against pagan.'

Hinane sighed heavily, and rested her head against the side of the bath when Takamat moved to her front to wash her breasts.

'And they blame me.'

Takamat's caressing hands hastened with worry, 'And they worry about losing their fortunes. What will you do?'

Hinane didn't answer immediately. She enjoyed the strokes of Takamat's hands for a while then said calmly, 'I'll regain the full power of the Tuareg Takamat. We stood united once, we'll do so again.'

'What you said in the meeting, that you were to blame for the attacks, sparked an uproar of debates. What did you mean?'

'Simply that I lost focus and should regain tighter control.'

The rest of the bathing continued in silence with Hinane's mind turning towards her predicament. When Takamat finished the ritual, Hinane rose from the scented water with Takamat handing her a robe.

But Takamat was still not consoled and pressed again, 'The Vandals are venomous my queen. How would you conquer them?'

Hinane's face turned dreamy and softened into a rosy glow, 'Chikae...'

They did not hear Amezwar enter the tent and the bitterness in his brusque voice made them jump with fright, 'The king of your heart.'

They swung around to face Amezwar, Hinane blushed and turned to Takamat, 'Please leave us.'

Takamat bowed, left the bathing area and Hinane swiftly regained her composure.

She folded the robe around her wet body, walking closer to Amezwar as she spoke guardedly, 'Chikae is the only one that can assist us in this matter. He has been my, our, ally since the beginning. He helped build our power and establish our good fortunes with the trades.'

She bore into Amezwar's face, watching his set jaw and clenched teeth as he tried to control his emotions, his back rigid and cold.

'He's the one to thank for all our riches, if it was not for his alliance and gold from the start, I know not how I would have gained favour. And you, my husband, you yourself owe your riches to the king of Ghana as you have allied and traded with him long before I did.'

Hinane's words cut through Amezwar. The pain flecked in red spots upon his face and his well-rounded lips straightened into a bitter line.

But Hinane continued ruthlessly, 'And in order to re-establish myself as queen, proving to my people that we can flourish once again, I will employ Chikae and all the warrior tribes that seam his country.'

Amezwar balled his fists and closed his one eye. The notion made her flinch inside, remorse for the eye he lost on her account and the pain she inflicted in his heart, a pain he had to endure all these years.

She moved closer to him with an outstretched hand and a sad smile. She was illuminated by the ambient light induced by the soft candle light, which made her look irresistible, her beauty starting to melt away his concerns. He stood defenceless, battling to overcome his emotions and averted his eyes downward,

trying to avoid the magnetism she held over him.

Hinane motivated her decision further, 'I have to do this for our people Amezwar. The armies that Chikae has built over the last decade are strong, black African brutes, worthy opponents against the Vandals,' her voice pleaded, 'I have to stop Geiseric from destroying our wealth. Our own warriors grew lazy and fat, I will need all the help I can find.'

He still said nothing, looking down at the richly weaved carpets lining the floor.

Then she said impatiently, 'What other choice do I, do we have?'

Amezwar had no answer to give. He took a deep breath of desperation, the black patch that covered his eye shining ominously in the dark. Hinane moved her body tightly against his and surrounded his face with her hands, pulling his lips towards hers. He rested his forehead against hers and slouched his shoulders in an effort to release the tension from it.

Hinane whispered, 'And I need you, my husband. I need you to remain here to defend our people and our empire.'

Her words shuddered through him, and feeling his distress against her naked breasts, her eyes dammed with tears. She wasn't sure if it was because of compassion for Amezwar, or her reign threatening to fall apart, or her hopeless love for Chikae that triggered so much pain for all three of them.

Her voice cracked when she said slowly and softly, 'You're my husband, the father of our beautiful daughter. You've been faithful to me and the Tuareg all these long years. They love and respect you, I have much owed to you. You're the one I share my life with, not Chikae.'

Her shoulders shivered as the tears rolled down her cheeks, suddenly realising that mentioning Chikae's name at the end of her reassurance, wiped away its sincere meaning, making things far worse.

Amezwar's face contorted in agony and said with a low hoarse voice, 'But I do not, and never will, own your heart,' he swallowed the knob in his throat, and with much difficulty tried to stifle his sorrow, 'And now I fear losing all of you.'

Hinane tilted his face upwards and kissed away the tears that clung to his eyelashes, her heart filled with sadness and regret.

Amezwar whispered, 'So cruel, so cruel to me.'

Hinane let the robe fall from her naked body. Amezwar lifted her and carried her to the mattress, gently lowering her upon it.

She arched her back, pressing her shoulders down on the pillow, pushing her tummy and pelvis in an upward movement and opened her legs for him. He could not contain his need for her and quickly lowered himself upon her, entering her in desperate haste in an effort to retain her and gain her heart. She lifted her legs and clutched them around his waist, thrusting her hips into his groin to bury him deeper. She moaned softly with the penetrating sensation, her eyes closed.

She ran her slim fingers through his hair, down his neck over his back, her nails biting through his skin. Her panting got louder with each push of his hips sandwiched between her thighs, quickly working towards an explosive climax. She wriggled her body in up and down movements and he lowered his head into her neck, biting on her earlobe.

He rubbed his hands down her sides, slipping in the sweat that trickled from her hips. He moved them further down and underneath her, over her buttocks, grabbing, kneading, pulling her tighter against him and thrusting deeper inside of her.

She arched her back and threw her head backwards against the pad when the pulsing shot up her spine. A viscid wetness seeped from between her legs and trickled on the sheets. Another flood of contractions rippled through her body and he felt helpless as the tide burst from him in a fervent cry.

Her forehead touched his shoulder whilst listening to the wild beating of his heart, her heavy breathing from her nostrils moving the hair on his chest slightly. She ran her one hand over the muscles of his upper arm and lay with her legs still clutched around him until the pounding of her own heart slowed down. He rolled over to her one side and reached for her hand, enfolding it into his, while wiping a forearm over his face, smearing away the sweat and tears.

The sexual radiance and magnetic thrills were all gone. There was left only a strange, critical intellect of their act. The only thing left shared between them were their tears of sadness that soaked through the layered fabrics of their bed during the long night.

CHAPTER 43

During all the years past, Hinane never permitted another horse as closely and spiritually connected to her as what Burn had been.

Before Burn was slain, he mated with Bahac's mare, Zaide, which had given birth to a male offspring, and Hinane named him Tifton. The horse grew up to be of mellow temperament, so she gave the colt to Kella when she was big enough to saddle at age five.

Tifton is now fourteen years old and although a superb horse, most definitely not trained for combat. Hinane wanted to preserve his ancestry, conserving Burn's bloodline and only used him to copulate.

But now, it became imperative to find a fitting horse for her campaign to confront Geiseric. Appropriate not only for strength and endurance, but also for that spiritual bond between rider and horse for synchronicity in times of battle. Rider and horse should find each other on a mutual plane of complete understanding to form that mental connectedness, each just knowing instinctively what the other would do next.

She'd been lying here all morning in her lookout point, hiding high in the west side of the Ahaggar mountain cliffs with an open view of the plains below where the drove of feral horses fed. Today was the fourth day of studying them.

Wild horse teams were not frequently found this far south of the port cities, but with the many battles and raids by the Vandals of late, many horses fled

from the gruesome scenes in trying to find more peaceful and safer pastures. They became wilder as the years passed, fearful of getting captured and saddled. Many of them joined up and formed communities with their offspring being totally wild and untamed. Kitah and Tayri, who were out on hunt, spotted the herd and immediately informed Hinane of their location, knowing of their queen's desire to find a new mount.

Every morning during the past few weeks since finally deciding to launch an attack on Geiseric at Carthage, Hinane was up long before sunrise to train with her warriors. She was annoyed at herself for neglecting her physique and drove herself much harder than before. She still felt the pain now and then rushing through her pelvic area, but throughout the years she'd learned to ignore it. Soon, she felt restored and fitter with confidence and endurance to capture a horse on her own.

On the first day from her hideout, Hinane chose an ebony black stallion, magnificent in posture and spirit. But the wild horses nervously fled with squeals and high jumps as soon as she approached. Only much later that afternoon did she manage to creep up close enough for the stallion to see her clearly where she sat among the scrubs staring at him.

Aggressively, the horse swung his rump around, warning her to stay clear. He pinned his ears sharply backwards, flared his nostrils, widened his eyes and gave her lip, showing his perfect row of white teeth. From the way he pressed his tail tightly against his buttocks, she could sense he was scared. She talked to him calmly and waited patiently while remaining seated on her hunches without moving.

Many minutes had passed before he approached her very slowly with a slight degree of curiosity. But Hinane remained aloof and still lured him with a careless attitude. When about twenty paces off, the horse snorted once, jerked his head backwards, whinnied, wheeled around and galloped back to rest of the herd.

The second day Hinane sat on a high pitched rock close to where they were grazing, watching him approach as soon as he caught whiff of her scent in the brisk breeze. In her hands were a halter and lead rope which she made sure he saw clearly so he could get used to it. She ignored him as he came closer but watched him from the corner of her eye. When he dared close enough for her to touch him, she lifted the halter slowly, but the motion made him snap in fright and he trotted away.

She repeated the same the next day, but this time she stood waiting on a level surface with the halter and rope, focusing on his eyes to soothe him with hers. When he was close enough, she lifted the halter towards his nose so he could smell it. She waited for him to rub his head against her arm, probing her for some action and only then, moved the halter towards his neck and romp with slow movements so not to alert him again. She rubbed the end of the rope all over his body while talking calmly to him, telling him how strikingly beautiful he was.

In comforting slow rhythms, Hinane tossed the rope over different parts of his body until it didn't bother him any longer. Then she threw the rope over his back

and pulled it off again, repeating the movements slowly from front to back, walking slowly from side to side underneath his neck so he could constantly have her in view. Every now and then, his hide contracted in nervous twitches wherever she touched with his ears attentively pinned upwards. But he stood his ground, displaying his willingness to her touch.

While Hinane soothed him with the rope she whispered in a soft, low toned voice that sounded almost like the wind, natural and soothing. Finally, she moved to right in front of him and stared directly into his eyes. She removed the rope and halter from his body and retreated slowly, but kept their eyes locked.

The horse bobbed his head and neighed, hoofing with his right front leg into the ground. Hinane stopped about twenty paces from him, waiting. When he made no move, she moved a pace forward, he still didn't move and she stood still for a few moments. She took a few steps backwards. The horse lowered his head then took an uncertain short step towards her.

Hinane smiled with satisfaction as she knew that was an approval and slowly gained his trust. She turned around, and without another glance backwards, walked back to her camp in her hideout while he stared after her. Every now and then, she gave a hop and jump so he could get used to any sudden movements. But since she was moving away from him he was not threatened by it at all and just stood watching her.

Now on her fourth day, since early that morning, she watched him closely from the cliff. It was actually surprising that the horses remained here, where she was actually an intruder to their domain. She now walked respectfully towards the herd where they grazed lazily in the afternoon, again with the halter and robe clearly visible in her hands.

The habituation procedure normally took a couple of days, but Hinane didn't have the luxury of time and had to speed up the development of comfort and trust within the horse. When she was a hundred paces from him, she stopped and waited. He had his eyes fixed on her since he smelled her, and now gave a short nicker and pinned his ears, bobbing his head in her direction, and then again, uttered a curt snort. She waited.

He moved slowly towards her while supposedly grazing, every now and then throwing a quick glance at her. When he was at close range she suddenly flung the halter upon his hindquarters, then drew it back immediately. He didn't startle, only his hide twitched from the sudden touch, and she repeated the movement until he turned to look at her.

She grinned and talked quietly to him, uttering soothing and loving words. He stepped closer and sniffed at the halter and leash in her hands. She stretched out a hand and he let her gently touch his nose bridge. She held her fingers tightly together so not to frighten him and lingered her touch between his eyes.

She complimented him, putting him at ease, 'Hello stud, what a splendid horse you are, so regal and divine.'

Her touch moved to his neck where she patted him gently all the while talking soothingly as she let him smell her other hand. She sidled her hand up to his neck, now facing the same direction as he did and gently rubbed her head and shoulder against his neck and shoulder. He snorted and she snorted back.

When he blew gently through his nose, she did the same and smiled softly as the blowing notion signalled his relaxation, the most encouraging sign when taming a horse.

Hinane slowly moved the halter, which she left hanging on his back, towards his head and slipped the lasso over. He didn't pull back which meant he trusted her. She pressed softly with her fingers against him, then increased pressure until he responded slightly by stepping away. She kept pushing him away while tapping the air with the lead rope. She moved to face him and wiggled her fingers, then lifted her arm and then the lead rope in waving motions, indicating he must retreat. Once he moved backward, she let him move a few steps while she still waved her hand. Then she stopped all movements so he could see she wanted him to stop too, which he did. She smiled at his quick understanding and knew they would make a great pair.

Hinane pulled on the rope and it tightened around his neck, she gave it a soft pull so he could feel the sensation. His hide trembled and she stopped pulling, but soon after pulled hard on the rope again. He hoofed in the ground with a nervous whicker and she released the tension so he could relax.

She waited a few moments while watching him, then pulled again. He gave two passes forward and she gently pulled him further, turned and started to walk with him for a few paces. She stopped and turned back towards him. He pulled on the rope and she released the lasso from his neck. He immediately jumped away from her and she turned around, walking away, then stopped, but kept facing the opposite direction, not looking at him directly.

She closed her eyes and willed him mentally to come to her. He didn't move at first. She waited almost twenty minutes before he approached her. When she felt his breath on her arm, she wheeled around and jumped on his back in one swift movement, quickly clamping her legs around his romp and threw the halter over his neck.

He shot forward in bewilderment, not used to the weight upon his back, and then stopped abruptly, bulging his back in an arch, then kicked with his forelegs into the air. But Hinane held onto his manes and remained on his back without any difficulty. He stopped the jumping and started into a sprint. He ran and ran, and only after a long while he started to blow rhythmically through his nose which indicated he was becoming more relaxed.

But he kept on running for some time, until he finally stopped from exhaustion and totally out of breath. Hinane's face was flushed from the exercise and charge, but she was totally satisfied with her accomplishment and patted him on his neck with a huge grin. She slowly slid from his back, circled her arms around his neck and said, 'Quasar, I will call you Quasar.'

Quasar snorted. She led him back to her campsite which was a far distance away. But she didn't mind the walk and it afforded the necessary time to strengthen the new bond between them.

As they walked and her thoughts travelled, her chest swelled with emotions. She was very pleased with her new horse, but the act of taming him made her reminisce on the past. She wept for Burn, for Philo and Lunja, for Amezwar's painful and unanswered love for her and her intense love for Chikae. She cried

for her divided people, for their loss of faith, for herself and the struggle that awaited in order to reinstate the trust of her community.

Quasar felt her turmoil and nuzzled her in her neck, puffing warm comforting breaths against her skin. She chuckled through her tears and by the time she reached her campsite at dawn, she was empty of all upsetting emotions, left only with serene calmness and peace.

She fastened Quasar to a branch next to the horse she came with into the mountains, and started a fire. Then she took out a brush from her saddle bag and brushed Quasar sable hide till it was shining and free from all dust and sweat. He remained placid and submissive under her touch, his head held low, ears half mast, eyes droopy and she kissed him fondly on his nose.

She turned from him and lifted the jackal carcass out the high tree branches where she'd left it early that morning after hunting and butchering it. She prepared the fire to cook her meal and provide warmth for the night. When the meat was done and she was fed, she made sure Quasar was nourished enough with fodder and water, and finally took a rest next to the fire.

She refuelled the flames with wood and watched it licking on the logs, its intense heat cracking the wood to smaller pieces, and sending tiny orange and red lit splinters into the darkness. She took out a small roll of canvas filled with cannabis and immediately smiled at the thought of Yattuy who smoked it often. Suddenly she missed him and sighed softly.

Almost all ancient peoples considered narcotic and medicinal plants sacred and incorporated them into their magical beliefs and practices. It was no regular habit of Hinane to use cannabis, but tonight she wanted answers and the substance helped her into that state in which to receive all the messages and answers from the gods and sacred spirits.

Hinane heated the tips of two knives in the flames until they were red hot. She prepared a small lump of cannabis by cutting it into small fine lumps. She took one of the hot knives and lowered it onto a few small chunks which instantly stuck onto the blade. She took the other knife and trapped the cannabis between the blades, squeezing them together until the weed burned. She rested the paired knives on a rock, took a small tube and inhaled the twirling smoke that arose from between the blades.

The effect was instant and Hinane drifted higher in her mind, feeling as if she was floating. She inhaled all the smoke from the small batch and then laid back onto her sleeping roll in the cooling darkness, letting herself go. Her mind fully experienced the heady sensations and slowed her breathing until her chest was barely moving. All boundaries between body, soul and spirit became just a haze, and she dwelled deeper into the silent void, further and further away, knowing it was enough to just be, and be one with all of creation, letting the power of its energy wash over her.

The utterly trustworthy and dual parental spirit, Huna, swept her up from the void and carried her further through it on a ray of bright golden light, Hinane feeling the pure love from it breathing through her.

The spirit of Huna, the vitalising life force, would take her prayers to higher beings whenever necessary since average human minds were of lower level

ability. Huna was with complete knowledge of Hinane's three selves and carried her to the answers she sought.

Very faintly, she could hear the echo of that same voice of the young girl that spoke in her dream so many years ago when Lunja was killed, 'Soon the times will change. All the truth, the powers, the secrets, the immense depths of the skies, the messages of the stars, all of it will be lost. But even if the messages were unheard, what was authored in the stars, long since already happened on earth.'

She let the voice pass and dwelled among scrambled images and strange symbols. During her journey she saw the man they first called Eeshó with a small congregation grouped at his feet. He said with a clear voice, 'I'll be with you only until the end of this age.'

The spirit took her further past the present day into hundreds of years into the future through changing deserts and seas where Arabs, the Islamic Umayyad Caliphate destroyed many cities and burned them to the ground.

She saw a serpent sailing into the heaven skies among the stars which transformed into a serpent-man, settling as a constellation around the celestial equator between Aquila, Serpens and Hercules, northwest of the centre of the milky circle. Its southern part lies between Scorpius to the west and Sagittarius to the east. Its forehead and third eye were in close proximity to the forehead and third eye of Hercules, the constellation just above it.

Hinane travelled far and wide through many more visions and finally returned from her tripping. With difficulty, she tore her eyelids apart, gazing straight into the full moon that threw a silvery light over the mountain landscapes. The moon and stars stole light from the sun, the earth stole light from the moon, everything adopted something from something.

'You called for me,' said Yattuy softly next to her.

She turned to look at him where he sat cross legged on his sleeping roll next to her, his long grey hair braided in several strands dangling down his back and around his face, the smoking pipe clutched in his fist, pale-grey eyes peering at her through cannabis smoke.

She smiled warmly, 'I believe I did.'

She rose onto one elbow, still slightly shaky from the hallucinations, asking, 'Hungry?'

He shook his head while exhaling another ball of smoke and handed her a gourd filled with water which she thankfully gulped down.

She looked at him intensely, the images of her visions still floating in her mind and Yattuy probed, 'What did you see?'

He listened quietly while she spoke and after her voice had died down, told her what he knew in trying to describe it.

The great Greek astronomer Hipparchos of Nicaea, attributing his astronomical observations between the period from 147BC to 127BC, discovered the precession, the motion of a spinning astronomical body in which it wobbles so that the axis of rotation sweeps out a cone.

The precession of the spring equinoxes occurred in 26,000 year cycles appearing to move from one constellation to another. When an equinox or

solstice entered a new constellation in this way, it signalled a new age.

'Hipparchos' discovery made it clear that the age of Leo the lion occurred between 10,500BC to 8,000BC or 8,600BC known as the Golden Age. The age of Cancer began around 8,600BC and ended in 6,450BC which was known as the age of the Great Mother. The age of Gemini the twins began during 6,450BC and ended around 4,500BC, known as the age of Communication and Trade. The age of Taurus the bull began in 4,500BC and ended around 1,875BC known as the age of Earth, Agriculture and the Bull. The age of Aries occurred around 1,874BC and ended in 1AD which was known as the Age of War, Fire and the Ram.

'The Age of Pisces, known as the age of Monotheism, Spirituality, and the Fish, is the current age for the next 1,600 years which would end around 2,150AD. At that time, the vernal equinox point will no longer be facing Pisces, but will move into the constellation of Aquarius, thus beginning the Age of Aquarius the Water Bearer, the age of Freedom, Technology and Information.

Yattuy paused, then said. 'Scholars say the age of Pisces is characterised by the rise of many religions due to the spiritual nature of Pisces and its ability to go beyond the boundaries of the physical world, marked by the continuous research of mankind seeking the truth.'

'And then about 1600 years from now, would be the start of the age of Aquarius,' said Hinane in deep thought.

Yattuy nodded.

Hinane fed the flames with more wood while listening to Yattuy's husky voice as he accounted further.

'Many astrologers also believed that the astrological ages could be divided into smaller sections like wheels within wheels, creating sub-ages.

'By the start of 2013, the earth would once more move into the constellation Ophiuchus, the serpent man you saw,' said Yattuy while lighting another batch of weed. 'Ophiuchus was so named for his relationship to the Serpent. At that very same time Sagittarius will point its arrow directly at the galactic centre, or galactic alignment.'

'Ophiuchus is the story of the forgotten constellation of the zodiac, and a metaphor for the journey of the soul through the great play of life. It is also a symbol of that which we have forgotten deep within ourselves.

'Being so close together in the sky, the relationship of Hercules and Ophiuchus was analogous to that of teacher-student, guru-disciple or shaman-apprentice. One of Ophiuchus' feet is on the back of Scorpius, just above Antares, the star in the Scorpion's heart. His other foot is dangerously close to the stinger in the Scorpion's tail. Near this foot and the stinger along with the tip of the Archer's arrow, is the position of the centre of our galaxy.

'Many other indigenous cultures have honoured the serpent and its energy. And those of us, like you who have journeyed on a spiritual path toward healing, wholeness or enlightenment have encountered the serpent, possibly as healing energy.

'Ophiuchus was the only constellation in human form that resided in the direction of the centre of the milky centre galaxy. In astrology, the centre of the

galaxy was analogous to the Higher Self or the Jungian Self. It is only by transcending the 'wheel of twelve' and allowing energy to spiral resonant with the number thirteen, that we as humans, can access and maintain a conscious connection to our Higher Self.'

'Ophiuchus, is the archetype of what humans would call the enlightenment age before moving into the age of Aquarius. The last time the age of Ophiuchus occurred was about from 4,500BC to 2,600BC.

'Some astrologers say the great pyramids built in Giza, Egypt for Pharaoh Cheops that concluded around 2,560BC, were aligned to the planets Mercury, Venus and Saturn that coincided with Ophiuchus.

'When the Serpent returns by around 2,000AD, humans will have the opportunity to remember and once again access the wisdom of the very ancients. Only then, will people look inwards for the answers they seek, instead of outwards to religion, or other crutches.

'The more enlightened members of a society will become, the more apparent the new dawn depicted by Ophiuchus with its emphasis on humanity, kindness, truth, spirituality and enlightenment. Only after that, people will evolve into higher beings, spreading more love and light, but not before then.'

Hinane sat quietly, suddenly feeling insignificant and small in the big scheme of things, then murmured softly, 'What of the vision of the Arabs' invasions?'

Yattuy tapped his pipe clean against a small rock and sighed, 'I know not. All I know is there would still be many religious wars before entering the enlightenment age.'

He stuffed the pipe with weed once more, ignited it and sighed, "Until then, the gods will be for everyone and each one for himself.'

CHAPTER 44

The sunset had always made her feel completely content and serene, similar to that of a sweet loving embrace, and the thought of it rising again the next day, always instilled hope.

Hinane sat with her arms folded around her knees, watching it now from a high cliff close to her camp, waiting for Chikae to arrive at this spot where they'd always met.

The sun changed into a red ball, the wonderment of its beauty evoking mixed emotions deep within. She quickly swallowed the knob in her throat. Her heart beat faster and faster with the thought that Chikae could appear on the horizon any moment now. She sent word of her urgent desire to meet with him a few weeks before, and as the moment of their meet approached, so did the excitement swell.

The love she had for him was entirely different from the one for Amezwar.

She thought the emotions Chikae evoked inside her at first, would gradually wane as the years passed. Instead, it grew stronger and more feverish, sometimes too unbearable to endure.

His closeness always made her feel alive, joyful and excited. But it was more than that. Their love was based on common values and compatibility in all areas of spirit, mind and beliefs, whereas with Amezwar, their love was shallow or tempered as between brother and sister. Amezwar could never grasp the full extent of her personality, as many aspects of her character only appeared in communion with Chikae.

To endure the times that separated them, Hinane changed the meaning of many things, like love being simply a feeling of respect and admiration. But when she's with Chikae the feeling erupted in passionate explosions, a feeling that held far more than just reverence.

She often felt hurt and lonely because they were not able to share a life together. But then she realised, people were only hurt when there was a sense of loss. Since there was no real loss between them, except time and distance, they had only to change some of the expectations which their love could bring.

Of course she felt his absence in her life every single day, but then she only had to close her eyes and feel the spiritual connection they shared. She would then spend more time with Kella or Takamat, or spreading more love and warmth in the community to feel more appreciative of all her other riches and wealth. And sometimes she would bury her loneliness in studying scriptures, and at other times she would write expositions of her own.

As for Chikae, he busied himself with the state of affairs in his Soninke kingdom. He established it as one of the richest kingdoms south of the Sahel by trading with commodities such as gold, timber, ivory and slaves. He took charge of the more westerly trade routes in the Sahara, the Walata road, from the Senegal river, and the Taghaza trail from the Mali river, which had their northern termini at the great trading centre of Sijilmasa in Morocco, just north of the desert.

Ghana, meaning war chief, was derived from the Mandé peoples who descended from the Bafour. They were also known as Wakoré, or the Aoukar with subgroups Maraka and Wangara.

Although not well-known and deeply hidden in the southern forests, their society proved fierce and industrious, with many other ethnic groups integrating into their group identity. The Yoruba Bambara, Bobo, Senoufo, Songhay, Hausa and Gonja, all became powerful allies of the empire, and Hinane aspired to derive strong resources from this pool in her quest against the Vandals.

The Hausa king Nokoto who once stood with her against Atisi, grew fat and lazy from his exploits in the copper mines they worked, and she could depend upon his forces no more.

Hinane smiled fondly.

Nokoto made true his promise to deliver a constant supply of copper which contributed significantly to her treasuries. Together they traversed to the Air Massif region near Azelik and Agadez of the Niger further south from the Ahaggar, and experimented with different furnaces styles. They focused on

copper oxides and carbonates, since sulphides were more complex to reduce to metal and required multiple stages. Oxides were structurally weakened by decomposition processes and contained the most desirable ores. The copper mines themselves were open stopes with shafts, and mineworkers were very successful in extracting large quantities of high-grade ore.

Because of copper's redness, luminosity and sound, it was valued by the tribes, for most African cultures associated copper's redness with life-giving powers. Its ability to reflect sunlight, represented aggression and liminal boundaries between states, and its redness was considered a symbol of transition used in many of their rituals.

It was dark already when Hinane finally heard a horse's hooves thundering on the rocky path, and she shot up from where she sat next to the fire.

When his horse stopped next to her, Chikae dropped from its back and lifted her in his arms, burying his face deep in her bosom. The emotion blocked her throat and all she could manage was answering his tender kisses when he lowered her tightly against him. She felt his heartbeat as thunderous as hers and it took a while to calm their overwhelming feelings.

'I came as soon as I got word Oya,' he whispered in her hair, his voice throaty and thick.

Chikae nicknamed her after the Ghanaian mythological Yoruba goddess Oya. She was behold as the warrior-spirit of the wind, the effects of her whirling skirts as she dances causing hurricanes and tornadoes, spreading lightning, fertility, fire, and magic as she stretched her open arms over the landscapes.

But mostly Oya was the spirit of change, transition, and the chaos that her actions often brought about, all qualities Chikae thought most apt to Hinane.

When they finally broke he noticed Quasar and walked closer to admire the horse, 'Magnificent,' he said approvingly as he examined the stallion.

Only much later, when they had fed on the grilled gazelle and saturated their immediate physical needs for each other, did Hinane voice the reasons for his summons.

'I need you Chikae. Your hardy strong men are the only ones brawny enough to back me against the Vandals. These barbarians are malicious, without heart, and I need your help.'

Chikae looked up in surprise and bored into her eyes with concern, 'What troubles you my love, this is not familiar talk for you.'

She sat quietly for a moment then lifted her eyes from the flames, 'I need to prove myself once more. I need to show my people they need not lose their faith in me.'

He just stared at her with his soulful almond eyes, and she continued, 'This quest will be my salvation. I dare not fail.'

She told him all that led to the attacks, Tuberon's betrayal and Tala's demise, her loss of assets and her fears.

When she had recounted everything, he nodded in understanding and agreed, 'I will assemble a mighty army in your aide Oya.'

She smiled thankfully and then pleaded with her eyes, 'Come with me?'

He bit on his jaw, balled his hands, the knob in his throat moving up and down as he tried to control his bubbling emotions. He looked dangerously attractive with his long black hair and tattoos on his arms, and she had to constrain herself from not jumping him.

Moments passed before he spoke, 'Do you know how rude it is, how callous, to never see you, or touch you. To think of you every single minute of every single day, and not be able to bid you goodnight, or good day?'

Hinane's eyes glazed in tears, her nails cut into her palms, and her chest heaved and floundered.

Chikae carried on, 'I must bury my love for you deep inside my belly where it slicks like a coiled snake niggling, each second trying to consume me.'

Hinane swung slightly back and forth, his words an echo of her own feelings which threatened to engulf her now. He swiped the hair strands from his face with a backhand, while they stared at each other, their suppressed emotions threatening to erupt.

Chikae was the one who spoke first, 'Yes Oya, I will follow you. Maybe then I can quiet my lonely heart.'

Hinane broke into a cry and fled into his arms.

CHAPTER 45

Hinane and Yeddes sat on the hill next to the huge encampment where Yeddes bred camels and horses, watching the herds as they graze.

Hinane smiled when remembering the time when they'd just arrived in the Hoggar. Yeddes was as happy as a beetle in dung, as the landscape and vegetation presented perfect pastures to grow the herds. Yeddes was a proud man and took much pleasure in breeding these beauties along with providing for his family, Takamat, his beloved wife, and their two daughters.

Hinane turned serious, 'Would you be able to make up the count of the camels lost in the raid?' asked Hinane with concern.

Yeddes thought a bit then smiled sombrely, 'Replacing hundred and fifty camels would require some time.'

Being pregnant for an entire year, most of the female camels gave birth at the start of the winter. Usually only a single camel was born, but sometimes they had twins. When the female was ready to give birth, she usually sought an isolated spot, but Yeddes, or one of the herdsman, would bring her back to camp

where they prepared safe and secure areas for this purpose.

When giving birth, the female camel knelt on the ground. The forefeet of the young appeared first from the mother's uterus with the head and the shoulders following soon after. When it was fully exposed, the mother turned to nuzzle, sniff and lick the calf. She sometimes separated the umbilical cord with her teeth if it did not break on its own, or if the herdsman did not cut it.

After about two hours the young would rise to its feet, the herdsman would smear his finger with butter, ghee or milk and put it to the calf's mouth, teaching it to suck. When the calf accomplished the task, the herdsman would direct the calf to the mother's udder.

The udder had four teats. Two were usually tied with two small sticks saving its contents until the evening to be milked for domestic use, the other two were left free for the calf to nurse.

The calf would nurse freely for three months, then kept away from the mother so that it could become accustomed to grazing on small plants and shrubs, only being allowed to suck three times a day for milk. This continued until the calf was around a year and a half, old enough to be weaned.

Yeddes developed breeding into a lucrative business, fully utilising all by-products derived from it. Camels were useful for their milk, meat, fur, leather, and dung. From its hide, they made containers and buckets, sandals, clothes, and leather items for tents.

The fur was used to weave bags for grain or flour, or weaved into an aba, or a cover for the saddle of a horse. Usually the fur was only taken when the camel shed it during the beginning of the summer, and often, some women would follow the herds to collect it from the ground.

Camel dung was used as fire fuel during winters, and sometimes for cooking food. Camel urine was useful as a hair wash in protecting it from knits, and to give it a reddish hue. Takamat and Hinane also used the urine as medicine for certain diseases.

Yeddes' voice cut into her thoughts, 'You leave the day after tomorrow?'

Hinane nodded, with a short sideways glance towards his solemn face, the magnitude of her quest hovering like a dark cloud over them.

After a few moments of melancholic silence Hinane said, 'You were always loyal to me, to my causes, my goals, even sometimes when I was wrong. Thank you my friend.'

Yeddes smiled with a shy twitch in the one corner of his mouth, 'The gratitude is all mine, my queen,' he paused, took a deep breath and followed with a worried, cracked voice, 'Go with the gods, the old and the new, call upon all of them.'

Hinane just nodded, her throat contracted, making it difficult to swallow or talk.

'I'm ready Hinane,' called Takamat from a distance.

Hinane rose to her feet, a bit shaky at first but then quickly steadied her stance. She glanced at Takamat then turned gravely to Yeddes before leaving him, 'Will you please...'

Yeddes raised his hands, 'You don't even have to ask, consider it so.'

Hinane gave him a last appreciative nod and moved hastily to Takamat who stood with hands on hips, 'Why do you take so long, the ink is drying.'

Hinane smiled, 'Bear me some time with your husband my dear friend.'

Takamat smiled with a blush and together, they entered Hinane's tent. Hinane took her place on the padding which Takamat had prepared for the applying of the tattoo. Hinane wanted a permanent tattoo as prescribed by the ancient traditional practices of the Amazon as a means to safeguard the wearer through drastic situations.

Since preparing for the confrontation with Geiseric, Hinane's entire being became more alive, flushed with energy and charged with excitement. She was back in the saddle, and although her mission was a daunting prospect with the outcome unknown, and she had to leave her home and family, she walked each day with a vigorous gait and a flame in her eye.

And this tattoo ceremony was the last preparation before departing. The modern Amazon normally wore temporary henna tattoos so they could change it according to their moods. They were widely known for their fierce tempers and ability to change their minds like a flash of a thunderstorm, so they altered between tattoo designs often. But now, Takamat had prepared the ink, black soot and oil mixed with milk from the breast of a young mother, for a permanent one.

Hinane had drawn the design for Takamat to study for its perfect copying onto her skin. It was from mendhi patterns traced back to animistic practices, which showcased that all natural objects and the universe itself had souls. The most significant one being a cross with two lines, representing a desert lizard, abasker, a sun seeker, symbolic of souls searching for enlightenment.

The tools Takamat used for the short incisions were wide flattened or sharp pointed sets of small bronze instruments with wooden handles. The procedure was performed with several points tied together to prick the skin in a desired pattern, thereafter Takamat rubbed the oil mixture into the tiny little holes to create the black pattern.

Hinane felt the prickles getting less and less painful as the procedure continued. Her mind drifted away, the soft pain pricks sending her on a mental journey, thinking of her time as a young girl to today. She smiled softly, she had surely done what she had intended to, fulfilling most of her ends.

Now, her newest charge was uncertain. But no matter how dangerous and dark the future seemed to be, she was geared for adventure and action, it was in her nature. It had been too long since she embarked on a mission, and although she could not show this to Takamat in fear of causing her worry, she bubbled in anticipation.

Hinane fell asleep and only woke up after Takamat had rubbed a mixture of honey and liquorice powder over the raw cuts in Hinane's smooth skin. Takamat's soothing hands resembled an embrace of love and devotion. Suddenly Hinane's eyes flushed with tears when Takamat broke into uncontrollable sobs while her fingers lingered on Hinane's skin.

Hinane turned to sit up straight and took Takamat in her arms, her voice thick when she finally managed to speak, 'Look after our babies?'

Takamat nodded with a deeper snivel, not being able to say anything.

Hinane hugged her closer and they sat like that for a very long time. Both of them were thinking of their deep rooted friendship, which was like a strong, invisible chord that kept them together, and which had thickened by years of loyal and faithful companionship.

Hinane broke the embrace, 'If anything should happen, would you preserve the book of the Tifinach for Kella? And all Lunja's and my jewellery?'

Takamat nodded through another rush of tears, 'Of course.'

Later when Takamat had calmed down, Hinane asked in a whisper, 'Do the worship with me?'

Takamat nodded and left to prepare for the small veneration offered to their goddesses. She lit the candles and the incense, then marked the ritual circle, the symbol of sacred space which had neither beginning nor end and which within all stood as equals.

They acknowledged the quarter-points, the four directions and the corresponding elements of earth, air, fire and water, bidding their welcome in the ceremony.

They drank from the ceremonial cup, together chanting, 'From this nectar we take the blood of mother earth, to swear her alliances to all who behold in this ritual's birth. Hail this to the immanent divinity, woven through every aspect of nature and longevity, connecting human and gods eternity.'

Then Hinane recited the prose she long ago wrote for the purpose and which Takamat followed without flaw. While Hinane spoke their arms were intertwined:

'Indigo blue rays, allow the earth to dream of what's to become, and allow it to be greater than it is, clear the air and renew this life.'

They put their foreheads together and laced their fingers with the palms pressed tightly together. The left hand was used to receive and the right hand to give, thereby representing the many polarities of the universe, the positive and negative aspects of divine action within the soul. Through their hands, the energy flowed from Hinane to Takamat and from Takamat to Hinane.

Hinane continued with closed eyes, 'Through our energy, knowledge, influence and power to those who understood the sacred teachings. Through the phalanges of each finger we communicate with the divinities of mind, body and spirit.'

'Mighty elements, if you can teach the rock to form a gemstone, then root with the same forces, bravery and courage within the Tuareg warriors. Spirits of air and water, guard those sheltered with blue veils, stain their faces with indigo pride. Fire souls, charge their hearts with nerve and valour, infuse their spirits with power and strength. Fix these words with wings, gild it and set it aflame with the power of your design. Blessed be.'

They remained sitting like that in absolute silence for a while, still half in trance when Hinane whispered with wavering lips, 'May all the mighty forces protect us all, keep us steadfast, strong and supreme.'

Takamat felt a heavy twitch in her belly, her vision blurred in tears again. Takamat raised and prepared Hinane's bed, and when Hinane settled comfortably in it, she slid in next to her.

They held each other as the clamouring of the settlement activities outside died down for the night, till the moon outside threw its light over it in gentle peace and stillness, and they fell asleep.

CHAPTER 46

Hinane mounted Quasar and rode to where her warriors stood waiting in the columns. The Kel Ahaggar was alive and busy, readying for their departure.

The journey to Carthage would be tiresome and challenging in the growing heat of spring, and under the command of Yeddes, servants loaded the camels and mules with the last bit of provisions they might need.

Hinane made an imperial figure upon her new black stallion, fully dressed in warrior dress. A leather cuirass covered her torso, leather guards were fastened on her wrists, and her inherited sword-belt accentuated her small midriff. She wore a short red skirt that exposed her lengthy legs fitted with long leather boots. Her weapon collection was fastened on her saddle, and her prized bow and arrows fixed firmly behind her back.

Hinane rode through her warrior lines and gave last minute orders, making sure they were fully prepared. All her warriors were present, except for Menna who would stay to manage affairs in their absence, and of course Izza and Kwella who were no longer among the living.

Kwella died a few years before in a curious accident. She was always providing much entertainment and the day of her death was no exception. In one of her foolish jesting pursuits she fell from a high cliff, much to the surprise of them all. Her long white hair fanned her face and her emerald eyes were staring lifeless when they found her at the bottom.

Without referring to Izza and Kwella's absence it was still deeply felt among most of them, and their faces were stern and serious while checking their weapons and armour. And finally, when they were ready to depart, Amezwar was nowhere to be found.

Hinane searched for him through the crowds but Takamat demanded her attention when she moved to Hinane's side and touched her knee, 'Go with belief.'

Hinane bent down, gripped her hand, looked down at her with a faint smile and answered softly, 'Always.'

Hinane pointed with her eyes to Ahina, her cheetah sitting one side, and clutched Takamat's hands tighter, 'Take care of Ahina.'

Takamat nodded with wet eyes and Hinane straightened. Hinane saw the plump Tedus standing a short distance off and rode towards her.

When their eyes locked, Hinane's lips offered a warm friendly smile, 'Care for him Tedus. You've always loved him enough for the both of us.'

Without waiting to see her reaction, Hinane wheeled around and rode with a trot through the settlement into the deserts. Her people didn't see her looking like that in a very long time and they now looked upon with mixed emotions. She waved goodbyes to them as they cheered her along with cries of, 'Go with the gods, hail mother of us all.'

The ones that immediately followed her in the line were a mixture of her closest female warriors on horses armed with bow and arrows, axes and spears, and then came the male warriors who wore the Tagelmust, the blue veils.

Some of them followed on camels carrying takobas, finely crafted swords with red leather covers, along with the allagh lances, and aghar shields made of antelope's skin. The horses and camels were decorated with head dresses, crafted leather and metal saddle decorations called trik.

Ahina was sitting on her haunches, waiting patiently for the long column to pass and then followed them in a casual stroll without Takamat noticing. The black stripes running from her eyelids to her mouth made her look sad and lonely, but no one paid attention to the old cheetah.

At the outskirts of the settlement, Chikae stood waiting with his tribal armies. He looked splendidly royal on his black horse with his own black hair tied in a ponytail. His tattooed muscles shone bronzed in the sunlight, and his dark eyes bored into Hinane's.

Afer, his devoted subject of many years waited at Chikae's side and he deeply bowed towards Hinane as she rode up to them. Hinane's heart thundered in her ears, her love for Chikae displayed with dazzling radiance in her blue eyes and Afer respectfully walked his horse away.

From a hilltop Amezwar watched their greeting with grief and sorrow which sagged his shoulders. Hinane felt his sweltering stare upon her and looked sideways to him. She immediately broke from Chikae and steered Quasar towards Amezwar with a shouted order for Tala to start their advance, and lead Chikae and his men.

Hinane halted next to Amezwar and searched for his eyes. The tears swelled under her lashes, her mouth pulled in a nervous twitch and the guilt threatened to suffocate her.

Amezwar remained quiet and just sat there, watching her.

She moved closer, put her two fingers on her lips then pressed it against his with the words, 'What greater love is there than that of a king for his queen. Unflinching, unconditionally, loving her more and more as the years passed with all her flaws,' her voice cracked and tears rolled down her cheeks, but she continued, with every word stabbing into Amezwar's heart, 'It is this love that carried me from whence I came as a young princess, to that of the queen I am today. I am forever grateful.'

She bowed towards him in veneration, her chin almost touching her chest, 'Remain always with my appreciation and respect.'

Amezwar closed his one eye with the tears hanging from its lashes, the dark patch covering the other a constant reminder of his sacrifices. Hinane couldn't witness the hurt she caused him any longer and wheeled Quasar, following her army into the deserts. She felt Amezwar's sorrow stabbing in her back, and she prompted the horse to gallop faster, wanting desperately to escape his constant depression.

Ahina followed the column to where they would pass the cross road which marked the way to the north to Carthage and to the east to the mountain ranges where Hinane had found her as a cub. She sat on her hind legs watching her mistress as she rode away from Amezwar, then disappeared over the sand hills.

Ahina rose slowly and took the path eastwards, her honey eyes glaring into the distance, her head hanging, her tail slightly drawn between her legs. She would not return home.

Aete flew in from the direction Ahina was going to and circled above the cheetah with a few squalls before following Hinane.

The further Hinane rode, the more her guilt turned into exciting anticipation of her time with Chikae. She felt the person she once was, streaming back into her veins, a fierce warrior with the quest to save her tribe from any threats.

Firstly, they would go to Tuberón's homesteads to confront his treachery. They reached his settlement after ten days of travel, but upon entering his fort, received reports from his servants of his absence.

Hinane knew where his favourite hideout spots were at the Tin Ghalega, the big natural rock arch, the Acacus or Forzhaga Arch as the Garamantes named it. It was a giant stone gateway, located on the junction of three wadis, with prehistoric images of human figures.

They found Tuberón intoxicated with wine and opium, lying under a tree in front of a huge tent. She thought of the first time she accompanied him to his kingdom, when his golden red curls lifted in the breeze like a plumed crown among his head. When his pointed chin was proudly pushed out, his imposing body frame soaring proudly and erect, having almost the appearance of an Egyptian pharaoh. She remembered feeling that strong undercurrent of superiority running through him and his empire.

But none of that was present now. All that remained was a pitiful figure drowned in misery and destruction.

He looked at her with bloodshot eyes, 'I expected you sooner.'

She sighed, 'Why?'

He took another gulp from the Roman goblet decorated with edged designs, while looking at Tala who appeared at Hinane's side, repulsion for him written clearly on her face.

'Ah and here too, is my gorgeous wife.'

Tala opened her mouth to answer him with a scowl, but Hinane restrained her with a hand on her arm.

'Answer me,' ordered Hinane impatiently.

'Why do we all do what we do, queen of the Tuareg? You yourself know it very well. You are as addicted to it as I, the power, the wealth, the revenge.'

Hinane frowned, 'Revenge?'

Laughter peeled from his lips while saliva splattered across his chest, 'Still feigning innocence I see.'

Hinane frowned at a total loss for his meaning.

Tuberon, just waved his hand in the air and shrugged his shoulders, taking another gulp of the wine. She realised his mind was muddled and further reasoning with him would frustrate.

He certainly did not merit any more of her attention, and said to Tala, 'He is defeated by his own wine, let him drink himself into a stupor, he is not worth another thought.'

She gave the orders her warriors and Chikae's soldiers were eagerly waiting for, and they dispatched to Tuberon's settlements. Since the Garamantes were no significant warriors, they overpowered Tuberon's forces in a short time. Tuberon was also a man of strategic disputes and hardly ever resorted to physical battle, which could be one of the explanations for him joining forces with Geiseric.

In the immediate days after, Hinane invaded all of Tuberon's surrounding territories, and freed all the slaves from their stations. Hinane ordered thousands and thousands of slaves to abandon the foggaras and said when they lingered, uncertain of their fate, 'You have earned your freedom. Go now, to wherever you dreamt of to be. If the thought of freedom scares you, offer your alliances as farmers and warriors to the Tuareg as free men at the Hoggar mountains. Go with the gods and dwell in the protection of the blue people of the desert.'

Freeing the slaves totally weakened the Garamantian state. In following years, with the lack of slave labour, inadequate maintenance and a seasonal declining water table, the abandoned foggaras caused a shift to smaller-scale agriculture practices, only supported by wells.

The freed Garamante slaves subsequently developed oasis zones in the west of central Sahara near Touat and Gourara, which facilitated the later development of a new north to south trade route through Algerian Sahara, straight to Tuareg territory.

They lingered in Tuberon's territories for almost three months before moving on to Carthage, Hinane marvelling in the closeness of Chikae and the camaraderie and spirit of her warriors.

For Hinane, there was far more to the warrior spirit than merely engaging in battle, it provided a number of extremely valuable qualities. Being a warrior was having a sense of duty greater than one's own needs, the desire to perfect oneself for the benefit of others. The warrior spirit gave intensity to life, a life filled with energy and a readiness to act. It cultivated inner determination, it fostered honesty, loyalty and integrity with a willingness to stand up for what was just.

Warriorship brought a balance to the human spirit. The profound aggressive qualities of the warrior during battle also needed redirecting towards peace for its true value to be fully understood and appreciated.

For any warrior, contending against this spirit was self-defeating which produced inner conflict, the opposite of peace. Therefore it was inevitable to fully embrace what and whom they were, channelling their warrior spirit into all

directions to complete the all-inclusive circle of their total being.

One night Hinane observed her warriors whilst thinking, 'Gathered here together, were my most highly trained warriors, men and women, acting with courtesy towards each other, fully committed to their purpose, working cooperatively towards a common goal. Camaraderie didn't get any better than this.'

She grinned with gratitude, feeling happier and more content than she had ever been.

CHAPTER 47

After confronting Tuberon, Hinane fell into a more relaxed even temperament, and turned all her attention towards Chikae. Each morning they sparred against each other and trained with the warriors. Chikae's mixture of tribesmen soldiers posed as worthy and strenuous opponents, and the Tuareg warriors learned much from their tactics.

Every day spent with Chikae was precious and Hinane hardly ever left his side. The past fourteen years without each other had been challenging and demanding with very little interaction. But they kept their love alive, their dormant feelings like simmering coals that only rose to full flame when fuelled by their rare trysts.

Hinane now felt the arousal for him stir in her pubic when peering through lazy, narrowed eyelids at his face, her eyes feasting upon his striking strong features that have deepened with the passing years. Her eyes slid down to the exposed parts of his chest covered by the sleeveless white tunic he wore, the sudden sight of the dark curly hairs growing there pricking faintly in the lower parts of her belly.

The evening clamouring of the camps outside Chikae's tent had died down to soft voices around the fires, the peaceful night painted with bright stars and a quarter moon with a soft breeze rustling through the tents.

Chikae prepared the ceremonial tea as practised by the Tuareg and Hinane observed his every move with a playful and jesting smile on her lips. Her exotic beauty bloomed in the candle light, the golden and silver strands in her dark hair caught the light and mesmerised Chikae into admiration and underlying anticipation. The alluring glimmer in her eyes was like silver moonlight reflecting upon cobalt pools.

There were always three cups served in the tea ceremony. The first was very strong and bitter, representing death. The second was a bit sweeter and weaker, expressing bitter and sweet just like life, and the third was to be very sweet like love.

Chikae dropped the tea leaves in the brewing pot and added a small

measure of boiling water which he poured out after a minute, leaving the tea leaves in the pot. He added the mint, then water again and placed it back on the burner.

Hinane was most entertained at this effort, for he followed the ritual truthfully in the manner as adopted and prescribed by their tradition, just like any Tuareg male would for the woman who possessed his devotion. Hinane's voice came with a hint of playful mock, 'It's the custom of only the Tuareg man to pour for his woman. You're not Tuareg.'

Chikae bowed slightly in her direction, a long black hair lock falling over his face that made her heart twitch. He said with a joshier's smile and raised brows, 'Tonight I'll be one for you, queen of the Tuareg, as I will certainly be your king.'

The innuendo pulled a string in her groin and she chuckled from pleasure, "What if I don't want you to be a Tuareg king, but instead an exotic King of the south who devours his maidens with sharp tongue and strong hands."

Chikae smiled at her fantasy but then turned serious with sudden thought, 'We're nearing the first of Carthage's outskirts settlements. We'll go in the morning to investigate the city.'

Hinane frowned lightly, 'Yes, we have to plan our steps carefully. I suspect Geiseric will be well equipped and prepared.'

He took the tea from the burner, poured it into a small cup, from the cup back into the pot, repeating it two more times to blend it properly into a strong brew. He poured the tea into the small cup again, the pot held from a short distant height to swirl loose tea leaves to the bottom of the cup as it poured.

He turned his black fiery eyes towards her, exposing his suppressed desire when they bore into hers. He offered her the first cup, saying in a hoarse tone, 'The first, for continued strength in bitter death.'

Hinane lifted an excited eyebrow at the intensity of his voice, the blood starting to rush in her veins. She took the cup, downed the contents and handed the cup back to him while searching his face for matching traces of what she felt.

He poured tea once again, this time with a little bit of sugar. His hands trembled slightly when handing it to her and Hinane smiled with content, knowing the same tides raised in him than what did in her.

He said, 'The second sweet and bitter for life.'

Hinane swallowed it evenly. But when he offered her the last cup with the words, 'And the third is very sweet, just like our undying love,' the repressed passion inside her detonated into thrilling eagerness. It spread swiftly through her body, igniting her thirst for him like flames flaring against dry wood.

She drank the tea while their eyes locked in titillating magnetism. Chikae's eyes mirrored her own desires, and she burned to express her love for him with energetic aliveness. Something she could never muster with Amezwar, as the tempered love she felt for him lacked the deepness she shared with Chikae.

She handed him the cup which he replaced next to the burner, then held out her hands for him to fold into his. She closed her eyes, trying to centre the energies that ran rampant through her when Chikae pulled her to her feet. He turned her around so her back faced towards him, and slowly lowered the caftan from her shoulders.

The soft drums resonated outside as the camaraderie of the warriors rejoiced, the rhythms willing and guarding Chikae's hands in sensual movements on her skin, with each touch of his fingertips sending rippling currents through her. She gasped with quivering expectation when the caftan fell to the floor.

His fingertips ran from her shoulders down her arms, then over to her sides and down to the upper cleft where the round soft cheeks of her buttocks showed, the bronze of her skin luminous in the candle light.

Softly, with one rasping finger, he trailed up her spine and shoulders where the tattoo Takamat placed there laid in its criss-cross design. Chikae touched each curl, each line, each motive with a tenderness she never knew he could master, then he slowly lowered his touch downwards to caress the folds between her thighs.

The pleasant sensations of his touch made her turn to face him, and his hands moved up to her breasts, the heat emanating from his fingertips burning her skin and pricking the little hairs on her breasts to stand erect.

Chikae followed the curves with a finger, lingering over the one nipple, then the other, piquing them to stand more erect and firm, then moved down over the soft bulge of its fullness, to where her breasts merged with her torso.

She pierced into his eyes, running her fingers along the side of his face, over his full lips, engraving each feature into her mind, same as she did every time they shared a moment. She undressed him, her fingers on his bare skin like butterfly traces that sent waves from his neck down his spine directly into his groin.

When he stood naked, Chikae took his one hand and placed it on her heart, while taking her hand and put it on his chest where his heart thundered with rapid tempos.

They closed their eyes and imagined the warmth of life emanating from and to each other's hearts. Chikae pulled her down onto the carpet and settled her in front of him with her legs wrapped around his waist, his aroused genitals almost touching hers. She pulled his head closer with one hand, rested her forehead against his, and took both his hands in hers, weaving her fingers through his.

Chikae pulled her closer so that the tip of his erection slightly pressed against the lips of the entrance between her legs. This startled Hinane into a fiery reaction, she gasped and shuddered as soft contractions pulled through her. She desperately tried to contain the strong stream of sexual arousal that threatened to explode into wild primitive responses. She drew a deep breath to control its flow, trying to prolong the foreplay.

The slight vibrations from her body signalled her amplified arousal to Chikae. He lifted her chin with a finger and slicked his tongue in her mouth with abrupt famine. She flicked her tongue lightly in response and pushed him away softly.

Chikae respected her will at once, and continued with the ritual. He made her lie next to him. She raised both knees slightly and he moved in between them. He entered her slowly just with the tip of the head, her wetness easing the way for him. Her breathing set the pace for him and he followed the gentle pelvic contractions with her, each time when she relaxed the contraction, he would

push in slightly, and when she contracted, pulling out just so the tip remained touched between the lips.

Chikae gently pushed deeper, stimulating her build up with intervals of slow movements and then no motion at all. Then he felt the slow rhythmic pelvic contractions of her first soft orgasm pinching him in concurrence with her soft cries. Hinane contained the mounting excitement of wanting to jump on him with much difficulty, instead she focused on feeling the slow contractions rippling in her.

Hinane's urges demanded much more and she rolled on top of Chikae. But with one motion, he rolled her back on her back and moved his lips away from hers, down towards her throat, then up to an earlobe which he nibbled slightly.

She groaned and folded her legs around his torso, lifting her hips and pulling his lower body closer. The heat broke out in tiny sweat droplets on their skin, illuminating their bodies in shimmering little sparkles in the soft candlelight. She felt the energy rise through him, she kneaded with her fingers on his back, driving her nails into his skin, dragging them down in the sweat along his sides, then to his buttocks. She moved her pelvis upwards to receive him deeper, and the blood rushed to her head, blinding her with deafening fluxes.

The full orgasm flushed through her in strong vibrations and contracting sensations. Then finally Chikae released this contained desire in full eruption. When he was fully discharged, he remained lying inside of her, clutching her tightly in his arms, totally revived with strength and vitality.

This final release moved Hinane to tears of sweet satisfaction, a wonderful feeling of peace and oneness. When Chikae lifted his head from where he rested it in her neck, his eyelids shined wet, and she was not sure if it was from tears or sweat. His eyes glowed when looking down at her, trailing her lips with his thumb. He bowed his head to shower her with soft kisses and caresses, while starting his lower body in slow movements, initiating another stage of intercourse.

She stretched out her body underneath him like a contented kitten and kissed him back as he took her on another journey.

CHAPTER 48

Chikae rode in front with Afer at his side leading the small group of warriors chosen to investigate the city in determining their best line of attack.

Afer made sure Siman rode a little behind them, keeping her close. Siman's sturdy muscles and amiable features immediately attracted the attention of Afer when they first met. After days of watching her, he decided they were a fitting match and constantly pursued her attention until she eventually gave it.

Siman quickly glanced sideways at him with a small grin, appreciating the

glance in his kind wide set eyes, open face and brawny bones. Right behind Siman, followed the twins Bahac and Damya. As usual, their heads were clean shaven and their ears decorated with multiple iron and copper rings. Their raven eyes persistently scanned the terrain in search for any sign of danger.

The twins were alert for the slightest movement, thus, they drew their swords the moment Hinane and Tala unexpectedly appeared from behind a rocky hill on their left, the veils protecting them from the sun concealing their features. But the familiar riding posture Hinane took on Quasar and Tala on her mare, made them slide the weapons back in their sheaths.

Early that morning, when Chikae left with the small scouting party, she remained with the rest of the army to give them her last instructions in preparing for any occurrence. The army consisted of the Tuareg warriors, Mandé, the Wakoré, with some of their subgroups, the Maraka and Wangara.

The Yoruba Bambara, Bobo, Senoufo, Songhay, Hausa and Gonja all became powerful allies of the Ghana empire and Chikae recruited some of the most brutal members of these tribes to aid in their attack. When Hinane left them, she was satisfied they were equipped for any commission.

Hinane and Tala chose a different approach to the city as precaution, and only joined Chikae's group for the last bit there. She threw a quick nod and grin towards Chikae when she joined him in the front. Their eyes locked only for a second, but it was still long enough for them to miss the reflection of the sun on an object from a hilltop further ahead.

But Damya immediately reacted when detecting the spark, and drove her horse on a fast gallop to where it came from. When they saw their hiding place was discovered, the two scouts turned and ran, quickly disappearing behind the next hill.

Damya prompted her horse harder to chase the scouts with Bahac, Siman and Afer following close behind. Afer quickly ascertained the situation, and released the frightful scouts, 'Let them go, they're harmless.'

Siman gave a tense nod and waited for Hinane, her eyes searching for the command from her queen.

With a slight tilt of her head and narrowed eyes following the scouts' flight, Hinane said with a nod in agreement with Afer, 'They will report our approach to Geiseric no doubt. I don't think anything goes unnoticed by the Vandal anyhow.'

The rest of their journey to Carthage was uneventful and Hinane had enough time to inspect her surroundings when nearing the inner city gates.

Carthage was built on a rocky promontory. To the north of it was a lake, and to the south some impassable salt marshes, so its position was ideal for defence. The only approach unprotected by nature was the isthmus, a relatively narrow strip of land with water on both sides connecting the city to the mainland.

According to Roman sources, Phoenicians led by Queen Dido, also known as Elissa, founded Carthage. Princess Elissa was the daughter of King Matten of Tyre. When he died, the throne was jointly bequeathed to Elissa and her brother, Pygmalion.

She married her uncle Acherbas the high priest of Melqart, a man with both authority and wealth comparable to the king. This led to increased rivalry

between religion and the monarchy.

Pygmalion was a tyrant, lover of gold and intrigue, who desired the authority and fortune enjoyed by Acherbas. Pygmalion assassinated Acherbas in the temple and kept the misdeed concealed from his sister, deceiving her with lies about her husband's death. At the same time, the people of Tyre called for a single sovereign which caused dispute within the royal family.

After learning the truth about her husband's death, Elissa fled Tyre with her husband's gold. When her ship was overtaken by the Tyrian ships which followed her flee, she threatened to throw the gold overboard. She gave her chasers a choice between facing the wrath of her brother for failing their mission, or to join her. They joined her and the augmented fleet sailed on towards the west.

Elissa eventually sailed to Africa after a brief stop at Cyprus. After reaching Africa, she requested land from the king of the Libyan tribe who lived near Byrsa to establish a new city. The king told her she could have as much land that can be covered with an ox hide. She cut the hide into thin strips and managed to surround the hill of Byrsa. The initial city of Carthage was founded on the spot.

At its peak, the metropolis became to be called the shining city that ruled three hundred other cities around the western Mediterranean. Elissa's subjects adored her and presented her with a festival of praise. She was even nobler when she offered asylum to Aeneas and his men who have escaped from Troy. A spirit in the form of the messenger god Mercury sent by Jupiter, reminded Aeneas that his mission was not to stay in Carthage with his new-found love, but to sail to Italy to found Rome.

When Aeneas told Elissa of his departure, her heart broke. She ordered a pyre to be built where she fell upon Aeneas' sword. As she lay dying, she predicted eternal strife between Aeneas' people and her own, 'Rise up from my bones, avenging spirit,' she recalled from an invocation of Hannibal.

'Hinane!'

Hinane was ripped back to reality by the shout of her name. She first looked befuddled and then realised Chikae and the group were waiting for her orders where they stopped at the Thapsus gate, closest to the harbour and Byrsa.

Many centuries before, the entire city was ruined by Scipio Aemilianus in the Battle of Carthage at the end of the Third Punic War in 146BC. The Romans burned the Carthaginian warships in the harbour, then went from house to house, capturing, raping and enslaving fifty thousand Carthaginians who were sold into slavery. The city was set ablaze and razed to the ground, leaving behind only ruins and rubble.

The new city of Carthage was built on the same land by Julius Caesar in 49 to 44BC, and by the 1st century AD it had grown once again to be the second largest city in the western half of the Roman Empire.

Before the city was demolished, the Carthaginians built three huge parallel walls which stretched the waist of the isthmus. The outer wall was thick and high, and at every hundred paces there arose a strong defence tower. These three walls, running fairly close to one another, were connected by arches which made the city look like one gigantic fortress.

The spaces beneath the arches were divided into two storeys. In the lower one there were stalls for three hundred North African elephants and storage space for their fodder. On the upper one, there were stables and haylofts for four thousand horses, and barracks for four thousand cavalry and twenty thousand infantry.

Hinane screened the rebuilt ruins with interest and concentration. Then she entered the Thapsus Gate with a hand signal for them to follow. She was no stranger to the city at all, having spent many months at intervals here with her trades and learnings. And yet, today she felt totally misplaced as she scrutinised the city with fresh eyes and altered mind.

The city fell into total disorder since Geiseric took over. While Geiseric allowed his fleets to continue plundering throughout the western Mediterranean seas, his followers created mayhem in the streets of Carthage.

Hinane frowned. The city is not as it once was twenty years before. At the origin of Carthage, the houses of the city were built very closely together and rose tall, sometimes having as many as six storeys. But nothing of that remained after the invasions, only the winding narrow streets in-between which formed shallow trenches from erosion.

The centre of the city was situated on the low hill at Byrsa where shrines were built and enclosed with another belt of fortified walls. Here was the citadel, the city within a city, where in the event of invasion, everyone could gather for a final stand.

The citadel once contained temples dedicated to the city's gods, Esmun the war god, Baal the sun god, and Astarte the moon goddess. When the city was at first threatened, the statue of Baal was borne into the courtyard of the temple. It was shaped like a human body with outstretched arms and a head of a bull.

Sacrifices were often made to Baal, sometimes human victims chosen from the sons of the city's noblest families, and other times the victims were prized cows taken from the royal stables.

The market square was near the sea. From its centre, Apollo's temple rose, beside which stood the majestic senate house, the headquarters of Geiseric's administration.

Along the roads towards the port, there were a number of hidden supply stations rented by seamen, traders and caravan leaders.

To anyone approaching from the sea, Carthage seemed to have neither port nor fleet. On the low, sandy beaches, thousands of slaves had dug a huge circular canal over a thousand feet wide. This was the naval base for Geiseric's fleet made invisible from the sea by an enormous circular arcade with columns on the inside and a blank wall on the outside. It could not even be seen from the city.

This arcade provided berths for at least two hundred and twenty ships, but no one could tell whether the fleet was there unless they were actually inside.

In the centre of the port, called a cothon, meaning cup, there was a small round island. On this island stood the stronghold of the admiral of the fleet from where, by means of trumpet signals, officers directed the work of the gangs of labourers in the port. From the turret, a small tower extending above the

stronghold, ships approaching the port could quickly be spotted.

It was clear to Hinane's party that Geiseric had a definite overhand in the city with a large military presence, whereas they, as mostly desert and rural dwellers, had no experience in urban warfare at all.

'I'll have to pick a fight,' murmured Hinane in thought.

'What was that?' asked Chikae at her side as they rode towards a tavern to retire.

'We'll have to lure him out of the city into the open.'

Chikae nodded in agreement, 'Let's quench the thirst and still our hunger while we discuss.'

A little later after their meal, Hinane gathered the group in the noisy tavern to deliberate their next approach. Effective battle tactics varied greatly, depending on the sizes of the opposing armies, the terrain, territorial advantage, various skill levels of different units, even the weather could affect outcomes and they discussed each option at length.

Critical elements in battle were speed and adaptability, the ability to move and make decisions faster than the enemy. To break forces into independent groups that could operate individually with the spirit of the campaign, a mission to accomplish, and enough room to function, was one strategy Hinane came to adopt, leading her warriors to many victories.

When Hinane was a young warrior, being a long-line descendant from the Amazon of Libya, she, like all Amazons including her closest warriors, gained a reputation for being a bit crazy which created much uncertainty in the hearts of their opposition.

'Uncertainty could be better than an explicit threat. Make it hard for the enemy to discern what's really going on with crazy and jumbled acts,' repeated Hinane the advice derived from Lunja.

But Siman offered a different input, 'Find the core source of Geiseric's power here in the city. Find out what he cherishes and protects. Separate the parts and sow dissension and division.'

Chikae nodded, 'A good strategy to follow. We must feed their expectations, manufacture a scenario to match their desires, and they will fool themselves. Control their perceptions of reality and you control them.'

Afer threw in his lot, 'First do something familiar and predictable, then hit them with the unexpected by delivering irritating but damaging side attacks.'

Hinane agreed to all of these strategies but needed to put them in a sequence for best effect, 'First, I would have to lay the seeds of self-doubt and insecurity within Geiseric, getting him to react in defence.'

Hinane rose with a yawn, 'I will send the request for a meet first thing in the morrow. Then let's poke the bear and drive the Vandal from his throne.'

CHAPTER 49

After several days in the city contemplating their next move, Chikae and Afer left with the warriors to ordain the troops on the outskirts of Carthage, while Hinane, Tala and Siman prepared for the convergence with Geiseric. He was the king of the Vandals, but in Hinane's heart he was merely a brutal savage, a mis-assumption she would later regret.

Hinane rode through the streets, anticipating the confrontation with a clenched stomach and flutter in her throat. But her face remained straight, wondering about Geiseric's agenda, his true reasons for accepting her request to meet.

Siman and Tala rode quietly at her side, scanning the streets which were in chaos and disarray, none of the city's previous beauty and glory in the times of Elissa were present. Cruel men molested helpless women, soldiers picked fights with stall owners, women and children begged for food, and freshly cut heads from rivals were fixed on lances along the tall derelict walls, the blood staining the murals, the weeks old stench of it pricking in their nostrils.

When at his quarters, Geiseric spent most of his time in his study. He now sat on a high back chair at a huge oak carved table, scribbling in a thick leather covered journal when the messenger announced Hinane, 'The Tamenokalt of the Tuareg, queen Tin Hinan is here my lord.'

Geiseric nodded without looking up and kept on writing when Hinane and Tala entered the room. They left Siman waiting outside with the horses.

Hinane had time to study Geiseric in silence.

He had a short greying goatee beard on a sharp pointed chin, almost in the fashion like that of Tuberon thought Hinane. Pointed ears and curly black hair framed his face supported by a thick neck and broad shoulders. He was dressed in what resembled some of the northern Celtic cultures with some Roman deviations to its design, which gave him the look of a rather tortuous dupe, contrasting poorly with the lavish Roman effigy surrounds.

Hinane was dressed in traditional warrior attire, her tattoos a glistening dark brown. She casted a striking and ferocious image, unlike anything Geiseric had expected from a desert dweller as he sometimes thought of the Tuareg queen. Thus, when he looked up at her, a sudden surprise flickered across his face and an aroused twitch pulled on his lips, mirroring the stimulating move in his groin.

But his eyes remained blank when he tilted his head slightly, a movement which could have resembled a short bow and said, 'Forgive me for not meeting you standing,' pointing at his maimed legs, 'Unfortunate horse accident.'

Hinane stood unmoved. She studied his face with stony curiosity.

A small frown plucked on Geiseric's forehead which portrayed his annoyance at her arrogant stance and he barked, 'Your truth dishonours your reputation.'

She snapped back, 'Yours do not.'

They weighed each other with their eyes, Hinane's ice-blue ones flicking daggers, his cocoa brown ones turning to muddy stone. Hinane willed her emotions back in control, realising this was not the time for uncontrolled lashing

out and volatile outbursts. She took a deep breath and stilled her thundering heart that throbbed in her throat.

But Geiseric was the first to challenge the heavy charged energy, suddenly eager to get to the crux of the matter, 'Your message stated your concerns for the safe movement of your trading caravans across the desert?'

Hinane nodded with a stiff, 'Correct.'

'How can I assist? Your warriors waiting outside Carthage prove to be strong enough to guard them,' he paused slightly then taunted, 'Or are they merely weak plebs dressed to disguise.'

The gibe plucked in the pit of her stomach.

Geiseric watched her with a cunning shadow in his eyes and continued, 'Where is the golden king of the jungle savages that accompanied you here? Why is he not at your side now? Instead you bring this, this...'

He referred to Tala's presence as a ridicule, meant as an insult to needle them, but Tala stood emotionless, only a small twitch at the corner of her mouth exposed her anger.

Geiseric saw the hesitation skimmed in Hinane's eyes and released another challenge, 'Do you know the Moors and Berbers in the ports refer to your Tuaregs as those abandoned by god?'

Hinane reddened, balled her fists, and drove her nails deeper into her palms in answer to his growing smirk. She tried to keep her voice even when saying, 'Keep your remarks on point, cripple king of barbarians.'

Then she recognised the opportunity to stir what he cherished and respected, and continued through clenched teeth, 'But since you braved the subject, is it not rather your Christian god that's failing you? His followers, people like you, brought more destruction than any other god before. You murder, rape, and destroy, all pioneered by your Christian counsel and clergy. What a dreadful message you send out about the power and compassion of your god.'

Geiseric's face turned sour and he hammered a fist on the table.

But she carried on recklessly, 'Your holy scriptures are spun together by poetic writers who know the secrets of influencing and persuading senseless masses who cannot think for themselves. Your followers take on the warped opinions and perceptions of those Christian priests who preach what's befitted only to their own agendas, whether the truth or not, whether just or not.'

Hinane held his stare, 'No, king of brats, it's not our gods who have forsaken us. It is you who are poorly strayed.'

Geiseric's eyes narrowed while she talked, quickly sensing she was out to hassle him. Even though her words rang true, and made him want to wring her neck, he restrained himself by calling upon years of experience in the arts of deliberation.

He pointed coolly to the chair across the table from him, 'Fill a seat,' he ordered gruffly, trying to level her intimidating stance to his forced seated position.

'I'm most comfortable standing,' she declined stubbornly, but the change in their bout did seem to even out her resentment.

'Why exactly are you here?' frowned Geiseric, feigning innocence.

She shrugged her shoulders slightly to get rid of the tension in her neck muscles and continued, 'I want your pledge to leave my caravans intact from this day forward, safe from any of your raids and plunder.'

Geiseric snorted with derision, 'Careful of what you imply.'

'You're the only one with the reputation befitting the attacks.'

'I launch attacks only against the Catholics. I have no quarrels with you pagans. You're primitive and native beings, undeveloped rural savages at best, what could you possibly have what I want?'

Hinane smiled, 'Everyone knows gaining followers for your Arian faith is not your only quest. Your love for power and possessions are more accurate explanations for your cruelty. You know full well who I am, what I have and what I own.'

Geiseric's hands shook at her audacity. His voice lowered and smoothed, 'Maybe the attackers are from your own camps.'

It hit home, and Tuberón's deceit lay bare between them, the mock in Geiseric's eyes betraying that there was much more in play than what his words revealed.

But she chose to ignore this fact, 'My people are not concerned about matters of gaining more than what they need.'

'Ah, says she who has built a wealthy empire herself,' he smirked.

'With, and for my people. Never just for myself.'

His widened smile and smirk ridiculed in her gut and her forehead turned into deep grooves.

She battled for self-control and said slowly, 'You murder Catholics priests and burn churches. You raid and plunder innocent bystanders, rape women and children, you violate and disrespect laws of any governor or magistrate,' she leaned forward, her eyes spitting rage, her fists pressing on the table, 'You are capable of anything,' then she blatantly accused him, 'You are the one who raided my caravans, maybe not in person, but you are at the core of its cause. I have no doubt.'

His face turned to granite and Hinane was suddenly confronted with a threatening, malicious darkness that cloaked them.

The tone in his voice turned sour in her stomach, 'You've picked a battle out of your league little Amazon.'

Hinane was satisfied, she got exactly what she came for. Their eyes locked, and the fierce battle that would inevitably follow already swelled in their smouldering eyes.

There was nothing left to say. Hinane turned for the door with Tala on her heels, and the slave opened it for them in haste with a short bow.

Later when they were back in the camp on the outskirts of Carthage, and the moon shone brightly over the quiet sleeping camp, a desert owl's screech was the only sound resonating through the dunes. But Hinane didn't hear it, she was fast asleep in the safety of Chikae's arms.

At the same time in the Ahaggar, feeling restless the entire day and not being able to sleep, Takamat placed round black stones in a calabash filled with water. She swished the water over the stones to make their rounded surfaces

shine and gazed attentively upon it, waiting for the images to appear.

But what she finally saw surfacing, made her fall to her knees in a desperate whimpering prayer.

CHAPTER 50

It was the waiting that unsettled their nerves. They could expect an attack from Geiseric at any time. But it was the not-knowing when that raised tempers and troubled their thoughts.

Hinane feared that her attack on Geiseric was not enough to lure him out, so she spread rumours that they guarded a fortune among their ranks to be traded in the ports in an attempt to make full use of their journey to Carthage.

But it had not the desired effect as yet.

'Geiseric is a strategist Oya. He knows how waiting would agitate. Just be patient,' Chikae assured Hinane.

But Hinane knew she would have to do something to prompt the Vandal into action before her warriors lost their nerve completely. She busied them with training, practising tactics which would be most used in their battle strategy. When she was satisfied with their readiness for a fight, she used the rest of the time devising more plans to force Geiseric into action.

She wanted to propel him and his forces to follow them into the deserts where she would have the overhand in combat. But what would be most effective?

Then one afternoon it suddenly came to her, 'Hannibal ante portas.'

'What?' asked Chikae with a puckered brow, baffled by Hinane's sudden exclamation.

Hinane was strutted against pillow pads under the shade of a tent tarpaulin, conferring with Chikae while watching the sweaty warriors spar in the heat.

'Hannibal before the Gates.'

Chikae just stared at her, still not catching her drift.

Hinane smiled, 'The famous commander Hannibal was once a Punic Carthaginian, considered as one of the greatest military commanders of his time somewhere around 200BC.'

Chikae nodded, 'Yes, I know of this man. What of him?'

Hinane recounted his story to illustrate her thoughts.

Hannibal lived during a period of great tension in the Mediterranean, when the Roman Republic established its supremacy over other great powers such as Carthage, the Hellenistic kingdoms of Macedon, Syracuse, and the Seleucid empire. One of his most famous achievements was during the outbreak of the Second Punic War, when he marched an army of war elephants from Iberia over the Pyrenees and the Alps into northern Italy.

In his first few years in Italia, he won three dramatic victories, Trebia, Trasimene, and Cannae, playing the battles to his strengths and the enemy's weaknesses, thereby winning over many allies of Rome.

Hannibal occupied much of Italia for fifteen years, but a Roman counter-invasion of North Africa forced him to return to Carthage where he was defeated by Scipio Africanus at the Battle of Zama. After that Hannibal still had many defeats and victories, and became known as one of the greatest generals of antiquity together with Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Scipio, and Pyrrhus of Epirus.

Some called Hannibal the father of strategy because his greatest enemy Rome adopted elements of his military tactics.

This praise has earned him a strong reputation and it was written that Hannibal taught the Romans the meaning of fear, and for generations, Roman housekeepers would tell their children brutal tales of Hannibal when they have misbehaved.

'Hannibal became such a figure of terror that whenever disaster struck, the Roman Senators would exclaim 'Hannibal at the gates' to express their fear or anxiety,' concluded Hinane.

'Ah,' said Chikae now in full understanding, 'And you want to create the same fear?'

He asked with amusement in his voice, 'How?'

'Elephants.'

Chikae's eyebrows shot in a curl that prompted an explanation.

Hinane smiled at his theatrics and continued, 'Hannibal used African war elephants in his strategy. We can too. Elephants were the most feared beasts on ancient battlegrounds. They are huge, powerful and imposing, and their terrifying appearance make them valuable cavalry.'

'But where would we find elephants? Capturing them from the wild is impossible, and even if we could, who would train them? There's no time for that.'

Hinane just grinned with a cunning spark in her blue eyes.

When Hinane conveyed her plan to her small war council, Tala rebuked, 'But the last use of war elephants in the Mediterranean was against the Romans at the battle of Thapsus in 46BC, with Julius Caesar where he commanded his legions to strike at the elephant's legs with axes.'

Hinane nodded slightly, 'Not exactly. 'The Sassanids of Persia recently employed elephantary in some of their campaigns against their western enemies, one of which was the battle at Vartanantz only two years ago in 451AD against the Armenians.'

'What were they fighting about?' asked Tayri with a startled frown.

Hinane quickly filled them in. In 301AD the Kingdom of Armenia was one of the first nations officially converting to Christianity, and they wanted to practise the faith under the Persian rule when the country became Sassanid dependency with a Sassanid governor. The Persians feared the Armenian Church would align with Rome rather than the Aramaic-speaking, Persian-backed Nestorian Church, so they tried to compel the Armenian Church to abandon Rome.

'This created a Christian rebellion in Armenia and a mass revolt broke out. The governor gathered a massive Persian army to attack Armenia where they used the war elephants.'

'How do you know all these things?' asked Kitah.

Hinane grinned playfully, 'While you bathe your brawny lazy white ass in the sun all day, hunting and feeding your belly, I feed my mind by asking questions.'

Kitah grunted, 'Exactly what a queen is supposed to do, right.'

'Right,' ordered a smirking Hinane them back to focus, 'Let's go over the plan once more.'

'Siman, Afer, and the twins, Damya and Bahac would lead the majority of our army back towards the Ahaggar, looking like we're returning home, like we grew tired of waiting and gave up the cause. Just like Geiseric would expect after a long wait, maybe he even planned it.'

They nodded in agreement.

'But he won't let us go that easily,' continued Hinane, 'Not after what I plan to do with the elephants. We can be almost certain, the Vandal king would follow us then. He would not easily forget my arrogance and blatant actions. He would want to take reprisal, and more than anything, would want to take the fortunes we are supposedly protecting.'

Siman nodded and clarified, 'We will disappear from sight in the desert and then lay an ambush?'

'We'll first see what his response would be after the elephants,' said Hinane. 'He might suspect our intent for a trap, so do not hide yourselves too quickly. Let's see what happens after the first part of the plan then we'll decide on a course forward.'

'Got it. When do we leave?'

'As soon as this meet is over. I want to engage him in combat as far as possible into the desert, away from his strengths in the ports and his large militia ranks.'

Hinane turned towards Kitah and Tayri, 'Your tasks are to be deployed first. Hinane discussed the plan in length so each one was clear of what was expected of them.'

'Brilliant,' grimaced Tayri, 'Geiseric would surely not see it coming.'

'Where will you and Chikae be?' Asked Afer when she proposed the next outline.

'At first with Kitah and Tayri then we'll follow you and Siman, basically everywhere, but I need strong leaders in each part of the plan, to ensure an effective and favourable outcome.'

Afer nodded, looked at Siman, and smiled at her.

'And me?' asked Tala.

'You will come with me first to secure the elephants, thereafter I will instruct you what to do.'

She nodded, satisfied to remain at Hinane's side.

To the Roman mobs, caught in continuous economic and political tangles, the great amphitheatres were their only destruction. The amphitheatres also became the ordinary man's temple, home, place of assembly, and

entertainment.

The Romans worshipped courage and all Romans liked to picture themselves as rough and tough fighters. The destructive forces of the circuses in the arenas kept growing and growing in attempts to satisfy the discontent of the Roman masses.

And so it was the same in Carthage. Built in 1AD just outside the city, the Carthage amphitheatre was considered one of the largest of the Roman Empire.

Under the amphitheatre there were tunnels that led to prison cells, gladiator lockups and animal cages. The animals, led by the gladiators, were brought out from under the amphitheatre through the tunnels that appeared onto the surface in the amphitheatre or into the middle corridor of the amphitheatre. Prisoners and animals entered the amphitheatre by the Sanivivarian Gate, the Gate of Life.

With the Empire in decline, death and torture became the only spectacles that satisfied the Romans' desires. The people of Rome, patrician and commoner, flocked to see gladiators mangled beneath the hoofs and wheels of horses and chariots, slaughtered by half-starved wild beasts, and butchered by well-armed and armoured fighters. The more exotic the animal, the better the fight, and the better the popularity of the games.

The trade in wild animals was highly lucrative. Animals were sourced from the far reaches of the Empire especially Africa, Egypt and Asia. The natives of these areas would capture and cage animals to sell them to animal traders. The animals were then delivered to the beast masters who treated them cruelly, sometimes leaving them with no food and water. The trade in wild animals for the arena dwindled during the 4th century as supplies were exhausted and prices became too high.

Although the animals in coliseums declined, animal trainers and performers still peddled their talents between towns and at local festivals. Animals were also kept by the wealthy for their own entertainment.

By far the most popular of the ancient Roman animals used for shows outside the arena, was the elephant. They were considered as prized status symbols used to transport wealthy men and women to imposing functions. The grey giants did of course also have more serious uses, such as in the building trade where they were able to carry, lift and pull huge weights.

Hinane knew the trader and keeper of elephants who supplied a steady flow to the rich and structured trade in Carthage. And since the Vandals infested the city, adversely influencing trades and shows, the old trader earned very little and would be easily persuaded.

The trader kept several elephants in captivity. His plot of land was in the western parts just outside of Carthage near the Utica gate. It was situated on the Lake of Tunis, at the outlet of the Majardah river that flowed all year long with grain cultivation in abundance for his elephants.

When arriving at the trader's den, the sight that greeted them shaved on their already thin nerves. The idea of riding elephants into combat was daunting enough, and this sight didn't soften the prospect.

A male elephant was tied between trees and he pulled harshly on the ropes that bonded him to it. He trumpeted and bawled, lifting the left knee then the

right, swaying from side to side in an effort to root the trees. A thick tar-like secretion dripped from the temporal ducts on the sides of his head.

Hinane instantly frowned, 'What's the idea of this?' She asked the trader.

'The bull is in musth,' he answered.

Hinane looked confused, so he quickly explained.

Musth is a periodic condition in bull elephants that co-occurred with highly aggressive behaviour and a large rise in reproductive hormones. Even the most placid elephants became highly violent during musth, requiring segregation and isolation until they've recovered.

'Is it because he is in rut?'

The trader shook his head, 'No evidence in support of that. You see, the female elephant's estrus cycle is not seasonally-linked, whereas musth most often takes place in winter. Bulls in musth often attack female elephants, regardless of whether or not the females are in heat. Some say musth is connected to natural periodic reorganisation of dominance among males.'

'The elephant's aggression may be partially caused by a reaction to the temporin, which naturally trickles down from the temporal ducts into the elephant's mouth. Another contributing factor is the accompanying swelling of the temporal glands that pressed on the elephant's eyes and caused acute pain, similar to severe root abscess toothache. Elephants sometimes tried to counteract this pain by digging their tusks into the ground.'

'So you tie him up?' Asked Tala, aggravated by the gruesome treatment.

'Yes. A musth elephant, wild or domesticated, is extremely dangerous to humans and other elephants and have killed numerous keepers already. They will even attack and kill members of their own family, including their own calves.'

'Does this only happen in captivity?' asked Tayri.

The trader shrugged his shoulders.

'For how long is he like this?'

The trader hesitated before answering, 'Deny food and water and he is fixed in a week. Feed him and it takes sometimes one month, sometimes two, it depends.'

'But no food and water is cruel,' frowned Tala.

The trader shrugged his shoulders again, 'Forcing him is better. Waiting until the elephant emerges from musth on its own takes too long. They cannot be trained, allowed outside or permitted to see other elephants, and must be fed, watered and cleaned, but they attack any keeper attempting to approach them.'

He sighed, 'Some mahouts say this method is crueller than starving the animal for a week. It recovers quicker when hungry and can then be safely reunited with the herd.'

The trader prompted them to his small homestead where he offered them wine and bread. Hinane briefed the trader at length of how many elephants she needed and by when. After hearing how many she wanted, at a reward too tempting to resist, the eager trader offered his trained keepers to handle the giants during her pursuit. They would form part of the overall planning of how they would be arrayed, for another handsome fee of course. Hinane didn't have the time to train the mahouts and accepted the offer with gratitude.

She returned to camp to recruit the most skilled warriors who harboured a natural balance and dexterity as they would require riding upon the beasts behind the mahouts on a platform. They would be equipped with full armour, lances, axes and arrows to effectively launch strategic attacks from above.

Then finally their training upon the elephants began in earnest. They had little time and had to strategise quickly. For this, Hinane and Chikae had to compile all their faculties and knowledge, the slightest mistake would result in disaster.

Discharging the elephants would be unexpected by Geiseric's troops, which would allow them to deliver instant and damaging attacks. The resulting chaos would make it hard for the Vandals to discern what's really going on, enhanced by the animals' jumbled pursuits that would create dilemmas for anyone in their path.

Elephants' main use in battle was to charge the enemy, trampling them, break their ranks and instil terror. An elephant charge could reach about thirty miles per hour and unlike horse cavalry, could not be easily stopped. This paralysed the enemy's ability to resist with no time to construct a strategic response.

But Hinane would not deploy them on a battlefield. Her main goal was to cause maximum chaos and provoke a desperate overreaction in the streets of Carthage.

'The Vandal lords are all thugs. It's about time someone teaches them a lesson,' agreed Tala with Hinane's plan.

'Don't elephants have a tendency to panic, and run amok?' asked a concerned warrior.

Hinane cleared his concern, 'The mahouts steering them would be armed with a chisel blade and hammer to drill into the elephant's skull which would render them helpless, just in case they became uncontrollable.'

'What about the horses? They are unaccustomed to the smell of elephants, so they would panic easily.'

Hinane shook her head, 'We take no horses on that day. We'll take only the elephants on this scuffle. But the Vandals attacking us on horses would be caught unaware.'

'The warriors on top of the elephants would be stationed high on a stable platform fitted by rails and fastened around the elephants' romps so as to provide a safe and steady stage to fire arrows and lances from.'

The trader insisted that his elephants wore protective armour around their legs and foreheads when Hinane requested heavy iron chains with steel balls at their ends, to be tied to their trunks. The animals were trained to swirl menacingly and with great skill for theatre performances, but in this case, it would be used to crush anything in its charge.

Then finally, the day came for their quest.

Geiseric's superior position among his own people was unquestionable and his will was accepted with little struggle. His frequent successes encouraged autocratic power and many Vandal lords wished to be stationed in Carthage under his immediate counsel. Geiseric favoured a government in which officials

were appointed by his patronage, and not by his birthright as in the case with the old Germanic tribal aristocracy.

This allowed Geiseric to freely employ the talents of Romans and Berbers as his commanders.

Geiseric organised his men into several companies commanded by captains called Chiliarchs, which meant leaders of a thousand. Most of them were Vandals and Alans but increasingly, as time passed and many of them retired to the good life, some Moorish and Berber tribesmen filled in. They were mostly used as seaborne raiding parties while the Vandals waited in the galleys for the spoils to be brought up. But many were kept in the city as Geiseric's eyes and ears while he was at sea.

For this reason it was difficult to discern who exactly was anti Geiseric and who was pro Geiseric. But Hinane had set her spies out weeks before, who'd gathered the necessary information, identifying the Vandal lords and Chiliarchs targeted for the elephant charge.

Outraging Geiseric's commanders would prompt Geiseric into following Hinane and trying to destroy her.

'You're quite the instigator,' remarked Chikae with a boyish grin when they mounted the elephants that would lead the assault.

Hinane didn't answer as climbing to the platform on the elephant's back took up most of her attention. The elephants stood in a long line, one after each other, unaware of what exactly their mission entailed, just standing in wait for their orders from the mahouts.

Tala had already instructed the mahouts where to go and what to do, and all of them were crystal clear of their individual tasks. Each elephant team of two animals with platforms full of warriors, would march up to a Vandal lord's home, break down the doors and loot what they could as payback for what they'd pillaged from Hinane's caravans.

'But who's to say they were part of Geiseric's plot in the attack on us?' frowned Tala.

Hinane shook her head, 'It doesn't matter, that's not the point. Provoking anyone close to Geiseric is.'

Tala didn't offer any further protest and followed her orders.

The elephants did not attract any attention at first when marching between the houses, shops and private spaces, as most citizens were used to them as the rich paraded the streets. But the warriors on the platforms soon stole a closer look and crowds started to follow in curiosity.

The housing blocks were separated by a grid of straight streets, approximately six paces wide, with a roadway consisting of clay and covered with punica pavement, and at some places smeared with red mortar.

The lords' homes were close to the harbour and by the time the elephants reached most of the homes, the entire city was in uproar. And when the elephants broke down the front doors with the lead balls fastened to their trunks, trampling and trumpeting, the crowds went wild from excitement. They cheered the warriors on as they swarmed into the homes and raided all the valuables they could find.

House servants were shocked and screamed, standing defenceless in the pursuit, too fearful to prevent them from invading and getting hurt. But it wasn't long before some of Geiseric's soldiers arrived on the scenes and the warriors who remained on the platform baskets attacked them from atop, launching arrows, lances and axes that pierced through their armour.

On Hinane's orders, all teams were to regroup on the hill as soon as they've achieved their objectives. The streets erupted into total chaos when the elephants charged from all directions to the Byrsa hill in the city centre.

With the erupting chaos and elephants charging away from the broken into houses with the Vandal soldiers following, the remaining warriors would scatter in various directions protecting their spoils from getting entangled in struggles with the soldiers. Teams on horses were already waiting for them at their designated posts and carried them out of the city unnoticed.

In the meanwhile, Hinane and Chikae led the charge up the hill. Screams and shouts filled the air which brought a giggle to Hinane's throat as she had no idea why everyone was so hysterical, although she fully welcomed the pandemonium.

'Hee-ha,' bubbled from her lips as she prompted the elephants to go faster and she blew on her ram's horn. The shrill sound of it, and the wind in her hair and upon her face, made her feel free and young, reckless and powerful.

The elephants knocked aside many bystanders in their charge, women shrieked and children wailed. She glanced at Chikae on the elephant at her side and adrenaline pumped through her veins as they grinned at each other.

As if in a dare to him, she chased to the citadel where the city's sacred temples rose, dedicated to the city's gods, Esmun the war god, Baal the sun god, and Astarte the moon goddess.

Chikae's elephant managed to pair with hers and they rode standing side by side through the narrow streets that were left in destruction in their wake.

But she misjudged the stairs built to compensate for the slope of the hill, and was thrown back against the basket rails when the elephant lifted his legs and jumped the stairs. The motion was totally unfamiliar, nothing like they'd practised which left her totally disoriented and she lost her balance completely. She was thrown from the elephant's back and landed on a rock with her side, instantly crashing three ribs. She squalled with pain, but also found her dilemma humorous and she didn't know if she should cry or laugh when the initial surprise left her brain.

Chikae's elephant brushed past her and Chikae shouted down to her, 'Get up, before the rest of the herd trample upon you.'

She rose to her knees and clasped her hand over her ribs. The pain shot through her chest but she tried to ignore it. She ran up the hill with a slight limp, following the two elephants. Once at the top, the mahout steering her elephant, restrained the animal and waited for her. He was not sure to laugh or show compassion, so his expression remained level when she finally reached them without breath and white with pain.

The mahout ordered the elephant to its knees so she could mount quickly just as Geiseric finally appeared below the hill. One of his consorts must have

alarmed him and he now approached on a horse, red faced and raging with fury.

Excitement charged through Hinane and she deliberately looked for more trouble to stir his anger higher. She spotted the Esmun war god statue and ordered the mahout to charge for it. He immediately shook his head, 'Sacred, the gods are sacred.'

She aimed her bow at his head and shouted, 'Do it, you stupid little man.'

He gazed at the arrow aimed at his head and immediately did as she'd asked.

'Hinane no,' shouted Chikae.

But she either didn't hear him or didn't want to hear him, he couldn't tell. Knowing Hinane he was certain it was the latter and followed her in angst towards the statue.

When the elephant came to a dusty halt at the base of it, she ordered the mahout to crash it down with the lead ball. He hesitated again, but then she stuck the sharp arrow in his neck and he directed the animal to obey her command.

Geiseric was livid when he saw the destruction in progress. Not because he cared for any of the Roman pagan gods, but because of her open audacity to provoke him and disregard his reign in his city.

He bit on his jaw and shouted an order, 'Find me pigs and jars of fat. Hurry.'

His men scattered and after a short while brought him a few hogs left abandoned by stall owners. He instructed his men to pour fat and oil over them, with his eyes on the crumbling statue and on the woman who ordered its destruction.

He ordered, 'Set them alight and release them towards the elephants.'

The pigs' hides caught fire in an instant and the flames burned through their skins, inflicting intense pain as the flames licked in the oil. The pigs wailed and the elephants that crowded together at the top of the hill bolted in terror from the flaming, squealing pigs that were sent into their station.

The elephants scattered in panic down the hill towards the outskirts of the city and trampled everything in their path, bringing disaster to anyone blocking their way. The crowds scattered but many of them couldn't escape in time and several soldiers and civilians got stomped upon.

The flustered mahout steering Hinane's elephant took the chisel blade and hammered it into the animal's brain before Hinane could detain him.

She screamed, 'No,' just as the blade pierced through its thick skin into its brain. She knocked him from his seat, 'You stupid imbecile,' she yelled.

The elephant crushed into the dust and Hinane was thrown into the ground for a second time, landing solidly upon her broken ribs, the fall stifling the air from her chest with a piercing pain shooting through her side and back.

Chikae saw what happened and ordered his mahout to charge to her rescue. He yelled at her, ordering her to rise to her feet and held out a lance towards her which she grabbed just as the soldiers reached her side. They grabbed her legs but she kicked into their faces while Chikae drew her up onto the platform.

Once at the top, and when her breath returned, Hinane suddenly bellowed with pleasure and laughter. She did not have fun like this in years despite the

pain it inflicted. Chikae led them out of the city with the other elephants all scattering in different directions from the panic which the pigs created.

'I underestimated the barbarian,' chuckled Hinane that night around their camp fire, the pain in her ribs no hindrance to her amusement when recounting the event.

Hinane frowned, 'How did he know that a pig's squeal is possibly the only sound that could send the elephants in a panicked flight?'

'He had two walls lined with scribbled records and books in his study. He is quite the academic, in case you didn't notice,' Tala pointed out dryly.

Hinane snorted, 'Of course, how foolish of me.'

But the error of underestimating him didn't dampen her spirit. In her own mind, the combat was a win to her camp. She looted an attractive reward, she managed to provoke the Vandal king. A pursuit would surely follow.

She smiled at Chikae and giggled again when recalling the images of their flight, grabbing at the pain in her side caused from the chuckle.

Chikae met her smile with a huge grin on his well-rounded lips and smouldering eyes, and Hinane was assured of more action in their tent that night. Hinane's heart pumped faster at the expectation, as the pleasure she experienced today on the back of that elephant, would be nothing compared to the joy she would find in Chikae's arms.

CHAPTER 51

As Hinane had expected, Geiseric followed them into the deserts. His disgruntled lords were at the forefront of the charge, adamant to drive, as they referred to Hinane and her warriors, the desert cockroaches out of their domain after the commotion and ridicule they'd caused.

Hinane sat quietly on Quasar waiting for them to get closer, the eagle Aete on her shoulder, Chikae next to her, the warriors behind them in large organised columns, all eyes fixed on the approaching Vandal crowds in the distance. They knew exactly what was expected, their weapons and minds ready, mixed emotions and troubled thoughts flowing like a strong ocean current through the legions.

But everything else was quiet, even the desert wind had disappeared, just the sun's rays were burning upon them in scorching wave stings. Hinane pressed slightly on the broken ribs in her side as the dust clouds grew larger with the Vandals' advance, the hooves of their horses and camels becoming louder and louder, like a rolling thunder rumbling from the skies.

She pulled her face lightly from the pain but then squared her shoulders in a determined fashion. She drew a deep breath that filled her with the courage she needed, her eyes burning upon Geiseric in the front. She held her forces in

check as the Vandals drew closer, and came to a halt a few hundred paces from where Hinane waited.

Geiseric sat uncomfortably in the saddle, pulling impatiently on a contraption manufactured to hold his maimed legs in position. But his disability did not for one minute overshadow the malicious manner in which he glared at Hinane and her army, his barbarian fighters in large numbers behind him, savaged brutes with ugly smiles and dirty faces.

Then suddenly Geiseric's face turned even and calm, and waved a lackadaisical command to his second in charge, 'Derol, bring the loot when you're done, I have matters far more important to attend to on this day.'

Hinane's jaw fell open from surprise as Geiseric wheeled around and disappeared with a gallop over the dune hills. But there was no time to ponder his motives as Derol abruptly shouted the order for the Vandal's charge.

She straightened her spine and studied the Vandals as they neared. The lords leading them were well-rounded and trained troops, but the hordes following were bestial looking men with wild soiled hair and beards, chipped yellow teeth with wide gaps, tattered leather cuirasses and breeches, swords, axes and lances flashing in their hands and cries spattering with saliva from their lips.

Hinane was mentally prepared to fight Geiseric, but his exit left her without balance. She hesitantly looked upon her enemy with an axe in each hand when she gave the order to attack.

Tala finally got the chance she yearned for, revenge for Izza's death, and she engaged in a ferocious battle with some of the Vandal lords.

Aete's warning cry pierced the sky and Hinane's eyes immediately searched for its reason. Ice cold fingers clenched around her heart when she saw Chikae charging straight into a band of Vandal lords that came for her.

She cursed his foolishness, steered her horse in his direction and yelled, 'Chikae, no.'

Swords clashed and ravaged, pain cries and shouts shook the air across the battlefield. But inside Hinane's mind everything was silent when a massive barbarian pulled Chikae from his horse and pinned him upon the sand, pressing a boot against his torso. Without warning, he sliced Chikae's throat with one sword swipe and a vulgar scream, 'Die you zot.'

In that instant, the fight was over for Hinane. She felt the life draining from her in red bloody strands. With both her hands she grasped at her own throat, allegorically trying to stop the blood that oozed from Chikae's open neck wound, pooling around him upon the sand. The blistering desert sands soaked up the crimson fluid, as if leaching the life from Chikae to sustain its own thirst.

She slid from Quasar and fell to her knees a few paces from Chikae's lifeless body, oblivious of Afer and Siman overpowering the bearded barbarian and giving him the same fate as he did Chikae.

The sounds of the battle were a mere distant humming in her head as her eyes locked on Chikae's unresponsive face, his flared eyes quickly turning dull, his chest lifeless, the aegis protecting his torso shining bright golden in places where his blood did not touch.

The images swam and blurred together as the tears dammed Hinane's eyes. Her head started to spin, dark specs flickered before her and she tried to steady herself by pressing with her left hand in the sand. But she was still clutching the axes and fell onto her butt. Afer ran to Chikae and knelt beside him, pinching the neck and upper chest flesh together, hopelessly trying to mend it and wipe the horrid deed away.

Around them the Tuareg and Mandé warriors fought with vigour and force, eventually driving the Vandals back with skilled and ferocious attacks, using all the power and tactics they had. But Hinane had no recollection of this. Nor did she witness how Tala sent many a Vandal to their deaths axing their skulls in half, uttering battle cries that even stunned Aete in his flight.

Even long after the clashing sounds had died down, Hinane still remained motionless, her eyes lifeless and bleak. The Tuareg won the battle and detained several Vandals, including Derol, the second in charge to Geiseric.

Hinane's warriors were wise enough to leave her there on her own to stare at Chikae and gradually take hold of her grief. When she finally moved, the sun had already gone to bed.

Afer shared her deep grief and watched her and the corpse of his king from a short distance behind her. He waited respectfully and patiently for her first stir which also gave him the time to recollect his own emotions and work through his thoughts.

When Hinane finally rose, he called two helpers who carefully rolled Chikae's corpse in white linen cloth, and lifted him onto a canvas sheet stretched between two poles. When they lifted him and started walking, Hinane spoke for the first time, 'Wait.'

They stopped in their tracks.

'He will ride with me,' her voice a deep gruff sound that rumbled from her throat.

They didn't protest and helped her lifting Chikae's body on Quasar in front of her. They followed her when she steered the horse back to their camp, quite a distance from the battlefields.

Tala remained at a distance the entire time, merely looking upon her queen and the dead king with troubled thoughts. She bowed her head in mourning for her friend when they rode past her, Hinane's grief mixing with her own.

They reached their main camp well into the night. Hinane ordered them to put Chikae in the tent they had shared where she would prepare him for the burial. Hinane removed the blood-soaked cloth, undressed him and washed his body clean, her eyes drowning in sorrow and tears. She stitched his neck wound closed, and afterwards, carried out the custom ritual with intense love and thick emotions.

She kissed him on his lips and whispered, 'Finally, I'm forced to accept, in this life we'll never be together,' she quivered, 'Go with my love by your side, forever and eternally.'

She rested her head on his chest, her shoulders shaking wildly with sadness while she wept. She cried until her heart bled empty and turned to stone.

When the sun crept from its cover the next morning, Hinane had finished the

body preservation and burial preparation.

Never in her entire life, was anything more difficult than to recollect herself on this day to face the world and carry on. Where the only thing she wanted to do most was to die and get buried next to Chikae. But she was still a queen with obligations. And now more than ever, she was a warrior and adamant to snuff the Vandal king.

When she stepped from Chikae's tent, they were already waiting and Tala immediately stepped to her side. Afer's eyes were empty and dark where he stood with Siman, Bahac and Damya by his side, the black tribes and Tuareg warriors in hordes behind them.

It was deadly quiet, just the light breeze that always seemed to blow when souls departed. Hinane gazed at them with inflamed eyes, sorrow in deep lines upon her face. She looked at the stern faces of Chikae's tribes and the piercing eyes of the Tuareg.

Her voice came hoarsely, 'King Chikae is dead,' the finality of the spoken words daggered through her heart.

She swallowed the re-emerging tears and lifted her chin, 'Are we all together in revenge?'

They cheered in agreement, lifting their swords in passionate grief.

'Then bring me that captured Vandal they call Derol, I want to know all there is about that Geiseric bastard.'

She turned to Afer and Siman, 'Prepare a sacred stake for Chikae. We must wing his soul before this day ends.'

She ordered her warriors to kill the other Vandal captives in any manner they wished, while she tortured Derol till she knew everything he did. She then tried to soothe her grief by axing him into a lifeless pulp. She left his butchered corpse in a blood pool to rot in the sun and to disappear down the throats of the vultures.

When she returned from the brutal massacre with no feelings or remorse, the rest of her forces were standing ready for Chikae's burial. Together with his closest men, Hinane lifted Chikae's body onto the stilt and rested it on the wooden structure packed with wood fuel, his corpse covered in linen cloth of white, blue, purple and gold.

They formed a wide circle around the stilt. Hinane delivered the proper burial ceremony and when her voice quietened, they stood ready with lit arrows waiting for Afer's command.

When it came, Hinane's face turned ashen white, and Tala stepped in to support her. The arrows fired, and Chikae's body and stilt busted into flames. Hinane stood lifeless, watching painfully as Chikae's corpse burnt to ashes while she silently whispered prayers to the gods to protect his soul.

Much later Tala led Hinane away from the burning stake that burnt down to smouldering coals, helping her to her tent and leaving her be.

Hinane ran the events of the past days through her mind over and over, and could not believe that Chikae was ripped from her so swiftly. He was there, right by her side and the next moment he was not.

It took three days for Hinane to reappear from her tent, her face white, grey

pockets underneath red eyes evidence of no sleep, and deep lines that dragged her mouth down.

Her closest confidants waited anxiously for the moment Hinane would reappear from her tent, and wanted to press the urgency of their next move, but they had to respect her grief. Convened around their campfire, with Hinane still not talking, they fell into deep thoughts, waiting for Hinane to speak, which did not come.

During their meal of camel meat and goat's milk, Hinane just stared into the flames of their cooking fire, her eyes dark and lifeless while the rest discussed unrelated matters in soft tones.

They realised Hinane would not break silence and Siman forced the issue, 'Geiseric followed us into the desert for a confront, and then turned away. What was the sense in that?'

Kitah answered, 'He almost certainly saw our strengths, got scared and left his men to face the heat on their own.'

Abruptly, Tala threw her bowl on the ground and spat, 'Bloody coward.'

Hinane finally looked up, 'I underestimated him. Twice. Huge mistake.'

The group frowned in confusion, not catching Hinane's full meaning. Hinane rose, walked a few paces and turned around, 'We'll have to nook him in his lair. We'll return to Cartage, find him in his port.'

Afer nodded, 'He's constantly on one of his galleys.'

The discussion of their next approach kept them planning for most of the night and when they finally went to rest, Hinane was too tired to sleep. Chikae's presence remained in her mind, the revenge she sought for his death like thorns in her flesh.

She walked to a high dune, plunged into the sand and waited in the dark for the sun to rise. She watched as it rose slowly, eloquently exposing the bright blue skies and sandy beige landscapes around her, bringing life to everything.

But inside her, everything still felt dead. All around her seemed to live on, naturally moving into cycles and seasons, patiently and carelessly, multiplying and dividing, taking death and creating life, everything growing into itself and from itself, a process never in any man's control.

Hinane had never felt so alone and out of control.

CHAPTER 52

In the centre of the cothon, meaning cup, there was a small round island. On this island stood the stronghold of the admiral of the fleet from where, by means

of trumpet signals, officers could direct the work of labour gangs in the port. From the turret, a small tower extended above the stronghold so ships approaching the port could quickly be spotted.

Hinane and her warriors found themselves on unfamiliar territory, urban warfare of this magnitude was not an activity they engaged in before, where civilians would get in the way, homes and goods that would be destroyed unnecessary, the complexity of the city's architecture and layout, and the skilful abilities of the Vandals who were stationed everywhere in the city.

Hinane's normal warrior tactics were impeded by the unfamiliar environment, limited field views, concealed avenues and below-ground infrastructures. Thus, for days, hiding under disguise with Tala, Afer and the twins, Hinane inspected the buildings, narrow alleys, and sewage tunnels. They carefully considered the information wrung from Derol and especially scrutinised Geiseric's every move and daily routine.

The buildings provided excellent archer and spearman posts, while alleys and streets were ideal for laying traps and sending in axe and swordsmen. But she did not want any harm to befall upon civilians, and their tasks would be hampered significantly by this consideration.

Geiseric surely had the advantage as they could easily move undetected from one part of the city to another using secret underground tunnels and concealed routes unknown to Hinane. And she had to use all her spies, skills and knowledge in trying to lessen their disadvantage.

Finally, after two months of planning and scheming, Hinane chose the final station points for the breaching units which would consist mostly of the Tuareg warriors. A strong Mandé backup force would be deployed in concealed spots, only to move into action once the battle has started. Their orders were to kill and plunder any Vandal and lord, an eager pursuit for the Mandé who were seeking blood in avenging their beloved king's demise.

Hinane would take up her post closest to the harbour where she knew Geiseric spent most of his time travelling between his residing fort and the war galleys.

The evening before their attack, she ensured they were battle ready and totally focused on their quest. Although they were a mixture of Tuareg and Mandé, they stood as one tribe, one voice in this avenger. They gathered around the fire for battle song and dance, humming softly while they moved:

'Ares, god of war, deliver sharp swords in swift hands and let us stab with crystal thought. Give us the strength of a battle axe, clear cowardice from our heads, and crush the deceitful impulses of our souls. Let the feathery birds flock down from your shoulders to guard the warrior's shrine.

'Athena, goddess of intellect and strategy, warn and advise our minds, connect and lead us within, stir your guidance with emotion and passion, and deliver wisdom to the depths of the unconscious mind so we would move as one.

'Harmonia and Hestia, goddesses of peace and harmony, tranquillity and contentment, reveal to us the universal view of things. Lead us to your stable bosom after this day, that whatever our fate at the end of it, we may find a hearth

in your heart where all differences wane.

With closed eyes, Hinane listened to the singing voices, thinking of Chikae. The prayers of the warriors were meant to strengthen their spirits, but Hinane took no heed of it. She did not need the gods to fuel her spirit, her sorrow alone erupted her drive into scorching flames.

‘It’s not good to be absent when we dance with the gods,’ Tala warned closely in Hinane’s ear.

Hinane ignored Tala’s caveat. But when the night enfolded dark and ominous in the harbour when Hinane and her warriors took their posts three hours before daylight, she wished she had rather heeded Tala’s admonition.

Fear and apprehension suddenly coiled in her stomach. She shook the feeling and gathered the frontline warriors before a huge building in the dark. She turned to Afer, Tala, Bahac, Damya and Siman, although they knew exactly what they needed to do, Hinane ordered again.

She whispered, ‘See that all the captured slaves in the prisons are freed, release all horses and camels, create chaos and kill any Vandal that comes your way.’

Hinane climbed to a rooftop after her commanders were dispatched to carry out their orders. The archers were ready when she gave the signal and they set the fort and administration buildings of Geiseric’s office to light, although she knew full well he was not there.

Hinane watched the fire quickly reach record heights that spread across the entire centre of the city. She listened to the screams and shouts arising from everywhere and watched some of her warriors assailing the Vandal lords in their homes. She turned her gaze to the harbour where the galleys laid in wait, tall dark shapes slightly swaying in the black water that glittered orange from the reflection of the fire.

A fireball from a Tuareg bow drove into the hull of the galley that stood anchored closest to the edge, the one Hinane knew Geiseric took his leave. Many more arrows followed and the entire harbour erupted into flames.

Turmoil broke out everywhere and the inner city became a heated blur of Tuareg, Mandé and Vandals fighting, screaming, dying. Hinane jumped from the building on top of Quasar and raced towards the jetty upon seeing Geiseric limping from the burning vessel. With the help of an officer, he climbed to another galley. Geiseric swayed on his feet. He watched her approach and shouted orders to take sail while turning around and crippling away.

Hinane charged through the buildings and the fighting men towards the galley on which she saw Geiseric climb on. She raced towards that galley, Quasar snorting nervously, but she prompted him in the side, encouraging him to jump. The horse’s eyes flared wide open when he hit the galley hull on all fours, but whinnied frantically when the galley rocked from the impact. Hinane soothed Quasar to calm down with a palm in the neck while he blew heavily through his nostrils.

The galley was fairly small akin to highly manoeuvrable vessels from the Liburnians. It had an elongated hull with one mast, and relied on compact biremes with twenty-five pairs of oars along its sides and several steering oars at

the stern.

It was when observing the absence of oarsmen that Hinane realised the galley was not moving and her eyes searched in the dark. Still sitting on Quasar, she slowly steered the horse in between ropes and crates, the horse battling to keep his balance on the unstable platform. But she couldn't find Geiseric and cursed.

Sudden shouts lured her to the far side of the galley. Geiseric was watching her from the deck of another bigger galley, a trireme with three tiers of oars on each side, slowly sailing away into the darkness while he laughed at her.

Instead that his laughter infuriated her more, it had a sudden strange but comforting effect, and all her aggravation slowly dissolved. In a bizarre phenomenon, her attention drew away from Geiseric and the loudness of the on-going battle in the harbour and city.

The galley Geiseric was standing upon was longer, broader and heavier with more than one rower per oar. It was significantly larger than the smaller galley she was on, but not as swift.

As the larger vessel slowly drew away, she stared at the towering mast and vertical posts at stem and stern. There was an additional mast closer to the front with a smaller square sail placed near the bow.

And upon it, perched Aete, her cherished golden eagle. He calmly turned his crown towards her, and for a moment she thought seeing Lunja in the depths of his dark eyes. The bird bobbed his crown very very slightly and Hinane smiled.

She gazed down the front of the galley which was decorated with a carved motif, put there by sailors and soldiers who believed it helped guide the ship safely to its destination. But for her, that specific motif had another and deeper meaning.

An arrow from an archer, meant for the Vandal king, flew straight in their direction. Hinane was totally oblivious of the arrow falling down straight in line with the nape of her neck, its reach too short to hit Geiseric, but far enough to cut through her dark long hair and pierce her white smooth skin, swiftly sliding deeper till it jutted out at the front of her throat.

But she didn't feel it, nor did she notice Quasar moving underneath her in a fuss, as her eyes lingered on the triskele symbol carved at the front of the galley.

It was a rounded spiral with three arms radiating from a central point, turning counter-clockwise. For Christian sailors it probably meant securing the protection from their father, son and holy ghost. In some ancient cultures, possibly from Geiseric's homelands, it was also understood as representing the sky, sea and land.

But for Hinane, in this specific form which was so closely crafted to the tribal tattoos inked on her back, it represented the three worlds and the travels to the outer spirit. The symbol depicted the cycles of life in the three spheres of the material world, the three spirals ever flowing outward and always returning to where they have started.

As Hinane relaxed her body and mind, instinctively knowing her fate, Tala and Siman ran to her. Since they were never far from her side, they saw what happened and jumped on the galley, catching her just as she slid from Quasar.

They snapped the arrow from her neck and lowered her to the deck, but said nothing. They kneeled next to her, and as the seconds dragged, they saw Hinane's eyes turning lifeless and her body growing silent. A deep pain of sadness filtered through them, but Hinane did not see them or sensed their sorrow.

She was focusing on the man who held out his hand towards her, it was Philo, her father. A radiant smile broke on her lips and she followed him into the light.

As she floated towards him, she heard her mind speak, 'My name is Tin Hinan, the mother of all, she who travels with tents. Once I was an innocent girl, and once I was a fierce warrior. Once I was a student, and then a teacher. Once I was a wife, and once I was a mistress. I was a mother, and I was a queen. I've fought wars and I've made peace. Once I was nothing, and once I was a lot. And all that remains now for the world to acknowledge, is who I had become.'

And Aete, whose name meant 'mighty eagle', carried her spirit away at exactly the same time as a lunar meteorite hit Khtern'Aït Khebbach, in Morocco.

Where Ahina sat watching the skies on the mountain in front of the dilapidated alley where Hinane had found her so long ago, she saw the meteorite hitting the desert floors in spectacular colours that lit the sky.

She struggled in a painful effort to her feet, and nibbled on the last bits of the dead hyena that pestered her for days. The hyena would watch her, laughing while she licked her sore limbs that were heavily swollen from arthritis. Then yesterday she had enough and killed it with one jump and a snap of her jaws.

She limped away and finally laid down on exactly the spot where Hinane had killed her mother. Ahina closed her eyes, only opening them once very slightly when recognising Aete's cry above the mountain cliffs long after many hours had passed, the sound of it almost resonating as her mistress' call.

Ahina took her last breath and followed her home.

* * *

The Tuareg took Hinane's body back to the Ahaggar, slowly progressing through the deserts without any further incident or attack. All the while when travelling, listening to the desert winds singing upon the dunes with Hinane's soothing voice:

'Once I walked the phenomenal world of the physical, and now I walk the greater world of the spiritual, represented in the legend that would live through you, my blue people of the desert, the Tuareg. If my physical death was the end, my accomplishments were meaningless. I therefore command you to remember and celebrate my name, and remember the strength I brought.

Remember my gifts to you, the courage in your hearts, the power of dignity and unity, and always remember the eternity of your souls.

They preserved Hinane's corpse in a tomb in Abalessa, dressed as a beloved and true queen in blue veils, satin tunics and her most treasured jewellery.

At her burial ceremony Amezwar prayed, 'Remember her before the silver

cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken, before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from. Remember her as her spirit returns to the gods who gave it.'

* * *

AFTERWORD

This story is partly based on the legend of Tin Hinan, therefore characters, events and creative elements are pure fiction.

The following are based on the legend: Tin Hinan, her friend Takamat and how they arrived in the Hoggar, her teachings in poetry, the Tifinagh alphabet, her healing abilities, medicines and practises.

The legend tells that she was a fearless warrior and some Tuaregs today still refer to her as an African Amazon queen who founded and united the Tuareg, establishing a vast kingdom around the Hoggar mountains.

Tuareg traders and warriors established the five most important desert caravan trading routes, and built wealth and riches throughout the centuries.

Tin Hinan had a daughter Kella from who descended the secondary tribe of Ihdanaren the Kel Rela. From Takamat, and her two daughters, descended the tribes of Dag Rali and Ait Loaien.

Tin Hinan gave the oasis of Silet and Ennided to the two daughters of Takamat to whose descendants they still belong to this day.

But no records were found that accounted for why she took the journey, where she was born, who were her parents, why she arrived there... Why was she so far away from her original tribe, who was her husband, or her lovers. Also not recorded, was how she died, therefore all references to these contained in the book are fiction.

As historically recorded, the invasion of the Vandals into North Africa is based on facts. Ghana empire becoming a mighty force, trading with gold is fact, and all settings and events are all elements that played an important role during the time of Tin Hinan, which were used to give flavour to the story.

Sadly and regretfully, as the Tuareg and Amazigh of that time were no record keepers like the Romans were, no proper and true recordings are available.

After the time of Hinane's death as depicted here, the Vandals controlled North Africa by enforcing a policy of strict separation and suppressing the local Romano-African population. As Arian heresy, they continued to persecute the Catholic faithful.

In 455AD, a year after Tin Hinan's death, Geiseric captured Rome and sacked it for two weeks. The sack of 455AD was the second of three barbarian sacks of Rome. Although history remembers the Vandal sack of Rome as extremely brutal, the Vandals did not cause great destruction in the city. They did, however, looted great amounts of treasure, taking gold, silver and many other things of value, and destroyed objects of cultural significance (hence the modern term vandalism).

In 468AD, Geiseric's kingdom was the target of the last concerted effort by the two halves of the Roman Empire which wished to subdue the Vandals and end their pirate raids. Geiseric, against long odds, defeated the attacking Eastern Roman fleet.

In 474AD, Geiseric made peace with the Eastern Roman Empire. In 476AD, when the Roman Empire had finally fallen, it became a remnant of the Empire.

In 476AD Geiseric was able to conclude a perpetual peace with Constantinople. Relations between the two states assumed a veneer of normality. Finally, on 25 January, 477AD, Geiseric died at Carthage.

Although the Vandals had fended off attacks from the Romans and established hegemony over the islands of the western Mediterranean, they were less successful in their conflict with the Berbers.

In the period 496AD to 530AD the Vandal state fell into decline, abandoning most of the interior territories to the Mauri and other Berber tribes of the desert.

In 500AD the empire of Ghana became the most important power in West Africa through gold trade.

In 533AD the Byzantine Empire drove the rest of the Vandals from North Africa. Emperor Justinian, using a Vandal dynastic dispute as pretext, sent an army under the great general Belisarius to recover Africa. In a short campaign, Belisarius defeated the Vandals, entered Carthage in triumph and succeeded in re-establishing Roman rule over the province.

In 674AD to 700AD Muslim Arabs drove out the Byzantines and conquered North Africa, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya.

Conversion to Islam began and the Tuareg converted under much duress,

and finally submitted to this religion.

In 1925AD, in Abalessa near Adrar of the Ifoghas, the ancient capital of the Ahaggar or Hoggar region of Algeria, archaeologists discovered a well-preserved female skeleton in a burial site, possibly a dwelling converted to a tomb, dated to the second half of the fifth century (450AD).

The tomb was opened by Byron Khun de Prorok with support from the French army, but archaeologists made a more thorough investigation in 1933AD.

Excavations revealed the skeleton of an unusually tall woman about forty years old, her skull was closely related to the Pharaonic type and she was deformed in her lumbar and sacral areas. It was decided and confirmed that the skeleton belonged to the famous Tuareg African Amazon Queen Tin Hinan.

She was stretched out on a bed of sculptured wood, her head facing east, her arms bent over her chest with heavy leather armour and jewellery. A string of antimony beads around her left ankle, and precious pearls covered her breasts.

On her right forearm she wore seven silver bracelets, and on her left, seven gold bracelets. Another silver bracelet and a gold ring were placed with the body. Remains of a complex piecework necklace of gold and pearls were also present.

A glass goblet, dates and fruits in baskets had been placed next to her together with a statue of a woman in Aurignacian style, and other pottery decorating the surrounds of her bed.

Along with her in the tomb they found a Roman cup and a wooden cup and piece of gold foil which bore the imprint of a Roman coin akin of Constantine I issued between 308AD and 324AD.

The tomb wall was inscribed with the Tifinagh alphabet. With her tomb eleven other burial places were also found. Takamat, Tin Hinan's personal servant and friend, seemed to have been buried next to Tin Hinan.

It is impressive that the tomb of Tin Hinan was never plundered, thereby illustrating how enormously this queen was adored by the Tuareg.

Between 1916AD and 1917AD the Tuareg rebellion was a reaction to French colonialism. Between 1961AD and 1964AD it was a reaction to the Mali government land reforms infringing upon traditional Tuareg areas.

Between 1990AD and 1995AD the Tuareg in Niger sought autonomy from the government, ending in a peace deal which promised them a bigger share of the region's mineral wealth.

In 2009AD, there were more than two million Tuareg kept divided between the political borders of Algeria, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Libya, suffering from the loss of historical capacity and position. They were dismantled by French colonialism, and perpetuated since by voracious military regimes in the name of exclusivist and smothering notions of nation-state.

This partition has provoked the falling apart of families and the weakening of Tuareg society and culture. They are people struggling to re-invent a better future, experiencing marginalisation and denials of their social, political, and cultural rights in all these nation states.

To this day the Tuareg people refer to Tin Hinan as the 'Mother of Us All' and her tomb is one of the main tourist attractions in southern Algeria. Her corpse is in the National Museum of Bardo in Algiers.

The Tin Hinan Festival is held in her honour in the oasis city of Tamanrasset in southern Algeria every year in February. The organisers of the event, Ahaggar's Friends Association, have confirmed that as many as twenty-six African countries, along with Arab and European countries feature in the festivals. The Ahaggar's Friends Association, said the festivals highlight the Tuareg culture while at the same time focusing on women, in honour of Tin Hinan.

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This book contains many extracts from historical and encyclopaedia pages posted freely and innumerable on the internet and can therefore be construed as common knowledge.

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As far as possible, listed below, are all sources used in this work of fiction. Should any entity feel they did not receive proper citation, please feel free to contact rizel.delano@gmail.com so it can be added.

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CONTACT THE AUTHOR

Rizél DeLano

www.rizeldelano.com