

~ The Falcon and the Handmaiden ~

by Lucien St Clare

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Synopsis

This story is very roughly based on Tomyris (Tiirmirise) Queen of the Massagetae as recorded by Herodotus the Historian in the Histories. The Amazons of legend were supposedly descended from the Scythians and their Massagetae cousins. This story is a blend of fact, legend, fiction and in some places pure fantasy. I have taken some liberties with the customs of the Massagetae. Some I made up and some are taken from Nigeria and Dahomey or Cameroon as it is now known was an African Empire. The Kings of Dahomey maintained an elite bodyguard which was exclusively comprised of women. These female warriors were the only ones the Kings trusted to protect him and his family in the Palace. Palace politics was what actually decided the succession and such women were therefore held in the highest esteem since they effectively decided who would be king.

Chapter 1

Enter the Falcon

"They have no right breast, for while they are yet babies their mothers make red-hot a bronze instrument constructed for this very purpose and apply it to the right breast and cauterize it, so that its growth is arrested and all its strength and bulk are diverted to the right shoulder and right arm."

Hippocrates

"I am Tiirmirise of the tribe of the Massagetae from the plains of Sarmatia and these were the words of Hippocrates the Greek. It is true that some of the people who dwelt on the plains who were descended from a warrior race whose name has been lost in antiquity. Some say we are descended from Scythians, a horse riding people who had mated with the Amazons of Dahomey a fierce warrior race of women.

It is also true that the Sarmatians fight and live on horseback and every Sarmatian can ride before they can walk. However it is not true that "No girl shall wed till she has killed a man in battle."

That is a romantic notion and were it true our tribe would not only be diminished in number but breed a race of killers and murderers with little appreciation for the fine arts, music, engineering, working the land and all the other things we Sarmatians are famous for.

The people of the plains are generally a peaceful people, we believe we are the guardians of nature. We worship the one God who is neither male nor female but we do not as the Hellenes claim sacrifice humans, well except in special circumstances.

We are often confused with the flaxen haired pagan Sauromatians of the Steppes. We are not of the Steppes but from the bowels of Africa itself. We are not of the Beriberi (those of the Middle East the Dominion called the Arabs) nor the Hellenes (Those of the West Known by the Dominion as the Greeks) although we are related to them, but from the most ancient of races.

Our skin is black like ebony, smooth, polished and shiny, our hair is not like the tight soft and curly kind like our brothers and sisters in the West of Africa but neither is it as straight as that of our cousins in the East of Africa. We are more bulky and more muscled than our cousins in the North. Fleet of foot and Quick of mind.

We are the first-born. It is from us that all the other races are descended. The legends say that after we were driven from the sight of God for our sins, we moved Northwards to the Northern parts of Africa away from the Jungles and Long wide Racing rivers with their thunderous water falls to the more moderate climes.

Hot Summers, Mild Winters, seasons changed as we settled into the land and owned it. At first our people were of one tribe the Massagetae but as we intermarried with the other people on the plains around us we began to see ourselves as Sarmatian."

Tiirmirise stopped dictating to golden haired youth who sat watching her with adoring eyes and turned on her couch. The couch was a gift from one of her beloved subjects. It was made of wood, cushioned with feathers, covered with kid hide and treated with perfumes and oils. Tiirmirise felt her time was near and she should write her story to leave it for posterity to her people. She smiled at the young one who took down the tale, fascinated enraptured and more than a little excited.

She spat blood into a bowl and a slave wiped the spittle from her face with a wet cloth. Her right arm was now paralysed from a stroke, old age was doing what her enemies could not.

"In my youth my fondest wish was to become a warrior. I longed for Iye - glory. Only a warrior has status amongst the Massagetae because a warrior protects the people from harm and those who would do them harm. A warrior's name is remembered long after their footsteps have faded from the earth.

My father however had other ideas about attaining status and glory. I joined the family business with him and my brother. We sold horses and we were good at it too.

Father saw nothing wrong being a merchant and paying obeisance to a greedy lord. Often though we were richer than our masters and we were obliged to hide our wealth for fear they would kill us and take it all away. Our overlord, Magba the great or in our language Magba Massinassa (Massinassa meaning Great and Magba meaning receiver) was an ambitious warlord with an over inflated sense of self worth. The only thing great about him was his girth.

He was greedy, selfish and murderous. It was because of his wicked ways that I was sacrificed for my family's protection. It was because of him that my father Jbenga now contracted a marriage with Qastursh the King of Sarmatia.

Now I had to put away my weapons and don silks and transparent linens obtained from far off lands. Now I had to put my lover aside and go from being the pampered daughter of a rich merchant to being one of many wives to Qastursh King of Sarmatia and ruler of the plains. However he was not King of the Massagetae.

That distinction belonged to my Uncle Abike, but only by virtue of the fact that he was the most highly ranked Massagetae Noble in Sarmatia. My marriage to Qastursh would make me the highest ranking Massagetae noble in the land and therefore leader of the Massagetae people an honour Abike was quite happy to relinquish.

As I moved morosely to my destiny at the great Palace at Ado, the first Capital city of Sarmatia, the second capital city was Ekiti. King Qastursh was also known as the King of two cities since the two largest warring tribes in Sarmatia the Massagetae and the Sarmatiae could not decide on which should be the capital.

The great Palace at Ado was built for beauty the name of the builder forgotten in legend. It was not meant to be a defensive structure. Consequently there were statues everywhere of ebony bronze or white marble, smooth and polished. There were fountains gold and silver, water falls and little pools teeming with fish of different colours, shapes and sizes. Everywhere there were beautiful birds like peacocks who came and went as they chose, there were even a few large female panthers and leopards, old yet tame.

I never went near them though others did. Once a wild animal always a wild animal. One of the King's wives was especially fond of a rather large cobra which she kept entwined about her person. As she was one of the few women to have borne Qastursh a child she was generally feared for her magic's.

Helle was a frightening woman. She was also beautiful and surprisingly overtly feminine unlike the androgynous women who had given Qastursh children. Her skin was pasty white, like dough, flawless and perfect, her eyes were yellow and slitty and dare I say it distinctly reptilian.

I reckon she either hypnotised the King into sleeping with her or else threatened him with her pet cobra. Everyone paid her a lot of respect and kept well clear of her. All that hissing and lip flicking with her tongue was extremely unsettling. When she bent her head and licked my face I knew the urge to urinate on the spot. I was that terrified.

As we spoke she had managed to join the two of us together so that her cobra entwined its sinuous coils around us, her pupils dilated from whatever drug she was taking her head as bald as the eunuchs. It was not the woman who frightened me it was the bloody snake undulating as though about to strike at any moment. I stood stock still, the warm slithering creature sending chills down my spine as its scales brushed my skin.

"You should not fear Asssrel, he isss fairly harmless. You should however be more afraid of his little brotherssss." She lifted her other arm around which was curled a bright yellow evil looking snake which hissed at Asrel who quickly unwound his coils and fled.

Helle made a funny sibilant sound which I can only assume passed for laughter "A bite from my little ray of sunshine here can kill you here and now. Before anyone got to you. I shuddered as she kissed her little ray of sunshine and took a large stride as far away as I could. I did not normally show fear and prided myself on always being able to keep my composure but venomous snakes? I wasn't hanging around for that.

She continued speaking to me whilst petting the wretched creature.

"I off course am immune having spent my life ingesting venom. It gives me...." She sighed and inhaled deeply as though enjoying a sexual moment " A lovely feeling."

In that instance I realised she was getting off on my fear. I took my leave and moved away as sedately as I could.

Our food was prepared carefully each woman could have whatever she desired, any type of food from her homeland and there were many types of rich food, and sweetmeats served. Every kind of intoxicating drink and herbs. Some of the herbs were smoked, some were ground into a powder and inhaled. Whichever process one used the effect was a soporific feeling of general well being and a lethargy that made the days shorter because in the Harem boredom was your greatest enemy. It was truly a haven of luxury and decadence. Most of the women thought nothing of walking around naked.

They would if they were a concubine wear rings in their ears and nose and in the nipples or silver bars depending on how valued they were. Only a wife of a Massagetae warrior could wear gold rings or piercings. Anyone who touched such a person without their permission was subject to instant execution. Qastursh was not Massagetae so I was not opportuned to wear gold piercings but only silver ones. A fact my mother lamented. The Massagetae were extremely protective of their wives and it was a law that was rigidly enforced on the plains.

In the harem many women had painted faces, Kohl, antimony or rouge or some other cosmetic or heady perfume. Their limbs were oiled and arranged to be displayed in the best possible way to catch not only the eunuchs attention but that of each other, since the women took lovers amongst themselves.

A practice the Eunuchs tried to discourage for obvious reasons by sowing discord and jealousy amongst such lovers. Belly rings, anklets bracelets and necklaces might be the only other adornment such a woman wore. Others were more modest and I use modest in the loosest possible term.

Everyone went about in transparent clothing of linen or silk all of which was too show off their beauty in every possible way. They were possibly the most narcissistic bunch of people you would ever have a mind to meet. By the time I had been there a week the whole novelty wore off

and I was jaded at fifteen.

The Eunuchs provided sexual services to the King's wives in orgies that were openly held in the harem every night. The eunuchs were only deprived of their ability to father children but not to perform. Naturally the eunuchs had a job where they could eat, smoke, drink and fuck as many beautiful women as they wished and were therefore often loathed to change the status quo.

The only condition was that a King's wife was a virgin when she first arrived so he could be sure the heir to the throne was of the blood and not some mongrel by blow. Even amongst the women they had many lovers and toys all to amuse themselves. The more intellectually minded ones might deign to listen to music or poetry or study books.

In this type of scenario of course there was a lot of intrigue and plotting. The mother of the heir was the most powerful woman in the harem. The only other woman as powerful was the Ada. The King's eldest daughter. At the time I ascended the throne her name was Olayrae. It had not always been so. A lot of children died mysterious deaths, a lot of people were poisoned or beheaded the victim of some nefarious plot.

In all his life despite the almost 300 women he had in his harem Qastursh had fathered only 5 surviving daughters on almost 300 women. Further it was rumoured there was another harem.

An even larger harem, one where Qastursh went into dressed as a woman. Our great king as I was to later discover preferred men. Tall, strong, bulky well built men with rippling biceps and toned bodies. Still I was presented to Qastursh with the 9 other virgins, 10 virgins a year were presented to the King for every year since he ascended the throne.

I still remembered that day like it was yesterday. Everyone was nervous. We had all heard tales of the mighty Qastursh and his mighty sword (I believe the Eunuchs sought to frighten us) none of us had yet become aware of his sexual peccadilloes.

I had expected the king to be like my father or brother. Tall, strong, well muscled despite doing merchants work. It was therefore with great trepidation that I stood in the great hall waiting anxiously for the king.

He was nothing like I imagined. The best word to describe him would be interesting. He was yet in the prime of life yet he was very fat and womanly. His man breasts were bigger than my girlie ones. He had a bulging stomach which wobbled in different rolls and was as bald as you like with a great shiny pate which shone in the glow of the candlelight.

His eyes were painted with kohl his cheeks with antimony and he wore the bored expression of a whore who realises she is not going to get what she wants. He also smoked a big water pipe. Its heady fumes filled the air as did the heavy scent of perfumes which made me nauseous. Behind him sat many arrogant bored looking young men wearing short kilted linen cloths like the Gypsos.

The cloths were transparent and the whole world could see their male organs many of which

were pierced with silver rings or silver bars . Their bodies were painted with henna or oiled, bodies lean and muscled, bronzed from the sun. Those that were slaves had their nipples pierced. It was the custom in Sarmatia to pierce the nipples of a body slave be he male or female and adorn them with bronze rings. Gold and silver rings were for Massagetae and Sarmatian citizens.

I had seen naked men before, After all as the daughter of a merchant I had often gone to the slave markets with my father and brother and naturally sometimes in the fields where I practiced the men exercised naked especially the Hellenes. However I had never seen so many naked men just lounging around posing, thrusting out their genitalia without a care in the world.

The King's Prime Vizier received us, presented us and allocated each a day and a time when he would visit us. The Midwives had made their calculations as to when we would be the most fertile. We were each allocated 3 days after which his majesty would choose at his leisure, when he would visit us and when he would not.

Before I entered the Harem I cut my hair to symbolise my crossing the threshold to becoming a woman. It would have been done when I was eighteen, taking a wife or husband or after making a kill in battle if I was under sixteen which ever event came earlier.

In the harem I continued to wear my leather trousers and a fitted vest tunic which stopped at just below my waist and showed off my biceps and proudly barred my scarred breast.

When I first arrived at the harem all the women stared at me. Some giggled quietly others stared in shock and others laughed openly and yet many others looked at me with naked lust.

Most of the Eunuchs hissed and avoided me only except one, an old man and low ranking vizier with whom I got on extremely well with. His name was Vayanes.

Vayanes seemed to have a fixation with having a Sarmatian or Massagetae born and bred of the plains on the throne. He was obsessed with it. I am ashamed to say I used his obsession to further my own ambitious ends. In truth what matter where a person is born or who sired them, the important thing is what manner of person they are.

If Qastursh had married a Massagetae wife older than me, She would have taken the role of Massagetae Queen and I would have been nothing more than just another Massagetae Princess.

As a Massagetae Princess I could have whiled away my time in the soporific splendours of Palace life and drowned myself in hedonistic pleasures. However I was a Massagetae Queen and my duties to my tribe fell on my shoulders so that the council of Massagetae elders insisted I continue with my training as a Massagetae aristocrat.

Vayanes arranged for me to have fitness training in the morning before the rising of the dawn. This was followed by sword play, archery lessons and other weapons used by the people of the plains. I trained with the children of other Massagetae nobles and they gave me no quarter.

In the afternoon after a light lunch and a light nap I studied military treatise, Legal writings, diplomatic scrolls which had treaties and writings on economics, engineering and trade. My

uncle Abike continued to attend the chamber of Viziers till I was old enough to represent Massagetae interests in the chamber of viziers. I had to learn the different modes of address and know them well so that I did not offend.

Emperors and Empresses were addressed as "Your Imperial Majesty", Kings and Queens were addressed as "Your Majesty" Princes & Princesses as "Your Royal Highness", Regents as "Your Highness" Grand Viziers, Governors and Prime Viziers as "Your excellency", Viziers as "Your Honour" and in the Theocracy, Primates and High Priestesses as "Your Grace", Priests and Priestesses as "Honoured Mother" or "Honoured Father".

In the evenings I would relax by going to the Hammam and bathing. Whilst listening to music my body slave, Soraya, a Parthian, would give me the most delicious massage to ease aching muscles that always ended with a little sex play. Well I am not exactly a temple maiden and besides it was fun.

I loved the Hammam in the evening when it was quiet and just after it had been cleaned and the waters were changed. The Hammam consisted of a dry steam room where you sat and sweated then you went into the humid steam room, here soaped and watered, a slave scrubbed your skin till it was glistening and shining.

This was followed by swim in the warm water pool which after drying off you were oiled and massaged. Alternatively you could jump into the cold water pool but I usually did that in the morning to wake myself up before my exercise regimen. I preferred to laze in the warm water, listening to music having sex with the bath attendants and eating fresh fruit.

I steered well away from the eunuchs and the King's wives I wanted no part in their intrigues. Many women died in the Harem under mysterious circumstances and it was not my destiny to become one of them.

At night I slept with one eye open. Assassination attempts were not uncommon. I myself had been assaulted several times and oftentimes the fact that I was a light sleeper saved my life.

I remained like so in the Harem until I reached my majority and was deemed of age to become a wife to the King. A day before I was to visit the King, the Head Eunuch, Khalifar brought a Midwife to come and examine me to make sure that my hymen was in tact and I was still a virgin.

I felt embarrassed yet she continued to educate me and explain the workings of my body in a way no woman had even my mother. It is always assumed that a woman will explain these things to her daughter but I believe women tend to be sufficiently vague about such things when they have to explain them to their own children.

At least my mother was sufficiently vague. The midwife impersonal yet calm and very frank about the whole subject made it sound like we were discussing nothing more consequential than the sale of a bale of cloth. Her next words however shocked me although I did try to hide it unsuccessfully.

"It is not enough to close your eyes and lie with your legs spread hoping for the best. You will be the one to take the lead and you must learn to master him in the bedroom if you are to achieve all that you wish."

I was absolutely terrified of what to do. I had no strategy, no words to say to the king, no plan of action. It never occurred to me to fear my first time of being with a man because I had always planned to marry a woman according to the customs of our people.

My father had sent me a bottle of wine, it was no bottle of wine from Sarmatia but a Persian brew. A very strong brew, it fairly burned the throat and made the eyes to pass out water. I was not sure whether he meant me to drink it and pass out or whether I was to use it to incapacitate the King.

My mother's present was curious but now I think about it wise in the extreme and extremely cunning. She sent me a present to give to the King. I was not to open it but merely to give it to him and tell him it was from me. The present was a huge painting of a very muscular aroused male."

Nine months after her visit to the King's bed, Tiirmirise gave birth to her first child the crown prince and heir to the throne Spargapises and all Sarmatia rejoiced. The young man inherited his mother's good looks and his father's temperament despite this he was his mothers pride and joy. Qastursh surprised his people when he disbanded his harem of women except for the five who had borne him children.

Tiirmirise could deal with his male favourites, ultimately they were no competition but she would not tolerate a female rival who might bear the king a son and thus be a threat to her own son, not because she coveted the throne but because such a person would inevitably plot to remove him from his position as heir and the only way to do that was to kill him.

The intrigue at court produced its first high profile casualty since the birth of the crown prince and the victim was none other than Perquites. The King's one time lover and Prime vizier of Ado, suspicion immediately fell on the queen and she was summoned to the King's private chambers.

"Did you kill him?" Qastursh enquired in his refined high pitched nasal whine. Tiirmirise laughed "Hardly, Perquites was an arrogant young fool but I did not kill him. I had no need to. The two people who hold your ear are myself and Perquites if anything I would be afraid someone would try to kill me."

The moment she said the words she wished she could have taken them back for she realised she had put herself in danger by admitting to have any influence over the king. Qastursh dismissed

her angrily and she bowed and left. She was not surprised when she received a message via one of the eunuchs.

"Lady I have a message for you."

"Speak" She commanded imperiously

"I come from one who wishes to remain hidden that he will support you if you take the throne."

Tiirmirise laughed "When will people learn that I will never betray Qastursh. Tell your master I say this. If you wish to kill the king you will have to kill me first for I will never betray my husband never."

"The people love you. You could take the throne and no one would think badly of you."

"Were I to take the throne they would kill me and use my son as a figurehead to rule and kill him later when he had served their purpose. Besides for all his faults I like Qastursh he has become a dear friend and I would never betray him."

As she spoke she knew it to be the truth. Senates another of Qastursh favourites had been behind that particular plot. Qastursh had a spy in her chambers who reported back everything she did to the king including that particular conversation to the king.

As the number of Viziers who died from poisonings, stabbings and stray arrows increased Tiirmirise had taken to wearing her leather armour and a dress sword or dagger. She had food tasters whom she lost at least once a month.

On the advice of her father and Vayanes she increased security around herself and Spargapises introducing the Massagetae warriors into the palace to form her own personal bodyguard. She had grown up with many of them and she knew she could trust them.

When Qastursh summoned her to his chambers she was surprised for they rarely spoke. Qastursh had returned to his male lovers and she amused herself with body slaves either purchased from the Bazaar or the bath attendants like Soraya. She idly wondered which diabolical coup plot she was about to be accused of conspiring in.

There were always whispers of intrigue and rumours of plots and intricate schemes, viziers, governors, generals every one was at it. Ado was a hot bed of political intrigue.

"My love, you come to my bedchamber clad for battle. Are you planning on killing someone?" Qastursh looked worried as he regarded his fierce looking queen.

Tiirmirise did not answer the question. She'd been accused of treason numerous times to mention already, by Ninyas, Qastursh brother, Qastursh himself and other members of the political elite. She'd been under house arrest, imprisoned and even sentenced to death twice only to be rescued at the last moment.

She did not trust her husband and she trusted her own tongue even less. Consequently she had become a woman of few words.

Suddenly he burst into tears. Tiirmirise was not impressed and sat watching him stony faced.

"I don't know who to trust. There is another hideous plot afoot." His many chins quivered as he sniffed and wiped his nose with silk cloth. A habit he had picked up from the Oriental Merchants who traded in silks.

"The Viziers and Governors they mean to murder me. I must send them away. I must send them all away." He started to sob and snuffle once more. "I had a dream" he sobbed "Last night I had a terrible, terrible dream."

"Oh it was awful" He wailed.

Tiirmirise flinched He'd been having the same dream for many a night now. Almost two new moons in fact.

"I dreamt I sent you and our Spargapises away and a man I loved he killed me in a most painful manner."

She waited for him to compose himself before saying quietly. "You never told me that before you always said I left you."

"I lied." he said dismissively waving the snotty silk rag he'd just used to wipe his nose.

"What shall I do?"

Tiirmirise shrugged "What you normally do. Execute the Prime Vizier and other random aristocrats until everyone is too scared blink."

"What if I execute the wrong people?"

"Well that has never bothered you before." She said dryly "Why only last month you had my head in a noose when three days before that I had just rescued you from an assassination attempt during a royal hunt."

"You are being deliberately obstructive." He fanned himself.

"Well I do have an idea but you will have to give me your royal Imperium and also get the viziers in the High council to consent."

"It is almost impossible to get that bunch of bickering old men to agree to anything." He said glumly

"Well intrigue is your arena. I am not a politician."

The sun has started its journey across the darkening sky, the hour is late, the day just ending. I sip from an expensive goblet of wine and ponder my fate as I stare at the parchment under my feathered quill. How do I pen my thoughts into words that you can understand? Even I find it hard to believe and do I not call the experiences my own.

My name is Aeslynn Votigernsdottir and I come from the frozen wastes of the North, a land which the Sarmatians call the land of the Angles. The winters are long and cold and the days are short. Sunlight is rare during winter and many are drawn to suicide by a lack of sunlight others take herbs to combat the black depression it brings on.

In the Summer our days are so long that the sun begins to set at midnight and night can sometimes last only a few hours. The beauty of the Aurora borealis can only be seen in our lands and our people believe it is a time when the gods would meet on earth.

I am a princess though I would not say that we were as rich as some of the royal families I have seen in my travels. I am the only daughter of the High Thane Votigern Redbeard.

In our country I was known as Aeslynn the fair and I had an elder brother called Leif. My father Votigern Votigernson was a raider by trade and I grew up in his Long hall. My mother was the daughter of the middle Eastern prince Median and her name was Nashara.

Where most in my country were red haired and brown eyed my mother was dark and exotic with black wavy hair and violet eyes. I inherited my blue eyes from her but my flaxen hair of my father. Where mine was golden like summer corn my brother Leif's was white like snow but as he grew older his hair turned red like my father's beard.

My mother was very different from the other women. She was not into agriculture and animal husbandry but more into the healing arts. She taught me the use of herbs and plants. How to set bone, manipulate muscular flesh and sew cuts, clean wounds and birth babies. Her final gift to me before she was taken away in tragedy was a silver falcon with its wings outstretched.

"Long ago we lived in a beautiful land," She said and Leif and I loved to hear that story. It was the usual myth of a land overflowing with milk and honey. "...we were banished but the keeper of the silver Falcon was the Handmaiden, who would one day come and tame the Falcon and bring peace to the people of the Plains."

Naturally I thought my mother quite crazy. There were no plains in the lands of the Angles. Mountains? Yes. Rivers and waterways? Yes but plains? I did not interrupt for I loved to hear the story of the very old prophecy about the ancient bird made from metal that fell from the skies.

I said she was taken away from us in tragedy. It was the day of my fourteenth birthday when raiders came and ambushed us. My cousin Eriksson and my brother Leif managed to escape. My father was out hunting when they came.

They came in black boats, yellow men with black hair and squat stocky figures. They looted and burnt and pillaged. My mother Soraya died defending me but to no avail for they carried me off into slavery. My last view of my homeland was of my mother Soraya lying on the ground her head split by an Axe.

They did not rape me because they were slavers and fourteen year old virgins brought premium prices so I was treated better than others. Many died on the crossing their bodies were tossed off the ship like so much rubbish. When we arrived in the slave market I was sold into a house of ill repute.

However I tended the brothel owner's gout for the promise that he would not use me in the brothel. I was lucky he was an honourable old man and kept his word. He kept me there for several years and was unfailingly kind to me. However when he died his niece inherited his estate under Gypitian law and she was off genteel breeding. She did not want to run a brothel and broke up that business.

Once again I was to be sold. This time for a lot of money to a fat twisted brothel keeper who would use me sorely. He did not take me himself instead he sent me to service my first customer a Massagetae of the plains and I was terrified.

You must understand I had never seen one such as him before. His skin was as black as ebony and his head was bald as you like. I who was used to men of fair skin, with long hair and bearded faces had never seen a man with no hair. His skin was smooth and his body was lean and muscular with huge biceps and chest muscles. His hands looked large enough to crush my skull between them and yet he too was a kind master. He did not hurt me and it could have been much worse.

When I turned nineteen he arranged that I be brought to his country estate to live as his slave. As one of many body slaves and bath attendants in Sarmatia my duties were light and I resolved to try to find a way to escape. I had seen what happened to those who failed. They had their legs or jaws broken by the same master I had considered to be gentle. However thoughts of escape soon fled from my mind when I discovered I was pregnant.

My master no longer came as often to visit me instead he amused himself with the others in his harem and I settled into looking after myself and my baby. I could no longer take those risks which I normally would. I had been with my master a year when I gave birth to my beautiful daughter Nitocris. She was like the daughter of the sun god Apollo.

Her hair was as black as midnight, and in her I could see my mother. She inherited neither her father's ebony skin nor my fair white one but a swarthy caramel mixture of us both. Her eyes were brown like her father's though but her father allowed me to name her and I called her Nitocris which in the language of the Angles meant "Mother returns".

I nursed her for a year. I loved to hear the sound of mama from her lips and kissed her when she fell from her unsteady legs. I thanked the God I was there to see her first smile, her first baby

steps. Her father doted on her and for awhile I actually thought everything would be alright.

I would not say I had any actual relationship with him. I was never even told his given name and at all times I had to call him Master.

The only use he required of me was bed play and that was only at night. The rest of the day I worked with the embroiders or those who sew cloths. I was never given anything too strenuous because I was pregnant. Nor was I allowed to work with the healers in case I put the child in danger.

I had learnt to speak Massagetae because that was the language spoken on the estate and I also learned a smattering of Sarmatian which I picked up when we went to a far flung bazaar or medina. Although the two languages were similar one was a dialect of the other.

It therefore came as a shock to me when my master, told me he would be selling me. He had acquired a Massagetae wife and she would not tolerate my presence in his house.

However what was to break my heart was that Nitocris would remain with him and I, a slave with no rights and not even considered human would be sold back into slavery. The Falcon my mother gave me I hung around her neck and entered a life of abject misery.

My Massagetae Master sold me to another merchant who sold me to brothel keeper in Gypsos and this time life was very different. However once more I thanked the gods I was sold to a well run establishment for rich and exclusive clientele and once more my Healing arts and skills kept me from being used as a courtesan.

Although at first I was schooled in the arts of a body slave and taught how to service both men and women. I learned how to arouse and titillate. How to adorn myself with perfumes and oils. How to dance, play the Sitar and make charming conversation. Which drugs were aphrodisiacs and which would increase sexual vigour.

The brothel keeper quickly decided I made more money for him as a physician for hire than as a courtesan. Also it was cheaper to use my services for his courtesans than to pay an outside physician.

Life held no meaning for me I simply wanted to survive. I needed to survive so that one day I could find my daughter. I had lost my home, my mother, my daughter even the name I was born with. I was no longer allowed to go by the name of Aeslynn my new master had given me the name Saronne in the language of the Gypsos it meant "Seducer" but in the language of the Massagetae it meant "Handmaiden."

Chapter 2

On the wings of the Falcon

Tiirmirise moved with a breathtaking ruthlessness that stunned the Sarmatian court. She called a

meeting and summoned back Qastursh's father's viziers. Men and Women loyal to the old king and his line. She then closed down his male harem, despite his protests.

She had to it was a viper's a nest of intrigue and plotting. She also dismissed his favourites and put in his more reliable ministers. At first things went well. The King and Queen worked well together and things seemed to improve.

They had a full harvest, the Bazaars and markets were bursting with goods, the number of beggars and vagabonds on the roads decreased because there was work to be had. Qastursh managed to negotiate for the oriental silk route to pass through a portion of Sarmatia. The Caravans were happy for this to happen because Sarmatia was a safe civilised country under the King's Peace.

In honour of Qastursh's birthday Tiirmirise presented him with a behemoth of a statue, one which dwarfed the Colossus at Rhodes. Twice as Large and Twice as wide. The Ivory and Gold Image was of a young obviously virile Qastursh. He loved it and showered her with wealth and power and with her success came Jealousy and envy.

In her twenty ninth year, Spargapises was fourteen and then the Nesians swooped down from the lush plains of the north. Big Yellow haired barbarians with long heavy Spears and bulging muscles. They ravaged the land striking terror into the Northern populace and disrupting the silk trade. The war was going badly and eventually Tiirmirise went to the front leaving Qastursh to do what he did best persuade the Viziers to release money to fund the war.

Tiirmirise was a natural war leader. She was trained by the Massagetae to fight from the day she could walk and had been fighting for her very life since she was sixteen from the day Qastursh had pissed himself when they had been the object of an assassination attempt by the Emperor of Sirahn.

Their private bedchambers invaded by assassins Tiirmirise had fought them off. There had been numerous little skirmishes with robbers and encounters with rogue elements on the borders of Sarmatia and she had won all of them.

This was the first time however that she would be organising a full blown battle with thousands of men involved. She had able generals to assist her, men and women more experienced than herself. She was not too proud to take their advice either.

Already the war was at a critical stage. The Nesians had swooped down from their ancestral home flooding the plains and looking for somewhere to settle.

They were tall black skinned warriors who would come at them running with long spears, naked painted men with yellow hair and flashing eyes. Their roaring war cries had terrified her armies who had already suffered several defeats and who now stood before her mired deep in uncertainty. It was why she had decided to go to the front herself. Well there was also the fact that one of the Sarmatians best generals, Adeinkes had been killed in battle by the barbarian horde.

They stood there before her trembling in a wave of icy terror. All except the 500 female Massagetae warriors. Their faces were stony their expressions grim. These were the best warriors in the land. They feared nothing and no one. Death in battle was a lovers fatal embrace they welcomed.

Tiirmirise surveyed her army from her black destrier Mordenes and took off her helmet so they could all see her. Criers relayed her message to those who could not hear all her words.

"Men of the Plains, I hear you ran from these yellow haired bastards like a slave runs from his master. No More! I hear you ran from their overgrown toothpicks in Panic and terror. I say No More!"

If you Men of Sarmatia, will not go forward and fight then we the women will. I have brought with me this day 500 Massagetae and they are all of them ready to die for their country, for their children, for their sisters, their brothers, for their mothers, their fathers, their wives, their lovers and their husbands.

If you Men of Sarmatia will not fight this band of slack jawed wild men, then we will. We will fight them and we will beat them. We will fight and fight until the last one of us falls in battle. We will be covered in glory as will you if you are with me. But if you run in shame, your disgrace will follow you even unto eternity. The choice is yours. Everlasting Shame or Eternal Glory. Now who is with me?"

She was answered with a resounding cheer. Her battle plan was simple. They charged the Nesians on their horses and suddenly wheeled around splitting the forces into two. One to the left and one to the right all day they repeated the same manoeuvre and peppered the Nesians with arrows as they retreated.

When they charged it was into the side of the horde. They never actually engaged their long lances en masse. Every so often though the steel lances pierced into unprotected flesh and when she decided the Nesian infantry was exhausted (the Nesians were not horse riders) She ordered the infantry to engage them with their short curving swords which they could use for both slashing and stabbing.

The Massagetae fought with a frightening military precision. The front line battled and when the unit leader called out the front line would fall to the back to rest and the next row of women rested, refreshed and ready would step in to take their place.

The Nesians driven away from the silk route Tiirmirise refused to allow her army to give chase and risk leaving the route vulnerable. At night they built a temporary wooden forte. It would form the base of her military operations till she could secure the silk route and drive the Nesians back to wherever it was they came from.

She sent a message of her success back to Qastursh and there was rejoicing in the Capital city of Ado. The Nesians did not return the next day but Tiirmirise was reluctant to remain on the field of battle for long. The risk of disease was high so after burning and burying the bodies of the fallen they moved forward onto the open Savannah plains.

The open plains stretched on. There was nowhere for an ambush to be laid and they could easily sight any troop movements on the horizon nevertheless they were in a state of war so she kept them all in strict battle ready formation. As they travelled through, the geography of the land began to change. Even the battle weary Tiirmirise took time to appreciate the gentle rolling hills and the sheer beauty of the land. The harvest had been collected so there was ample food to feed her band of 5000.

Although that task of itself had been a logistics nightmare. Nnandi, a Massagetae unit leader was hardworking, patient and determined. She always seemed to find a way to solve the feeding, training, clothing and medical needs of 5000 adults. The toughest part of the campaign apart from logistics was security.

The Nesian army were not stupid and she already had to execute several of their spies and scouts who had ventured into their camp. In the end she ordered the camp followers, prostitutes, wives & lovers to either join the army or get lost. If a woman was not willing to fight she was sent away. If she stayed she trained with the Massagetae whose ranks swelled to almost 1000.

The Massagetae were Tiirmirise's personal bodyguard made up of men and women (but mostly women) dressed in black, so that when they bled no one was aware of it thus ensuring they could fight till the bitter end. (It also made for high casualties since it was difficult to discover entrance and exit wounds.)

The Sarmatian army had red cloaks and the royal family wore purple. Apart from acting as her bodyguard they also acted as spies and assassins. Their main strengths were speed, stealth, agility and incredible skill with the bow and arrow on horseback.

On the battlefield they were assassins. Originally their main role was to seek out the enemy general, or whoever was inspiring the enemy army to fight well and exterminate him or her. However as she came to rely on them in her battles and their numbers increased they evolved into a very effective army force with different specialists.

One of their specialist areas was archery. They used composite bows, Unlike the long bows the Sarmatian archers used which could travel vast distances and required strength and stable ground, the composite bow was not as powerful as the long bow the men used but as a smaller bow which did not require a lot of strength to use and was invariably more accurate but over a shorter distance.

They also used throwing knives and were trained in hand to hand combat techniques obtained via their trade relationship with the oriental caravans. The Massagetae were just as deadly with a sword blade as they were with a knitting needle or a fan. Sophisticated killers, with frightening discipline and ruthless self control.

They had been travelling the country side for weeks. Tiirmirise was beginning to get worried for despite the best efforts of Qastursh the Viziers were being extremely economical with the treasury's gold. They had to be since most of the treasury's gold came from taxes and not

conquest. If taxes were too high it could damage the economy and the people would revolt. She was therefore almost relieved when they sighted the Nesians who had the high ground.

The Nesians were a race of wandering nomads who whenever they perceived there was a weakness on the throne of Sarmatia or any other nearby countries decided to invade. She was not surprised by this invasion. Everyone supposed Qastursh to be a weak king and with the re-introduction of his favourites at court, position and power was handed to young inexperienced pretty boys whose only skill as far as she could tell could be bought in any insalubrious neighbourhood in the city for a few coins.

The Nesian barbarians had simply acted on assumptions that everyone else made. She knew it was important to crush them and put the fear of God into her surrounding neighbours so they did not take liberties. Tiirmirise swore when she realised the Nesians had the high ground.

She was not prepared to lose her army on a suicidal uphill charge. Further this Nesian army outnumbered them 3 to 1. On the positive side her army had its first taste of success under her leadership so she knew they would be in a much better frame of mind than their earlier battles under previous generals.

Tiirmirise was in her command tent expecting a report from one of the unit leaders sent out to survey the land. Candace a slim, wiry, agile, woman with a talent for being able to contort her body into small spaces. Silent as a snake and just as deadly her main role was gathering intelligence. She could sleep in trees, on her feet, slip in and out of places unnoticed and often did.

Tiirmirise was poring over the battle maps with the other commanders, lieutenants and unit leaders of the Massagetae when Candace slipped in unseen and unannounced to give her report.

"So what kind of a man is the Nesian leader?"

"Well from what I gather he is not the eldest. He won his right to lead by trial of fire."

"Trial by fire? How intriguing." Tiirmirise raised an eyebrow and sat in her chair folding her legs elegantly with an elegant economy of motion. "Do tell." She waved her hand regally.

Candace bowed and waited till she had the attention of all the inhabitants in her room and then began her story.

"Before they decided to attack all the Nesian tribes gathered together at the death of the High King Juegos. Juegos had many sons but only two competed for the throne, Geneseric and Jugeric. Jugeric is the elder. A man mountain with bulging muscles and not much between his ears. Geneseric is the younger, cunning, dynamic, smarter but much smaller. When the time came to crown the King, Jugeric was challenged by Geneseric to a trial by fire. 24 Iron braziers were heated on the coals."

Candace lowered her voice filling her voice with suspense "Jugeric went first as the elder no doubt he presumed that once his brother felt the taste of iron he would give in. Geneseric showed

neither emotion nor did he cry out and as the burning braziers were pressed against his skin. The smell of burning flesh permeated the cold winter air.

When it was Juegeric's turn he too showed no emotion. On and On it went and the High Shaman said not even Wenceric, the greatest king of the Nesians had withstood 6 brands. Finally when both men were exhausted, sweating, and in excruciating, unimaginable pain, Juegeric finally gave in and Geneseric was crowned King.

Geneseric with the full support of his brother Juegeric united the Nesians into the vast army which has now congregated on our borders. They have been travelling looking for a place to settle. They perceive our country to be weak, a woman on the throne and by that they refer to Qastursh and not yourself my queen. You they do not reckon with at all."

Tiirmirise nodded at the news and asked curiously "What kind of a man do you think Geneseric is?"

"He is haughty, arrogant and full of his own self-importance. Their loss on the battlefield has shaken their belief in their leader. Yet they are still confident because Geneseric was not the leader of the army you defeated but a minor son of Juegos. Now they outnumber us and believe they have a better army."

Tiirmirise seated in the command tent tried to gauge the expression of her commanders and generals. "What make you of Candace's story?" She asked Petronides one of her generals.

"Well if all we have to worry about are a bunch of masochistic morons then I say we have an excellent chance of victory."

Spargapises her son allowed a small smile to break out on his face. He wore his manhood like a palpable shield of power. He feared his mother yet he loved her. He liked his father but he did not respect him. In the Sarmatian paternal culture where women were generally submissive he found himself in a dilemma.

In his heart he knew that had his mother truly been a submissive woman he would not have the power and position he now enjoyed nor did he think he would respect her as much as he did and it rankled. His mother listened to his advice and respected his opinion even if she did not always follow it.

His father on the other hand was arrogant, pampered and spoiled. When he was not with his boyfriend he was with his latest favourite Partheses. He was often drunk or drugged on hashish and went to great lengths to hide the relationship from his mother. Spargapises himself was drawn into the seedy plot. Yet he did still love his father despite his faults, who doted on him and showered him with plenty of fatherly love and affection.

As they pondered on what plan of action to take Makeda another Massagetae warrior put forward the suggestion that they could build fortifications at the base of the hill and starve them out.

"A fortified building your majesty would give us extra protection and even up the odds against the Nesians. Further a siege tactic would starve them out and thus we would not lose as many soldiers."

"We are in open land Makeda where would we find enough wood for such a construction. Time is of the essence and the nearest wooded forest is miles away." Baronides another of the Generals interjected.

"Sire," Spargapises interjected, "I believe there is a wood not far from here."

"Candace is this true?"

"Yes your majesty, but the groves are sacred to the old pagan gods. Anyone who cuts down those trees will suffer great personal calamity and die a most horrible death."

"I am Massagetae, I do not fear the final embrace, I myself will bear such calamity if such a one exists. I worship the one God and I fear neither pagan god nor bedtime story to frighten babes. Continue Spargapises."

"If we cut down those trees I believe there will be enough to build our forte, surround the horde and starve them out."

"Indeed my lady," Makeda continued "His highness is right. They will be expecting us to give them battle. They are not prepared for a siege and if we should set archers at the perimeter." She drew a quick diagram on a parchment of white paper thin hide.

"We shall create a killing zone here. They have nothing at the top of that hill except their wagons and horses. It will take time for them to organise an attack and we can have our battlements ready if we work night and day. That is through out tonight and throughout the day tomorrow."

"Very well make it so."

So the next morning the Nesian army woke up and were organised for battle by noon. It was only when he sent out scouts that Geneseric realised the Sarmatians had been up all night constructing palisades. They waited patiently for the Sarmatian attack which of course never came.

Geneseric had chosen the high grassy knoll knowing full well that their horses so effective in the last battle would be utterly useless on such terrain. He had effectively neutralised the effect of the Sarmatian cavalry which the Sarmatians had used so effectively against them and was now irritated at their reluctance to attack.

"Why do they not attack?"

"Perhaps their woman leader is afraid?"

Geneseric did not think so. Tiirmirise was renowned not just for her cunning which had enabled

her to sire a son for a man who was an avowed sodomite but also for her skill in battle and the ability to hold a large diverse Kingdom together with many tribes who all spoke different languages.

However he kept his thoughts to himself. It was not wise to show his anxieties to his warriors. A Nesian warrior never showed his uncertainties. He needed to appear like a rock, solid in his convictions so his people could be brave.

Eventually Geneseric sent his warriors charging down the hill. They were cut down in a hail of arrows as the Archers did their work. They were able to stand in safety behind the battlements and fire arrows at a great distance at the army of Nesians.

Geneseric ordered his men to spread out around the hill and attack in a circle thinning out his army and neutralising the effect of the arrows fired at them from distance. However this meant they were spread out too thinly and the palisades formed an effective blockade against their attacks so that they were unable to break the Sarmatian battle lines.

In the evening they retreated to lick their wounds and the building continued through the night. Those who had not fought during the day now worked during the night in shifts. So that they surrounded the Hill trapping the Nesian horde now exposed on the hill with only their wagons for shelter. Again and again the Nesian horde charged the Sarmatian battle lines and again and again their lines broke against the Sarmatian defences.

It did not occur to Geneseric that being unable to break their battle lines now meant he himself was trapped. The seriousness of his situation did not begin to dawn on him until much later in the month when the winter snows started falling and by then it would be too late.

It was a brilliant tactic for the season, for as Autumn ended and winter closed in with a vengeance and it seemed the heavens were on the side of the warrior Queen. The nights got colder and colder the Nesian horde now short of food began to slaughter their horses, dogs and cattle for food.

In the autumn when there had been plenty of grazing land the Nesians lived off the blood, and milk from the cattle but now that there was no grazing for the cattle which was now starving they had no option but to kill the animals so they could eat.

Geneseric sent the aged, the infirm, children and women out of his camp so there would be more supplies for his men. They went down to the Sarmatians begging to be made into slaves. Tiirmirise refused. She would have to feed slaves and their supplies were meagre, though they were not in the same desperate position as the Nesians for they could forage for food. Further slaves could easily infiltrate the camp and act as spies for Geneseric.

She sent them back to their King and they froze to death on the plains because Geneseric himself would not allow his own people back into the camp to shorten the rations of his fighting men. They froze to death in their thousands right outside Nesian camp.

What Tiirmirise had not achieved by starvation and battle, disease did. It ravaged the Nesian camp. Their feeding on the blood of diseased animals, rotting bodies and low standards of hygiene once the women had left the Nesian position, turned it into a disease ridden filth infested death ravaged camp.

The smell of corpses burning, to control the spread of disease and to keep the army warm filled the air. The Sarmatians observed all this and were sure that the Nesians would soon surrender however Candace and her unit returned to the command tent with frightening news.

"Your majesty, I came as fast as I could. There is another Nesian army approaching. They will be here in fourteen days."

"Fourteen days? Tiirmirise stared at Candace, How could you have scouted so far away in such a short time?"

"We were out hunting when my Falcon caught a pigeon in its hunt. Attached to its ankle was a message from Jugeric."

"The bird is it dead?"

"No Dread lady it is alive my Falcon never kills."

"Very well. You will allow the pigeon to carry on its journey after a few days to give us time to start constructing another palisade."

"Another Palisade?" Nnandi blanched. Her black skin turned grey with horror. She was not sure there would be enough wood for another palisade. They would need to be extremely creative with the resources they had.

Tiirmirise ordered another forte to built around the army of the Sarmatians. The second palisade had a ditch and kept them safely in so that it would protect them from attack from the second Nesian army.

Effectively they who were besieging the Nesian army of Geneseric were now about to be besieged by the Nesian army of Jugeric. Nnandi not only had to worry about wood but also to forage enough supplies to keep them safe from starvation and withstand a siege.

Now that Tiirmirise was privileged to their communications she knew the mode and manner of their attack and was able to make plans accordingly. When the second Nesian army arrived they faced the task of having to cross a ditch and then storm high walls and palisades.

Once more they created a killing zone. Firing from the safety of the battlements. If the archers had been in the snow it would have affected the strings of their bows however ensconced as they were within the forte they were effective and accurate as they pelted the Nesian horde with arrows, spears and rocks.

Jugeric was more determined than Geneseric and it came down to hand to hand fighting. Three

times the Nesians almost broke their lines and three times Tiirmirise dashed in with her own personal body guard to rescue a desperate situation. The Massagetae women, inspired the men whenever they thought they were flagging or about to break.

Tiirmirise herself was critically injured in the ensuing battle and her right eye was destroyed. The arrow which pierced it did not lodge in her brain but never the less it was a grave injury for she lost a lot of blood. She was taken to the wooden forte to recuperate but she still directed the battle from one of the towers in the palisade. It was an excellent vantage point because she could see everything that was going on.

The Forte was measured and marked out to hold every man, woman and beast in the army. The deep ditches, sharpened stakes, raised earthworks and palisades kept the Nesian horde out as wave after wave of the barbarians broke against the Sarmatian lines.

If Geneseric had co-ordinated his army at the same time as Jugeric was attacking Tiirmirise they would have been hard pressed to fend off the assault and would probably have been crushed between the two armies but they could not co-ordinate because the Massagetae battlefield assassins especially targeted the Nesian messengers with arrows, daggers or spears.

Pasiphae commanded her own unit in this battle. Her commander had been killed in a skirmish. She proved herself an able lieutenant and a good commander.

The Princess Pasiphae, daughter of Qastursh the King and stepdaughter to Tiirmirise, had sneaked along with the army and had distinguished herself on the battlefield.

She was promoted on merit for her actions and her brother Spargapises was jealous. He instead remained in the command tent and was jealously guarded by the Massagetae because his mother could not bear that anything happen to him and Pasiphae had teased him mercilessly about it.

When Tiirmirise had finally emerged from her command position, a black eye patch and a long evil scar ran across her once beautiful features twisting her smile into a sneer. Her army rallied and Jugeric's lines broke. They fled. A week later Geneseric surrendered and Tiirmirise had him executed on the spot and then gave him a burial befitting a King.

She did not believe in torture or humiliating prisoners by dragging them in triumph down the city streets nor imposing a long lingering death. As far as she was concerned Geneseric was essentially a man betrayed by the cowardice of his brother. He was also a noble warrior and a good king.

The rest of the surviving Nesians were either taken as slaves or slaughtered. She chased Jugeric's army out of Northern Sarmatia. At the borders of Sarmatia she created border patrols and built fortresses to man the borders so there would be no more easy incursions into Sarmatia.

She then returned to Ado and a heroes welcome. She sat on the dais beside Qastursh and watched Spargapises in the march past in his first triumph. The young man was followed by the army.

All except the Massagetae would take place in the triumph. History would record that

Spargapises had won the war and not Tiirmirise for the Sarmatian psyche, that a woman was always a helpmate and never a leader.

Hence to Spargapises went the honours since he was the titular commander of the army. Spargapises himself knew it was his mother who had fought and won the campaign and it galled him.

He swore that when he became king no woman would ever be accorded so much power. Yet as he basked in his parents pride and joy and the people's adoration he plotted an evil in his heart.

He had been plotting to remove his father from the throne. A man who was too well protected by his mother of all people. He decided he would alienate them from each other. Bereft from her protection he would be easy to kill.

After the war the country at peace settled into day to day politics. Spargapises was sitting in his mother's chambers as was his want.

"My son, you should go home you have a wife and a new born son. You should be celebrating his birth and enjoying his company. They grow up faster than you realise."

"I have seen him already today." Spargapises said dismissively

"It is so with you young men. I suppose you do not labour for nine months to bring a child into the world so therefore to you life is cheap. You cannot understand the love a mother has for her child"

"Enough of these sentimental meanderings mother, there is a grave matter I wish to discuss with you."

"What is it my son?"

"It concerns the King." Spargapises said hesitantly.

"Perhaps you should discuss it with him."

"I cannot for he is the problem."

Tiirmirise swept up her robes which were draped across her body. She wore no armour for it was a time of peace. She was wearing white linen trousers, her hair fell down her shoulders in black waves, her tunic also white was belted at the waist and over that was draped a purple cloth which proudly showed off her scarred right breast.

On her head she wore a golden diadem and with the exception of her personal seal which she wore on a ring on her left hand, the only evidence of her royal station. Tiirmirise was Queen of the Massagetae and Sarmatia, Ruling Lady of the Plains.

"I hope you do not speak of treason." Tiirmirise said sharply. "For rest assured that if Qastursh can sire one son he can sire others. I am not barren, your son Derastes is a legitimate contender for the throne nor is there anything to prevent your father from taking another wife and siring other children should he so wish."

"As to your concerns, as father of Derastes under the law I hold his life in my hands. If I wish I can have him killed and no one can gainsay me. Not you nor the king. As for father I hardly think he will have other children. I cannot speak for yourself but then succession passes through father's line. The viziers are in the midst of changing the laws to ensure that."

Tiirmirise's eyes narrowed and she smiled a nasty wicked smile that she had never shown her son but only her enemies. He however did not see it. The arrogant pompous young man had his back to her.

"Further I will have power over you when father dies for I will become the head of the family."

"Will you indeed." She laughed but the amusement did not reach her steely black gaze. "You are nothing more than an arrogant boy. Your ambition and pride blind you to the truth. You are not clever enough to understand the deadly game of politics that is played at court."

"Really mother," He tightened his great hands in clenched fists, his ego battered by her words and pricked by her all knowing smile "I understand..."

"You... understand... nothing!" She hissed the last words out with such venom he fell silent. "If your father were to die tomorrow you would not inherit the throne. No that honour would go to Ninyas your father's youngest brother and he has been plotting his rise to power since before you were born."

"Ninyas?" Spargapises felt his breadth catch in his throat. He had always thought Ninyas nothing more than a friend of his father's, perhaps even one of his lovers but his uncle?

"You mean you did not know? Your spies did not inform you? Ninyas is your father's youngest brother. He as the eldest male heir would inherit the throne should anything happen to your father. You cannot inherit anything under the law until you have seen your twenty fifth summer and reached your majority. That is several years from now. Plenty of time for Ninyas to work his misdeeds."

Do you not think he was angered by your birth? Do you not find it passing strange that Qastursh married 325 women but had only one son who survived childhood, a child raised not at the palace but with the Massagetae on the plains whilst his other thirty seven sons and twenty five daughters died in unexplained circumstances of childbirth?

Your sisters who live now were never meant to be born. The harem is filled with good looking eunuchs who whilst they could not bear children can please women so the women are not tempted to seek other pleasures outside and so palm off a bastard as heir to the throne.

Everything has been arranged according to this plan and despite it all I had you and he loathes me for it but you he hates with a passion. Your father and I are the only thing keeping you from death at his hands Spargapises and I will hear no talk of treason from you."

"That deviant shares his bed with Partheses your vizier." Spargapises felt a desire to hurt her to see her cry, brought low and reduced to her womanly status.

"Who are you to judge when you yourself keep a mistress and fornicate with slaves."

"I do not allow another man to...."

"Silence! I will not hear it. You owe your father respect!"

"I owe him nothing!"

Tiirmirise backhanded him hard. Her eyes flashed with anger. He would have made a move to strike her back had he not noticed that she anticipated such a move.

"Why do you always defend him?"

"I will never stop protecting him my son. Know this even if you yourself were to enter our bedchamber and try to kill him I would strike you down with my bare hands. Derastes will simply take your place. Step carefully prince, I will not tolerate treason."

"What mean you by that?"

"I know everything that happens in this kingdom. The plots, the intrigues everything. I warn you, should you anger me your fate will be terrible indeed."

"We shall see mother....we shall see."

He stormed out and Tiirmirise cursed under her breath. "I have birthed a viper."

King Qastursh, Tiirmirise's husband heard every word. He had long ceased to doubt the loyalty of his wife though he wondered at it. He had heard every word of the exchange but then they had not known he was there concealed behind the curtains.

No one had. He was glad to see Tiirmirise startled by his presence when he appeared. The woman was an expert at disguising her emotions with an inscrutably bland expression. However Qastursh knew what most people did not. The bland expression was a front. The Queen's emotions ran deeper than the Oceans.

"So even my own son plots against me."

She did not even try to deny his statement. "I have given orders that Derastes be taken to my people in the mountains. Since Spargapises has barely bothered to look in on his son he will not

notice his absence."

"You are too hard on him beloved." Qastursh took her hand and led her to the bed he kissed her forehead and sat down beside her.

"And you my lord are not hard enough."

"He is confused. His father is a woman and his mother is a man." Qastursh smiled ruefully.

"What a pair." she sighed and Qastursh laughed.

They were good friends, no longer lovers but good friends.

She sat down and regarded him carefully before she spoke again. "Beware of Partheses I do not trust him."

" Oh he is harmless enough"

"He is like a green snake in the green grass. You can not see his evil till it is too late."

"Is nothing hidden from you?" He asked exasperatedly expecting her to take him to task regarding his lover but she did not.

She no longer concerned herself with such matters and as much as said so. "How you conduct your affairs is none of my business but your safety and protection is my concern."

He nodded "Well do I know." He lay back and listened to her droning on and on about the protective measures he needed to take.

In another part of the palace however his brother Ninyas and his vizier Vayanes were having a meeting which had he known, he would have paid more attention to Tiirmirise's lectures.

"The only way to kill him is to get that she-wolf away from his side." Ninyas spat.

"How do you propose we do that!" Vayanes hissed exasperatedly. He was heartily sick of Qastursh. He would conspire with anyone who would remove the King. He had hoped that after helping her to get the throne Tiirmirise would remove him but the silly bitch had proved his loyal ally.

Vayanes represented an old and conservative faction of politics in Sarmatia. Descended from the old Massagetae nobility, they had no problems with Qastursh's sexual tastes or even his orgiastic excesses it was almost expected of a spoiled and powerful ruler. Most of the ancient aristocracy inbred and crazy indulged in such.

What he objected to was the plain and simple fact that Qastursh was not a Massagetae or a Sarmatian. He was not even descended from any of the ancient tribes of the plains. He was of the

Beriberi race, not the ebony skinned Massagetae or the Mahogany, curly haired Sarmatian or even the pink skinned black haired Getulae and he hated him with a passion that bordered on insanity.

"We have long had uneasy relations with the Simian to the east. What we need to do is to keep Tiirmirise out of Ado long enough to foment some kind of instability and strike whilst she is away." Ninyas said thoughtfully.

"Something like that." Ninyas drawled. "I have enlisted the aid of one Magba Massinassa. He used to be overlord of Jbenga the sire of Tiirmirise and well hates the thought of bending knee to a vassal never mind a woman. He approached me but he does not wish to be seen to be connected to our faction."

"And the prince?" Vayanes queried

"He no longer wishes to consider his father's murder. No doubt he has been terrified into obedience by his mother."

"Hmm Spargapises might suspect you are after the throne for yourself. You have reached your majority and would become regent should anything happen to Qastursh."

"Spargapises is a stupid little child who thinks the world revolves around him. He can be manipulated. I have been manipulating myself into power for too long to be thwarted by one such as he."

He did not deem it prudent to let Vayanes know that he was the one behind the murders of most of his brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews. If Vayanes knew, he would be disgusted and he knew without a doubt that he would lose the old man's support.

Vayanes for all his insistence on racial purity was an honourable man. Ninyas couldn't give a fig for racial purity he himself was only half Sarmatian, but if he could use it to manipulate Vayanes to his ends then so much the better.

"If Qastursh had not married Tiirmirise I would be King. We must be patient a little more. Our next scheme cannot be too obvious. We shall foment disagreement with the Simian, Tiirmirise will go charging up there to fight and we shall kill Qastursh in her absence take over the throne and rule."

"You make it sound so simple Ninyas."

"That my dear friend Vayanes is because it is that simple. In the meantime I will arrange the murder of Partheses. He has become over bearing and fulfilled his uses which was to get us close to the king. All we need to do is blame it on Spargapises and that will get him out of the way. We all know how much he hates his father's sexual proclivities."

Everyone knew Tiirmirise insisted on the best and the latest equipment for the army and that meant she needed a steady supply of Simian Steel, Simian armourers and craftsmen, Engineers, Scrolls, Wood for her siege engines etc all this cost money.

One of the most efficient ways to finance this without recourse to the High Council which was riddled with politics was to fund it from the King's purse and the best way to do that was to cut down on the King's over heads

So other than the King's wives who had given him children, like Tiirmirise, Helle, Augur and other wives and daughters the harem which had once housed three hundred female wives and male concubines was largely empty and the funding put towards buying weapons for the army.

His eldest daughter Olayrae was being groomed to make an advantageous marriage. She hated the idea because she wished to serve as a temple maiden. She was chaste, modest, humble, young a virgin and infinitely suited to temple life.

However Qastursh would have none of it. She was a princess and it was a Princess's duty to make good marital alliances to protect the country's borders, cement trade treaties and increase the influence of the Sarmatian Kingdom.

Tiirmirise had pointed out to him that if he continued this course not only would she make her poor husband a miserable wife but it might damage the very relationship he was trying to repair.

He did have other daughters who were also of marriageable. One called Bierae and the other called Pradae. Unlike her elder sister who stood up to her father at every opportunity, Pradae was a shy little girl who fairly trembled and became extremely quiet whenever she saw her father and Tiirmirise. She only got on with her mother who dominated her at every opportunity.

Pasiphae was her father's favourite and got on extremely well with Tiirmirise. She was very like her mother but had inherited a self-destructive, wild streak from her father's side of the family. Where Spargapises vice was women and alcohol, Qastursh was drugs and men, Pasiphae rode into every battle as though she was going to die that day. She lived for war and the thrill of danger.

Her daring deeds in battle were many. She had fought against the Nesians stealing her way into the Massagetae ranks and distinguished herself much to the annoyance of her brother. She was rewarded personally by Tiirmirise who made her a Massagetae commander on sheer merit. Beloved of the army Pasiphae could do no wrong she was literally the golden child of the royal family.

Bierae was one of the older daughters of Qastursh and she was on good terms with both the King and Queen and almost everyone in the palace. She generally had her head buried in a scroll. Like her father she liked to smoke herbs often they often smoked together.

They were quite close and she spent many an evening playing chess with one or the other. Her

mother had died in childbirth just at the time Tiirmirise was arriving so she tended to regard Tiirmirise as the closest thing to a mother figure in her life although there was not much age difference between them.

Finally there was Minae, the youngest daughter of Qastursh. Her mother was descended from the long haired Hellenes. Helle was a concubine who became a wife by virtue of giving birth to Minae. Both mother Helle and daughter Minae were despised by the other Sarmatian aristocrats. Helle in particular was feared because of her affinity for snakes.

Helle was perhaps the most beautiful of Qastursh's wives despite her bald head and green eyes, unlike the other women who had given birth to Qastursh's children, she was curvaceous and very feminine. Minae had inherited her buxom womanly charms which were greatly prized by both Massagetae and Sarmatians alike.

Her father's darker colouring and her mother's flawless white complexion gave her the bonze toned appearance of an old pagan Sarmatian goddess. She often wore the dress of a Sarmatian courtesan rather than that of a princess.

Transparent silk and linen clothing that barely disguised her womanhood, a green emerald gleamed in her belly button and a fortune in white pearls which hung from plaits in her pubic hair. Her breasts were barely covered by a large jewelled collar which covered her nipples. Her red hair was invariably worn up to reveal her slender neck and delicate facial features.

So many lusted after her that of all Qastursh's children Tiirmirise assigned almost as many Massagetae to guard her person as she did to the king. She was barely nineteen and already had several offers of concubinage from the Sarmatian and Massagetae aristocrats who despised her background but lusted after her body. She was too beautiful to be used for childbearing they argued but not of noble lineage enough to be married as a wife.

Qastursh unable to part with her left Tiirmirise to negotiate the marriage contract. Tiirmirise, already burdened with matters of state allocated the job to Helle. Helle was of a mind to marry her daughter off to someone who would love and respect her, someone rich enough to support them but who did not depend on palace intrigue so they could live a peaceful life and she could bounce her grandchildren on her knee.

Helle considered her daughter flighty and apt to turn her head at every handsome inappropriate young man she could find that she knew her mother would disapprove of. Men like Ninyas or even Partheses men who were always in some plot or the other who would use her to get to the king.

Tiirmirise sat in the Harem looking over the list that Helle and Minae had compiled, warily watching Helle and Asrael her companion cobra who was always with her everywhere she went and was now wrapped around her wrist and body.

Helle's hand writing was a studied scrawl for she had learnt to read and write late in life. It listed wealthy middle aged Massagetae merchants of both sexes who would be overjoyed to be married

to a princess. Minae's list however had the crop of rich young aristocrats of both sexes with all sorts of depravities from some of the oldest families, some of whom she knew had a deep hatred for the king and his daughter.

As they rejected the suitors on the list Minae flew into a rage after Helle rejected yet another arrogant aristocratic youth.

"Bitter old woman you do not want me to marry. You wish me to stay here forever."

"That'ssss not true!" Helle said gently "and you know it child." Helle spoke in that hypnotising sibilant whisper that at once mesmerised and terrified Tiirmirise who continued to watch the pet snake Asrel warily.

"You have refused every single suitor for my hand that I have suggested."

"Becaussse they all wish to make you a concubine and not a wife."

Minae folded her arms across her chest and sat down petulantly "What is wrong with being a concubine?"

"A concubine is nothing mere than a glorified body ssservant. You would have to share your body with not jussst the man or woman I gave you to but to whomever he or she gave you to alssso."

"What is wrong with that? It is not as though I never had sex before."

Helle, Tiirmirise decided had the predatory, hypnotising characteristics of a deadly snake. Her head came up slowly and she sidled over to Minae her body almost slithering across the room. Her head moved up and down slowly as she inspected her daughter then suddenly she struck and slapped Minae hard.

"You whore!" She hissed.

"Enough!" Tiirmirise had a soft spot for the young princess and was not going to stand idly by whilst Helle disciplined her. She now stood between the weeping girl and her furious mother. Minae threw herself against Tiirmirise and sobbed hysterically against her. Tiirmirise's arms tightened reflexively around the young girl who sought protection in her arms.

Tiirmirise swallowed hard and regarded the hissing spitting snake now alive and attuned to Helle warily.

"Helle you must calm yourself. Before you say or do anything you will regret." She tried to calm the situation. The last thing she wanted was for Helle to know she terrified her.

"I thank-you Tiirmisss but I better leave before I beat the sssilly sssslut black and blue." She hissed flicking her tongue with her lips as her head moved slowly from side to side as she spoke undulating and constantly swaying like a snake.

"Go!" Minae screamed "Go to your eunuchs and your bloody snakes that's all you care about anyway."

Helle hissed at Minae and Tiirmirise fairly jumped out of her skin before the other woman literally slithered out of the room and slammed the door behind her.

"Your should not speak to your mother like that." Tiirmirise sighed as the girl continued weeping uncontrollably in her arms. Eventually she quietened.

"What about you?"

"What about me?" Tiirmirise asked warily

"Perhaps there is a reason you don't want me to marry?"

Tiirmirise rolled her eyes. "Minae please, I don't have time for such childish games."

"I know lust when I see it and I have slept with women before. I have seen the way you look at me, I know you want me."

"You are imagining things." Tiirmirise said coldly disentangling herself from the princess and her troubling words. Tiirmirise went to sit at her desk and set aside the lists of marriage candidates. She pulled out the merchant contracts she was reading before Helle and Minae disturbed her.

"Oh I know you have sex with your bath slaves and Soraya is your favourite, but then everybody does."

"Everyone has sex with Soraya?"

Minae laughed "No silly, I meant that everyone has sex with their bath slaves. yours are all female. No one has noticed it but I have."

"What of it?"

"I talk to the slaves you know, especially the body servants. You can learn a lot about a person by listening to their body servants and bath slaves."

"What is your point?"

"You like women." Minae said simply "and you like me and I know you want me."

"You are a spoilt little girl Minae, you need to learn that good looks and charm alone will not get you far in this world."

"Well it has worked for me so far."

"Listen you troublesome little baggage you are in enough aaaahhhh...." Tiirmirise's voice trailed off into a sigh as Minae's sure competent little fingers kneaded the sore neck muscles taut with tension of political debate and marriage contract negotiations.

"See I can please you. Let me please you." She whispered sliding into Tiirmirise's lap seductively and kissing the black queen's hard lips.

At first Tiirmirise refused to respond and fought her desire. She had indeed lusted after the princess. Who hadn't? but in a court full of intrigues and plots she had never allowed herself to act on it.

"I should not do this!" Tiirmirise groaned against Minae's neck. Her resolve was slowly and surely slipping away with every wanton caress of Minae's fingers on her body.

Minae parted her robes and placed Tiirmirise's hands on her bare breasts and whispered against the Queen's lips. Minae it seemed had inherited her mother's sinuous serpentine ways. Her softly spoken words were seductive persuasive and so very tempting.

"You are Tiirmirise, Queen of the Massagetae," She whispered against the Queen's lips, "Dread Lady of the Plains, the Falcon of Sarmatia, the most powerful woman in all of the realm, an anointed monarch ordained by God you have every right to do this."

Minae pressed her lips against hers, her pink tongue flicked at her lips seeking entrance. Tiirmirise groaned and succumbed to the young woman's hot and seductive kisses.

Saronne stretched once more and decided to put pen to parchment. It was late in the evening and she had completed most of her chores for the day. She looked fondly over at the sleeping form on the bed and smiled. Her memories were sometimes painful and sometimes cathartic. This one that she was about to commit to parchment was definitely cathartic.

Saronne's diary.

"My time in the brothel did not go as badly as it could have gone. Yes I was trained in the acts of love. How to paint my body and what clothes to wear to look more desirable etc but I also had the skill of healing and every morning. I thanked God for my mother's teaching. A brothel like any other place is always in need of a healer no matter how exclusive the clientele.

There are consequences of promiscuity and I was often called to deal with them. Although the primary reason for my purchase was to provide sexual pleasure for clients this did not actually happen as physicians in Gypsos were expensive even those who were slaves and since I was valued highly I never actually performed any sexual services at the Brothel. However once in

awhile I was called to play the sitar and even dance.

According to the brothel keeper I was a good dancer at least of the Gyptian style. In the land of the Angles the dancing was different. You had to learn many steps and be in line with everyone and turn and dip and bow then you had to keep time and count that in your head.

However in the land of Gypsos their dance was more sensuous and consisted of rolling the hips and the pelvis a lot. Sometimes I danced with the other girls in the troupe most times I danced alone. I also learned how to play the sitar. A six string instrument but I did not sing. I did not have the talent to produce the high nasal ear piercing shrieking that passed for Gyptian singing.

It was at Gypsos that I first met Pasiphae and learned first hand of her cruelty. She was of the same height as myself Her hair was jet black and her eyes glowed with an unholy light like she was touched by the ancient gods.

She was powerfully built with bulging muscles everywhere and though she had bathed yet she still stank of horses. Around her neck she wore a necklace of teeth. Her hair was long and brown and worn in a neat braid. She wore a linen robe like most Gyptians and so resembled a Gyptian with her swarthy skin than a Massagetae warrior that when I first met her I thought she was a native of Gypsos.

As a dancer I was called to entertain her and whilst the other girls played the sitar, drums and tambourines I danced for her. At first I thought I was killing time and she was waiting to be pleased by a male slave.

However when the song finished and I lay at her feet her eyes fairly stripped me naked, seeming to linger on my skin and I shuddered. It seemed to delight her.

"I want this one." She smiled confidently. There was a feral glint in her dark eyes.

"I am afraid she is not for use my lady. I have someone I have prepared for what you have in mind."

She looked about to complain but thought better of it and then barely looking at me, she contemptuously tossed a coin in my direction. Grateful for small mercies I got up ignoring the money. Slaves owned nothing so the money would go to the Brothel keeper there was no need for me to pick it up he would send someone along later.

I picked up the spare sitar to play a piece whilst another one of the musicians now prepared to dance but Pasiphae waved her away and I saw why. One of the girls walked into the room. Her eyes were blank. I presumed she was drugged. She was naked except for the iron manacles she wore on her ankles and wrists.

It was then that Pasiphae's interest was pricked. The Princess chained her to her bed and whipped her. The girl did not make a single sound and Pasiphae intensified her efforts to no avail. The girl did not cry out even whilst Pasiphae bloodied her back with the whip.

I wanted to cry at such cruel barbarity. What had this poor girl done to deserve such treatment? Pasiphae beat her till she fainted and then threw her whip down and stared at us thoughtfully. She drank her wine and the others shrank back cowering in our corner.

When the brothel owner returned to offer Pasiphae more wine she smiled nastily.

"I got nothing no emotion from the girl you gave me. She was so drugged she could not react. I will pay you more for I want some better entertainment tonight."

She whirled round and pointed at me. "That slave appears to be horrified by my actions. There is almost a hint of innocence there. If I did not know the type of establishment you ran I might almost believe what I see in her eyes."

"What is your wish princess? How can I please?" The snivelling Brothel owner asked in his whiny voice.

"That girl the one who thinks her screams pass for singing I would like her."

"She is expensive she is not just a body slave."

I was horrified. Was she speaking of me? I kept my face hidden not allowing my terror to show. "I had never been beaten before, always managing to persuade my owners to be lenient with me."

"I would like her," She pointed at the girl who had been singing "for tonight, I would like her to sing a different kind of song for me." She said smiling nastily "and I would like for that one to watch." She finished pointing at me.

Pasiphae I was to later realise had no emotions she felt nothing. She was empty. The only time she felt exhilaration was at the sight and smell of blood or another's pain and it was the only emotion she felt. So in order to feel she abused her slaves.

When the first stroke of the bull whip she used landed on the back of the slave who had been singing in accompaniment to the sitar I played, and the steel balls ripped into my companion's back she screamed and then Pasiphae came alive. When the girl stopped screaming after passing out from the pain she glowered in my tears of anguish and sorrow.

I could have done something fought her off pulled her off the poor girl for we were alone, but I was too scared. I was a coward. I was a slave. A princess would have fought to defend the weak but I was no princess not anymore. I was nothing but a slave now.

When Pasiphae left in the morning I spent the whole day caring for the two girls and then I spent the whole night reliving the nightmare of watching them being beaten senseless."

He grasped a linen sheet and wrapped it around the woman in his arms.

"I love you Pradae."

"I love you.....Brother."

" Do not say that."

"Why not it is the truth. You know what we do is wrong."

"We have been lovers for many years and you have never felt guilt before."

She turned to him and cupped his face "Whilst you were away I went to visit your wife and son Derastes. He looked so like you I was so jealous of her. I wished I was the one to give you a son."

"Don't be. Aleye is a dull sow that I have to get drunk to fuck. She is nothing to me. You are everything to me."

"But what if we get caught?"

"What will they do? Is it father and his boy toys or Mother who is at this moment fucking our sister."

"Strictly Speaking Tiirmirise is no relation to Minae and Helle was a concubine before she became a wife so she has done nothing wrong."

"I hate her."

"Because you wish to be King."

"She rules this country but she is not of the blood."

"Again you are wrong. Hers is an ancient line. They ceased to produce male heirs and their line was therefore broken but she is from the most ancient family in Sarmatia. The only one that extends back to the first woman in an unbroken line of females."

"Well at least she is honest. I thought you were going to say she was descended from some god or goddess."

"You know she believes in the worship of the one God. She would never deign to claim divinity."

"Whereas I claim descent from the god of the groves."

"Which you destroyed when you fought the Nesian horde thereby bringing a horrible curse down

on your head." She said sarcastically.

"When I am King I shall declare myself a god and fuck whom I please."

"Is that all I am to you? A fuck?" Pradae got up "All this time I thought you loved me but I find that you just want to rub Tiirmirise nose in our relationship because you know she will disapprove and then you can confront her with Minae."

"You are not just a fuck you are a good fuck." he smiled indulgently now satisfied he did what he did best hurt those who loved him the most.

"Pasiphae was right you are a selfish bastard and you're just using me to get to Tiirmirise. May be you want to fuck her yourself."

"Get out of here!!!" he roared at her.

"Oh don't worry I will." She screamed back taking her clothes and running naked into the night.

"Wait! Pradae come back!" He raced into the night when he realised she was truly upset. He'd been running for awhile when he noticed the night was eerily still.

Suddenly a horse came charging at him from the midst of the harm gardens. He barely had time to get out of the way. The rider was obviously not out to get him for he carried on towards the harem and he became terrified for Pradae.

"Pradae! Pradae!" he called her name out frantically fearing for her safety he gripped his stomach sick with fear. In that moment He had realised he loved her and pain was like a knife in his heart.

"Psst over hear."

"Pradae?"

"I saw a group of armed men make for the royal chambers. I think they were heading for the harem and father's apartments. We need to warn the Palace guard."

"No it is better we go to the Massagetae. They are loyal to mother. The palace guard must have been bribed because I do not see how an assassin can simply ride into the palace on a huge horse like that!"

Chapter 3

Rise of the Silver Falcon

In the palace there was a chaotic scene as the inhabitants fought for their lives. Spargapis was right the Palace guard had indeed been bribed. Minae was crouched naked in a corner. In front of

her Tiirmirise a dagger protruding from her shoulder, which had prevented Minae from certain death since the dagger was originally aimed at Minae's throat.

Now Tiirmirise stood in front of her fighting off four assassins and successfully holding them off with a chair. The door burst open to reveal Pasiphae and the rest of the Massagetae also hard pressed. One of them threw Tiirmirise a sword and she dispatched the assassins with ease.

"I was never very good at fighting with tables." she murmured to Minae who clung to her like a leech and was shaking uncontrollably.

"Go to your mother's chambers little one, you'll be safer there."

"No! She'll be better off coming with us. Whoever attacked tonight wishes to wipe out the entire royal family. They attacked me in the barracks. Helle and Augur's chambers were the first to be attacked. Pasiphae said bursting into the room. Her clothes were tattered and bloody. She herself appeared to have been in a battle.

"Augur is dead, Helle's wounds are grave, Olayrae has had her eyes gouged out before I could get there, she is alive but not well. She has been screaming hysterically since it happened. Spargapises is nowhere to be found, neither is Pradae, I don't know whether they are alive or dead." She finished breathlessly.

"Say what you are thinking Pasiphae."

"I don't know if they formed part of this plot."

"Let us survive the night tomorrow will be enough time for accusations. Let us make for the King's apartments"

Partheses was dead. His throat had been slit like an animal. One of the assassins was preparing to do the same to the King. Pasiphae's arrow lodged in his head pinning him to the wall. Another assassin lodged a small axe in the back of one of the Palace guard.

Tiirmirise drew it out and hurled it at another assassin cutting off his wrist in one gory blow so that the hand holding the throwing dagger twitched harmlessly on the floor. Mid-morning they found Pradae and Spargapises who had brought in re-enforcements from the army barracks and the Massagetae.

The young Prince had fought his way to the harem with his sister who could only squeal and scream hysterically. Several courtiers were killed and the entire palace guard were executed in the morning. Qastursh's fury knew no bounds.

"Well we needed to change the Palace guard anyway." Tiirmirise was saying as they bound the wounds in Qastursh's shoulder.

"I do not want to be surrounded by Massagetae no matter how much you trust them I do not."

"The Massagetae are not baby sitters." Pasiphae bristled

"Oh Shut up do." Qastursh growled.

"We will need to convene a new guard detail now that you have successfully executed everyone in the Palace guard who did not die in the fighting last night and now it will be very difficult to trust anyone." Tiirmirise said rubbing her chin thoughtfully as she regarded Qastursh.

The Public funeral of so many members of the royal family threw the nation into mourning and the worst part was no one knew who had perpetrated the atrocities. Even Ninyas house had been attacked for he had lost two of his three sons.

In the midst of this disaster the Simian, traditional enemies of the Sarmatian nation were making war noises. The family were resting in the Palace at Ekiti whilst the Palace of Ado was cleaned and rebuilt with added security features. Sarmatia had two capital cities a legacy of when it was a divided country.

The two largest tribes the Sarmatiae and the Massagetae had come together to unite but each had kept its capital city. The Sarmatian nobles anxious not to be blamed for the plot did all they could to make the royal family comfortable in Ekiti.

"Your Majesties " Vayanes the current Prime Vizier bowed and swept into the inner sanctum. "We will need to attend to the Simian sooner rather than later."

"I will go, Spargapises will remain here. I believe he has enough training to protect the king."

"Especially now he knows that whoever executed that last attempt won't be killing father to make him King." Pasiphae drawled.
Spargapises blushed "You unnatural bitch!!!"

"Enough!" Tiirmirise roared "Pasiphae you will attend me this trip, I...."

"Your Majesty, come quickly the Lady Helle is dying." A messenger ran into the royal apartments and threw himself at Tiirmirise feet.

By ancient Sarmatian tradition, Qastursh as a King was forbidden to attend Funerals. He had been inconsolable since the death of Partheses and Augur and finally he had a mental breakdown when he saw Olayrae's condition. He currently existed in the state of alcoholic and drug induced stupor which was punctuated by bouts of uncontrolled weeping and sedation.

Tiirmirise went into Helen's room. It stank of death. Minae wept inconsolably in her mother's arms. At first it had seemed she would recover but then the wound became poisoned and she was now dying. Assrael her snake had died in the defence of his mistress as had several snakes.

Helle's snakes had taken out so many of the assassins sent out to kill them that by rights they

should all have been dead had it not been for the courageous snakes.

Unfortunately many of the little buggers had also escaped and as their mistress was no longer around to control and care for them Khalifar the current head eunuch was under orders to exterminate them.

"Watch over my daughter Tiirmirise. I place her in your care." Helle kissed her weeping daughter and after two days in a delirious fever she slipped away during the night. Minae was inconsolable and Tiirmirise had no peace.

The princess clung to her like a leech. Her nightmares often had her running into Tiirmirise room eventually she simply moved into the Queen's bed and did not care what people thought. There were whispered rumours in the palace no one dared openly comment on the relationship between the princess and the Queen.

As the youngest Minae was indulged and having lost her mother, she seemed to change becoming more emotionally delicate.

It was a tough year and Tiirmirise was glad when it was over. After winter came spring and with it new hope and new life and new troubles.

"Minae you cannot come with me to fight the Simian." Tiirmirise said exasperatedly

"I cannot stay here either. What if someone kills me before you get back? Besides you promised mother you would look after me you can't just go swanning off to war." She finished waving her hand negligently.

Tiirmirise closed her eyes and counted to ten. "Lately the princess had become emotionally demanding. All of them had, even Bierae who she took to be the most sensible of the lot. She was looking forward to fighting the Simian anything to get her out of this atmosphere of doom and gloom.

She managed to reassure Minae and deposited her with Bierae. However Minae was tearful and inconsolable at once beseeching at once weeping hysterically till eventually Tiirmirise was able to leave. Pasiphae was not amused and could be heard to mutter "offspring of slaves under her breath." Bierae gave her a sharp look.

As Tiirmirise rode through the streets of Ekiti at the head of her bodyguard, the army was already ranged outside the city and ready to march she was approached by a delegation from the temple of the one God. She dismounted and was surprised when they parted to reveal Olayrae.

"I am sorry I could not protect you my princess." Tiirmirise whispered, her heart broke to see the once quiet beauty disfigured by an assassins knife. They lived in brutal times.

Olayrae stepped forward. Her hands touched Tiirmirise face. "You are too hard on yourself my Queen. This was meant to be. I was never meant for marriage. I think this had to happen before I

could persuade father to let me serve in the temple." Olayrae smiled and her hands continued to touch her face suddenly her expression changed and her voice seemed to come from far away. Her facial features contorting to almost form the face of another.

"A great threat shall come from across the Araxes. You will save the Massagetae and be the greatest Queen of the two cities that Sarmatia will ever see. You will be given a granted a special gift, a special child.... Tragedy will find you because of a sin. A stain on your honour but that person will pay for it. I am to tell you it is not your fault a person must take responsibility for their actions. You will grieve for it shall rip out your heart."

She gasped and stepped back. "You have a great and powerful destiny my Queen. I am privileged to have known you. You will know love but it will be a long time before you recognise it for what it is."

"And this war with the Simian?"

" You will need to lose to win. The Simian are not the horde." The male female voices once more took over and issued from the princess mouth.

"And your sisters?"

"You mean Minae?" Olayrae smiled "You have a weakness for her. Nothing is hidden from me. She will do well never fear but it will not be with you."

"And you?"

There was laughter in the voices when they spoke "Get you gone Tiirmirise I you can be extremely nosy but this is not your business. You have a war to win." Tiirmirise was surprised at the answer from the voice. Olayrae slumped forward into Tiirmirise arms and when she spoke her voice was back to its usual timbre.

"I take it you were spoken to." Olayrae said as Tiirmirise helped her stand unaided.

Tiirmirise nodded and looked around nervously. Everyone else continued to look at them expectantly. Some in awe, some not quite sure what was going on. Someone fell to their knees, others followed and then the chanting began.

"Hail Tiirmirise Queen of the Massagetae!"

On the trip Tiirmirise took Vayanes with her. She knew he conspired with Ninyas and that he commanded a large portion of the conservative aristocratic nobles in government. He had after all made her queen and she feared his influence more than that of Ninyas. So She kept him close to her. His presence was almost as a hostage for good behaviour.

He held so much sway over the aristocratic elements she was sure of their good behaviour whilst he was with her. She dared not leave him behind to plot heaven knew what with Ninyas.

She also took her own family members. Xango her brother, Jbenga her father and Pasiphae as well as her Massagetae commanders Makeda, Candace and Nnandi. Nnandi, slender and elegant woman of small stature was in charge of logistics, Candace a slim, wiry woman was in charge of Intelligence.

Makeda, the largest of her female generals was muscular and stocky, she was in charge of tactics and training and finally Jbenga her father and Xango her brother who had excellent knowledge of the geography of the land and fighting styles of the different nations around them, their knowledge gained from their previous occupation as merchants.

She also had new group of lieutenants. The other young men who had served on the previous campaign went into politics as was the custom. Few preferred a career in the military when it was less hazardous to the health to make money and prestige in the comfort of the chamber of Viziers than on the field of battle.

With Tiirmirise gone and Spargapises left behind it seemed the Queen had made a blunder. Every coup plotter, every rebel rouser every intriguer at court made a bee line for the Young prince and they buzzed around him like flies around honey sensing the sweet smell of victory.

They wanted to make him king. All he had to do was to support their cause. Namely murderous attempts on his fathers life. Others were more insidious. They did not want to kill the king they claimed merely to remove him for his own safety.

Qastursh himself seemed to sense there was something afoot. His nightmares returned in earnest. He made an effort to spend more time playing chess with his son and discussing the laws of Sarmatia and they even went hunting together."

"How can you stand that woman?"

"Don't speak of your mother like that. It is because of her that you are alive today. Because of her ingenuity you were even born. She gave you birth plotted your conception whilst you were a mere babe. Foiled many assassination attempts on me and you. I remember one time when an assassin broke into your room to kill you."

Qastursh shook his head in remembrance "He stabbed your mother 17 times but your mother fought him to a standstill with her bare hands. Where was I? Cowering under the bed. Such love is frightening. If something should ever happen to you Spargapises, I truly fear for the life of the man who causes it."

"She did it to keep power. You would have cast her aside if I had died."

"I can never, would never cast her aside even were you and your son to die tomorrow and she became barren. Know this she is my heir after my death. No one else has ever shown me such loyalty. She has shed blood and sweat for me. I can never forsake her."

Spargapises was terribly disappointed. "But the laws say...."

"That only one born of the blood may rule." His father finished.

"They also say that no woman may rule Sarmatia"

Qastursh smiled. "Actually no such law exists on the scrolls. That law was a rumour created by my great grandfather when he seized the throne of Sarmatia, illegally I might add. I am neither Sarmatian nor Massagetae. I am Beriberi and not of any tribe of the plains.

We are foreigners in this land you and I. It is why Vayanes plots to put someone like Ninyas whose Mother was Sarmatian or Tiirmirise who is a blue blooded Massagetae on the throne. It is the real reason they despise us. Yes us Spargapises they despise both you and I not because I like men but because we are neither Sarmatian nor Massagetae."

"But I thought..."

"I know what you thought. We are safe only for as long as Tiirmirise remains Queen. If your mother should die believe me the High council will move to make Ninyas my heir and once they accomplish that we are all as good as dead. He is ruthless is Ninyas. He will not spare even your sisters because their children would have a claim to the throne."

"Later that night as Spargapises pondered on what his father told him he became confused he did not know what to think."

"I don't know what to do Pradae." He sighed

"Go and see Olayrae, that's what everybody else does."

"She scares me."

"Anyone who is different from the way you think things ought to be scares you"

"No she scares me. She looks at me as though she knows everything there is to know about me and has somehow found me lacking."

"She is a priestess Spar. Don't worry about it we shall go and see her together."

The next morning when they arrived at the temple she found Minae and Bierae also at the temple. She sincerely hoped it was coincidence and nothing more.

One of the Acolytes met them in the temple and led them in with a smile. "The Priestess will see you all now."

They looked at each other warily and entered the temple. Normally they waited outside where everyone else worshipped. No one was allowed to touch the altar. Touching the altar meant

certain death.

It was not that The government enforced the law for there were no guards there. However many stories abounded of people dying after touching the altar. The stories were all the same the person faded to dust before their very eyes.

In the Priestess quarters Olayrae smiled when they entered although Minae was certain she could not see them ever since the terrible night when her eyes were gouged out by assassins.

"The time is coming when we will see no more of each other as each of us follows our destiny. I summoned you all here to...."

"Wait you did not summon me."

"Oh but I did brother. If not why are you all here today and not tomorrow. I know why you have come and I will give you an answer as best as I can but I will tell you this it will be up to you to follow your heart and go the right way.

For some your destiny is set in stone and nothing you can do can change it. For others you will have power to make your destiny a great one or a mediocre one. Ask your question."

She sat down.

Pradae spoke first. "Will I ever find true love?"

"I love you." Spargapises said exasperatedly.

"No you love yourself. I am merely a means to rebel against Tiirmirise and father."

"You will indeed find love sister. If that is what you want. You will find love have children and be happy but your name will not be remembered. If that is what you want. But you can also choose greatness. Your name will be greatly remembered but you will not find love nor happiness only a lonely slow and painful death."

"How will I know I am making that choice?"

"When the time comes you will know."

"And I?" Bierae asked timidly

"Ah I'm afraid your fate is set in stone. You will marry a handsome prince of the realm. You will grow fat in your old age and your husband will love you till the day you die. No matter what happens what you do you will have 3 children remember that Bierae."

"And Pasiphae?" Bierae asked after her favourite sister.

"Pasiphae like you has her destiny set in stone. She is doomed to die young but covered in glory and her name will be remembered for eternity for bravery and courage."

"She would have it no other way." Bierae sighed sadly.

"And I?" Minae asked tentatively

"You will have to make a choice between love and duty. Make no mistake your time of choosing is coming sooner than you think. If you choose duty you will live long and your joy and happiness will be in your children. If you choose love you will be gloriously happy but you will not live long."

"This is just Cack!"

"Is it? I tell you this Spargapises," her voice was stern and angry "Before you do the evil which you are about to do I will come to you. I have been granted that. Now I must go I am tired. You will never see me again except perhaps when I come to you in your dreams if you call to me. I will no longer remain in the temple. My calling is to travel the land and heal it."

"Yet you cannot heal yourself!" Spargapises sneered

"Spar!" Bierae said warningly

"But I can. Since I have the sight I no longer need physical eyes. The eyes I have see you all clearly and more. I can see you in the past in the future and in the present as clearly as you see me. Spargapises stands before me in green, his tunic belted, with tassels and brown leather breeches. His black hair oiled his face covered by an especially shiny wig beard. Pradae wears her customary white linen as does Bierae, Minae is wearing a delightful shade of fuchsia....shall I go on?"

Minae gasped "Oh Olay must you go?"

"I'm afraid so little one. Strange and frightening times are coming to Sarmatia and I must be there to help the people."

Chapter 4

The Lady of Battles

Tiirmirise spent the first campaign avoiding the large armies of the Dominion who were a much greater threat than the Simian. She did not have a large enough army to beat them and if they engaged the Dominion in open battle and she knew she would be defeated.

It was very frustrating having to fight a guerrilla war but it was the only viable way to conduct the current campaign. She cut their lines of supply and descended on them with her army in

lightning fast raids. Appearing without warning and then disappearing before they had time to regroup and fight. They retreated into Simian lands to lick their wounds.

At first she had come preparing to face the Simian and ended up at the Simian stronghold where she expected the usual ritual humiliation because she was a woman, a nothing with no royal Imperium except her capacity as Qastursh's ambassador. However the Simian had apparently suspended hostilities because a greater threat now loomed. The mighty Dominion had.

The Dominion were terrifying because they were a crack military army. They had excellent weapons and battlefield training rivalled only by the Massagetae. Even the Sarmatian army were not as militarily sophisticated as the Dominion.

So when she addressed the Simian assembly she was unprepared for their news but she did not let it show.

Prince Taeron spoke in the Simian Assembly his voice echoed in its halls. "The Dominion have decided they want to take our lands from us. They seek our iron mines to forge more steel for world domination."

"Prince Taeron, do you bare our weaknesses to the barbarian Sarmatian? They also wish to take our lands." One of the other Viziers spoke.

Tiirmirise did not of course wish to take their lands. She had quite enough intrigues and plotting to deal with between Ninyas, Spargapises and Vayanes. What she needed to do was return to Ado & Ekiti to prevent whatever mischief was afoot. The Simian assembly subsided and she cleared her throat and prepared to speak.

The Simian Assembly was a large room every bit as opulent as that in Ado or Ekiti. Gold leaf decorations, marble walls and columns and just like Ado and Ekiti council chambers, was decorated with statuary and tinkling water fountains.

In the middle of the assembly chambers of the twin cities, Ado & Ekiti, were two trees entwined together representing the marriage of the Sarmatiae and the Massagetae, two ivory chairs sat in front of the trees. Whereas in the Simian Assembly one chair was the centre of the room and that belonged to the King.

Tiirmirise stood in the middle of the floor and walked around the room thoughtfully so they could all see her. She wore her black leathers. Black leather trousers and black leather fitted coat which stopped at her waist.

Over that she wore a Sky metal and a Simian steel plate composition burnished to a brilliant mirror like shine. The Plate protected her body, her arms her thighs and legs. On her feet she wore silver greaves and black Simian boots. Silver spurs, a uniquely Massagetae invention were harnessed to her booted ankles.

Her customary purple cloak swirled around her with each movement. Her hair cut short for

battle, bore a delicately ornamented crown made of light weight beaten gold and studded with expensive jewels. She did not normally wear such ostentatious jewellery but the crown like the sceptre of office she carried made a statement.

If she were to wear her diadem and not much else they would never believe she acted with the authority and Imperium of the Sarmatian nation. It was because of that Imperium that she had been granted an audience before the Simian Assembly. Her right of address was granted only by the King of the Simian's personal grace and favour as one monarch to another.

Her face battle scarred, and her missing eye which was covered by a steel and diamond encrusted eye patch did not only make her look fiercesome and terrifying but also portrayed her as a person to be reckoned with. This was no soft harem bred simpering female. This was a warrior Queen, a Lady of Battles.

"We too have my problems at Sarmatia. As you well know we recently survived an assassination attempt which decimated several members of the royal family and till date no one knows who perpetrated it. We have come on behalf of Our King Qastursh, to negotiate a truce with the Simian. A mutually beneficial non-aggression treaty.

"We want more than that. We need more than that. Queen Tiirmirise. The Dominion will take our lands and once they learn of the fertility of your lands and the abundance of your gold mines they will find an excuse to take your lands also and they will not stop till they have enslaved every last Sarmatian."

"What do you ask of us Lord Taeron?" Tiirmirise regarded the Minister carefully. Taeron's youth masked an intelligent mind. He was the King's second youngest son and was politically astute.

She had yet to meet the Crown Prince Aresteion but she already had several dealings with the wily Taeron over the Simian steel she used to equip her armies and she knew him to be a tough negotiator and utterly corrupt.

"An alliance sealed by marriage between one of the daughters of Qastursh and a son of the Simian."

Tiirmirise knew she was on thin ground here. Ever since the assassination attempts Qastursh had become extremely protective of his daughters.

"Our King guards his daughters jealously and he will not give even the meanest of his daughters into concubine."

"She will be the only wife. I swear it!" A voice shouted earnestly from the doorway of the chamber.

Tiirmirise swirled around to find the owner of the earnest voice.

"And whom are you to so swear?"

"I am Aresteion. Crown Prince of the Simian."

Tiirmirise studied him carefully. He appeared physically trim. His eyes blazed with intelligence and a passion. He wore his royalty like a cloak of power. Arrogance and pride emanated from his pores and he was exactly as she expected the King's son to be.

"Very well. I will aid you in your battle at this time. When spring comes again you may choose your bride."

He bowed mockingly. Tiirmirise turned to address the rest of the Assembly. "By your kind permission I will come with you on this expedition. I would like to see how the Dominion fight. I will also send word to the nearest battalion. The winters will be upon us soon and the passes will be impossible. I do not think the Dominion wish to be on the Plains whilst we bed down in one of our strongholds for winter with fully stocked supplies."

Prince Taeron was not convinced. "We shall see."

"Make way for the King! Make way for the King!"

The assembly bowed to receive the king and Tiirmirise sat down in her chair. The Simian King looked every inch his sixty seven years. His age sat on him like a lead weight as he recounted the tale of their shocking defeat. 30 000 Simian troops defeated by 5000 Dominion troops.

Tiirmirise turned to Vayanes and whispered. "I don't understand, isn't King Silenion supposed to be a notoriously bad general? Why did Aresteion or Taeron not take command."

"Aresteion had already left on another expedition when news came of the Dominion sightings. Under Simian law when the crown prince or the ruling princes are absent the king may go into battle.

Since neither Taeron nor Aresteion were not around Silenion had to go. The timing was most unfortunate for them but very fortunate for us since it is known that you my lady have never lost a battle."

"I am glad this is Simian land, the amount of intriguing and plotting that goes on at home is so high that if I didn't know better, I would suspect that one of the conservative Viziers in Ado, after a Simian concession engineered the absence of the two princes." Tiirmirise whispered back.

"But you do know better my lady." Vayanes drawled.

"Did you have a hand in it?" Tiirmirise hissed

"Not this time and even if I did I would never admit it. Always remember Tiirmirise there is more than one way to skin a cat besides the defence of Sarmatia is our ultimate goal. You do it by soldiering, I do it with politics and others do it with trade."

"We are defenceless how can we get another army together in so short a time." One of the Simian ministers said wringing his hands. There was almost a palpable groan in the hall.

"Well I do not know how much time we have but in 14 days when they have finished their assignment we will have 5000 Sarmatian troops at your command."

"Well ten thousand returned with the King and we can levy another ten thousand." Prince Taeron said thoughtfully.

"Yes, yes, yes, but how to outfit them all and they will need training." The pessimistic Minister who had been wringing his hands inquired of the Assembly.

Tiirmirise addressed the assembly without bothering to stand up and ignored the raised eyebrows. "Strip the dead. Your dispatches did say the Dominion left the field looking for the King."

"They will be coming here?" Silenion asked horrified

"Only if they think the King is in residence" Taeron drawled. She could almost see a spark of light go off in his head.

"We would have to prepare for a siege. Eventually" Aresteion sighed.

As the preparations got under way the Sarmatian army was not able to reach the Simian capital in time. Instead the Sarmatian army simply found a city to bed down and wait for winter to end. It was a clever decision because winter was hard on the plains. Once the snow fell all the animals went into hibernation.

Unlike Sarmatia which every so often had wooded groves and in the north there was an abundant forest, there were no trees, no woods at all in the land of the Simian. Their fruit grew mainly on bushes or under ground. The Simian imported wood from Sarmatia and used coal to heat up their houses. Wood for them was a luxury.

It also meant that the siege was harder on the besieging army than it was on the defenders. In the deepest of mid winter a little party stole into the castle and there was a lot of pandemonium when they was discovered. The people were arrested and dragged to the throne room and would have been killed had not Tiirmirise recognised the culprits.

"Candace! What is the meaning of this?"

"Majesty! The lithe woman threw herself on the floor. We travelled to bring you news that the Sarmatian army is holed up in the nearby city of Tasruk. Unable to come to your rescue. We come to ask your plans. I could not risk sending a bird as it would be noticed so I had to come myself."

"You know this intruder?" Prince Taeron was furious.

As well he might be their security had been compromised and he was thinking if it had been compromised then the Dominion could also compromise it.

"Yes she came with news."

"You will return to Makeda and Nnandi, Tell them to wait till the end of winter. The Dominion will leave of their own accord then they are to rendezvous with me here."

"As you command Dread lady. Take precautions before you leave that no one else can sneak in the way you did."

"I already have Dread lady." She grinned addressing the queen by the ancient honorific title of conqueror used by the Massagetae for their warrior queens.

Tiirmirise returned to her bedchamber tossing her heavy leather gauntlets on a nearby stool before taking off her purple woollen cloak. She unstrapped her sword belt and was about to lay it down when she noticed something was different.

She sniffed the air. Her room smelt different. There was someone there who was not supposed to be. The scent was familiar. Her room was warm from the coal fire in the grate and the room slightly stuffy so it was easy to tell if someone had been in there.

"Come out." She said quietly

She heard a giggle and Minae appeared from behind a silver drape. Tiirmirise exhaled with relief and placed her sword on the table. As usual she was clad in very little. The room was indeed very warm so she did not need to wear so much.

"What are you doing here Minae?"

"I couldn't bear to be parted from you Tiirmirise I love you." She said earnestly

"You do not know what love is and you have come at a bad time. I take it you persuaded Candace to bring you here."

"Aren't you even the slightest bit happy to see me?"

Tiirmirise smiled "You know I am little one." Minae threw herself against the black Queen and wrapped her arms around her slim leather clad body.

"I sincerely hope you do not intend to go amongst the Simian dressed like that." The black queens brows receded upwards into her hairline.

"Jealous?" She teased

"Extremely!" Tiirmirise drawled

Minae giggled and standing on tiptoe lifted her face expectantly upwards for the kiss she fully expected to come. She was not disappointed.

Tiirmirise pulled away and removed the eye patch. Her injured eye started to weep when exposed to the atmosphere. She washed her face with water and soap and then rubbed an ointment made especially for it on the eye.

Finally she put on a more comfortable cloth patch. Having dressed her wound and washed her hands she turned to face Minae.

"You should not have come. The situation is soon to be desperate. I will make arrangements for Candace to take you back to Sarmatia."

"It is too late for that Candace has already left. Why can't I stay?"

"I don't trust the Simian. Besides you are too beautiful to be a princess no one will believe you are not a body slave."

"What a way you have with compliments." She slid her hands down Tiirmirise belly and tugged at the leather strappings of the Queen's breeches.

"What a way you have with Queens." Tiirmirise drawled

Tiirmirise ever resourceful managed to sneak a letter to Qastursh in Ado and he read it in the Chamber of Viziers with glee and no little concern.

"My Husband, I pray that this letter finds you in good health. I have interesting news for you. The army that defeated Silenion so easily was turned back from the city walls. The people stayed put inside. The city was built to withstand both the siege and the horrible winter, the worst in ten years and the Simian have put it down to the favour of the gods.

There was nothing to scavenge from the land. The snow fell in thick powder every day and every night. The wind blew tirelessly. There were no trees or any thing to temper the rage of the elements and there was no wood to build palisades to protect the enemy army because the wood was being burnt to keep the army warm.

The canvas tents the dominion army brought were little protection against elements, the winter was so horrible and the ground so barren that the Dominion army literally froze to death outside our gates.

Eventually they decided to leave and gathered what troops they had left. Our own Sarmatian troops yet to arrive, we took my vanguard of 500 Massagetae and some of the Simian army and

anticipated their route then using the snow as cover we ambushed them at night. None of the Simian troops thought that we could defeat the Dominion but defeat them we did.

Unfortunately instead of accepting their surrender and letting that be an end to it Silenion still smarting from that last defeat forced every Dominion soldier to pass under a yolk. An insulting symbolic gesture to the Dominion I believe.

He also extracted a promise from the Dominion general and a treaty with the Dominion granting all sorts of trading terms and addressed the letter to the 3rd man in charge in the Dominion. The Speaker of the Senate House. Another Insult I believe to their two consuls. I think I have won some measure of respect for our people from the Simian."

The letter did not end there. Qastursh did not think it important to read the rest of the letter out to the assembly which read " My husband, I beg you to be careful. The Simian have informed me there is much plotting and intriguing at court.

Ninyas plotting is responsible for our damaged relations with the Simian. You must do what you can to counter it and do keep an eye on the other girls. Minae is here with me and is safe. She managed to sneak through enemy lines and I believe Prince Aresteion has taken a shine to her."

She signed off and the King sighed. Tiirmirise was like a force of nature her absence in the palace was felt through out the Kingdom very keenly indeed.

After winter spent with the Simian Tiirmirise army finally arrived just before the end of winter. Her army was different from that of preceding Sarmatian Kings.

Most of their armies and indeed most of the surrounding kingdoms drew their soldiers from the landed classes. Men of small holdings who needed to return to the fields during certain times of the year to plant crops, harvest the fields and manage their lands.

Her armies were drawn from the landless masses. Men and women who had nothing to lose but their Sarmatian citizenship or Massagetae nobility if they were sold into slavery during a war.

Since no Sarmatian, whether Massagetae, Urhobae, Sarmatiae, Getulae or Trigantae could be a slave, a man or woman in debt sold themselves to the state to pay their debt.

The state paid the money from their sale to the creditor. The debtor then worked for the state for a reduced salary. The system worked because more often than not the State always needed workers for the army, building work like sewers, aqueducts, temples, schools and other construction work. It kept the economy growing and put food in people's bellies.

All Sarmatians were also educated up to a certain level by the state the landless classes were largely numerate. It was one of Qastursh's father's laws and had been strictly enforced by Qastursh himself. This made it easier to teach them to recognise flags, numbers, letters and symbols and thus easier to train in battle and maintain discipline.

Finally the landless had no preconceived notions or traditions of military service so she was able to mould them into a disciplined military force with their own unique fighting style which to her mind suited the national character of the country.

They were easily adaptable to taking evasive action, some specialised in guerrilla warfare, others in mounted attacks, others were especially trained for infantry work, others yet for construction, artillery and even the navy. Her entire army was superbly trained rivalled only by the disciplined Dominion. It had taken her ten years to get them that way for Tiirmirise was now well into her thirties.

Further Tiirmirise herself made a highly emotive rallying point for her armies. The story of the Falcon and her victory over the barbarian Nesian horde had swept across the tribes of the plains like wildfire. She gave each battalion a beautiful gold Falcon, which had its wings spread upon a very tall pole the top of which was wrapped with a sheet of gold.

The Falcon was carried by the most decorated man in the battalion. The Falconier. Each battalion swore to keep the Falcon from falling into enemy hands. The Falcon was an embodiment of the State and the People of the plains. This then was the highly trained professional army that came to the aid of the Simian.

Like most, the Simian assumed the Sarmatian army was made up solely of cavalry troops because of their reputation as horse breeders and merchants. They were therefore surprised to see both cavalry and infantry troops decked out in Sarmatian colours of Red and Black.

The Dominion returned in Spring with a twenty thousand strong army and despite Tiirmirise's orders they decided to give battle. Tiirmirise was furious and refused to fight. She claimed she was waiting for Qastursh's orders to join battle. Still with over fifty thousand men the Simian outnumbered the Dominion. Yet they were soundly beaten.

Tiirmirise had observed the battle from her vantage point on top of a hill. She had seen how excellently the Dominion General one Lucius Cassius had deployed his troops and conducted the whole engagement. The Simian fled in complete disarray. Tiirmirise watched coldly as Aresteion fought for his life. She was torn in two minds whether to rescue him or let him die. Why?

She suspected Minae was in love with Aresteion and Tiirmirise was extremely jealous. She'd often wished she could kill the Simian prince and shove his self satisfied smirk down his handsome corded throat. However she knew Aresteion was also smitten with the Princess who literally had him wrapped around her little finger and that could only be advantageous to Sarmatia but not to Tiirmirise. She paced the hill above the battle restlessly. They all awaited her orders. Pasiphae was angry. She knew what the Queen ought to do. Everyone knew what the queen ought to do and yet The Queen hesitated.

When she finally did act the Dominion were not expecting the lightning fast raid to rescue the beleaguered Prince Aresteion. Pasiphae rode into battle and was truly a terrifying sight.

Her ululating screams and the fact she rode into battle beside the black queen without wearing

much in the way of armour. No plate, no chain mail her long brown hair flowing behind her, her spear held high. Neither blade nor spear touched her and she used her shield to brush aside the javelins and arrows aimed at her with unconscionable ease.

Her skill with spear and shield was phenomenal and when an enemy soldier finally broke it she simply drew her short sword and stabbed him in the throat. His blood spurted every where like red ochre.

The Dominion had already nicknamed her *Carnifex* "the Butcher".

She fought back to back and toe to toe with Tiirmirise. Stabbing and slashing with the curved scimitar swords, made of the sky metal peculiar to the Massagetae.

It was very different from the regular issue Sarmatian short stabbing sword. Massagetae sky metal was mined from rocks that fell from the heavens and contained an iron ore not found on earth. It was stronger than Simian Steel and the blade could be folded five thousand times. They never rusted and it was said such a sword could cut through Simian Steel like butter which was off course the most durable metal known to mankind.

Aresteion refused to leave the field and flee. Tiirmirise tried to reason with him as her father fought beside her in the Massagetae vanguard. Aresteion soon realised where the warrior Queen got her short temper from.

Irritated with the conversation, Jbenga, Tiirmirise's father cuffed him, knocking him unconscious and flung him over his horse and the Massagetae vanguard were gone as quickly as they had come. Pasiphae thought she heard Tiirmirise mutter under her breath "I wish I'd thought of that."

In the rest of the field the war went sorely for the Simian. The Simian general who was the overall commander of the army and who according to tradition held the centre was beheaded and his gory remains paraded for all to see on a pike.

The Simian fled in complete disorder and the greedy Dominion this time stripped the bodies of the dead so the Simian could not quickly re-arm a new army. However the time he took to gather spoils also delayed him and it would be another 14 days before he was able to conduct another major engagement against the Simian.

They were in the Simian High command tent where the generals held an emergency meeting after the battle.

"We will take command of this army. We have fifteen thousand troops now in your territories to your exhausted ten thousand."

"What can you a woman do against these devils" Parmenion one of the Simian generals spat blood as he spoke. The healers bandaged him up in the command tent.

"We can beat them."

"How?"

"Easily." Tiirmirise said maddeningly and Makeda rolled her eyes. She could see that Tiirmirise was going to enjoy basking in her moment as much as possible. Everyone could see the queen was dying to say I told you so but she did not. Tiirmirise had more political savvy than that.

"Actually things are not as bad as they seem, Aresteion, We believe should be reinstated as the titular head and overall commander-in-chief of this campaign.

"But If I win all the glory will be mine." Aresteion had been humbled he was no longer his usual swaggering arrogant self.

Tiirmirise smiled "You'll need it. Qastursh is not going to give his daughter to a loser now is he. If We win as We believe the God wills it, The Sarmatian King will see you as a worthy suitor for his daughter. Your Majesty King Silenion We believe it best you return to the capital and ask your son Taeron to persuade the Simian assembly to raise more money to fight this war. We will need to establish and consolidate our supply lines. An army marches on its stomach and not just its feet.

"Bossy woman!" The king huffed.

"Merely a suggestion your majesty merely a suggestion." Tiirmirise bit into an apple.

"Please continue your majesty." Silenion bowed to her.

Tiirmirise bowed back to him and continued. "Thank you your majesty."

He more than the others knew how utterly hopeless the situation was. Unlike most kings he was actually quite humble. Aresteion had enough pride and arrogance for both of them.

"The Dominion will not be expecting us to launch a co-ordinated attack. They regard us as oafish barbarians with no intellectual capacity. We shall therefore surprise them."

The Massagetae Queen was to be proved right for Lucius Cassius in his pursuit of the Simian was supremely confident he would encounter no organised resistance and he therefore marched towards the capital without tightening ranks or sending out scouts. The Dominion fell easily for the ambush set for them.

In other circumstances Lucius Cassius would have been correct in his estimation that he would not encounter the Simian and their allies. There were not enough trees or groves or forests to hide an army. The ground was flat as the eye could see. Anyone who tried to sneak up on them would be visible and in plain sight or so the Dominion general thought.

Unfortunately that was not the case. The Simian passed underground in a series of tunnels which

had been dug by their ancestors for years. It was after all their land and they knew more about it than their opponents. After outflanking the Dominion army they then burrowed into the grass lay down flat and waited for them to march into the trap.

The Dominion were slaughtered to a man. Tiirmirise was utterly ruthless. However the Queen did nothing insulting to her enemy like making them march under a yoke and delivering sophisticated insults like that meted out by the Simian.

The Queen of two cities was quite merciless. Tiirmirise gave orders they were to take no prisoners and slaughtered every single soldier so that they would not return in the next campaign season to fight against the Sarmatians. This very act shocked the Simians.

The sheer cold bloodedness of the executions and the relish that the Sarmatian Princess Pasiphae took in obeying Tiirmirise's order was terrifying, even animals were slaughtered better.

Tiirmirise had given Pasiphae the task of disposing of the prisoners. She knew full well that the other Massagetae and Sarmatian generals would have balked at such an order. It was why Pasiphae was one of her high ranking generals.

She followed orders with unquestioningly loyalty and the black Queen manipulated her lust for blood to suit her own ends. Apart from the expense of maintaining slaves and the impact on the economy, it was not well met to dishonour a defeated enemy and since death was better than dishonour...

"God help you if you or yours were ever captured Tiirmirise." Prince Aresteion shook his head.

"If me or mine were ever captured, I would expect them to end their own life before they surrendered. The Massagetae do not prosper well as slaves." Tiirmirise said coldly.

Tiirmirise had been furious when she learned just after the battle through Candace's intelligence gathering at the Simian court that in fact the Dominion had only attacked because the politically sly and crafty King Silenion had deliberately provoked the war with the Dominion as part of Ninyas plot. The Simian stood to gain an alliance with Samatia and Ninyas was paid a substantial sum of money by Silenion. Money he could use to bribe other viziers to support him in his quest for the Massagetae throne.

She had meant the atrocity against the prisoners to be a lesson to the Simian and it was effective. They would hesitate before engaging the Queen in any battle or war and further they were more than willing to sign a military alliance it was after all the whole aim of the war which they had plotted with Prince Ninyas.

As for the Dominion they would think twice before they thought of attacking the Simians and their allies. Although it was spring the Dominion would have to wait for the next year before they could do anything. Twenty thousand men was a large number of men. Men who would not return to harvest the wheat from the fields or the fruits from the orchards, protect their wives from greedy slavers or watch their children grow.

They could not spare men for now but they would outfit an army and take revenge. As summer turned into autumn and the Dominion needed to outfit their army and harvest their crops the campaign season came and went and it seemed unlikely they would launch another attack that year.

Tiirmirise returned to Sarmatia in Spring and Minae married Aresteion and became Crown Princess of the Simian. She should have been angry, upset depressed even but she felt nothing. She had made love to Minae and then told her why she should marry Aresteion. She well remembered the scene that determined piece of baggage had thrown.

"How can you fuck me so sweetly and then tell me to marry that pompous arrogant bastard!" Minae cried heartbroken.

"Because you are a Princess and must do your duty." Tiirmirise said softly. Minae did not know it but it was one of the hardest things the Queen had ever had to do in her life.

"I thought you loved me." She wept her tears falling freely.

"I don't." Tiirmirise lied. Her inscrutably bored expression was back. The one that Minae hated.

"I hate you!" She screamed. "I hate you!" Tiirmirise motioned for the Massagetae guards to carry the screaming girl away.

After Minae left one of the tribes in Northern Sarmatia began to rebel. They refused to send tribute defected on a payment and against her advice Qastursh sent Spargapises to settle the matter.

"For crying out loud Qastursh the boy is barely 19 he cannot manage a campaign never mind a war of attrition against your own people!"

"Your son may have seen only 19 summers but he has organised a plot to kill me!"

"You have no proof!" She hissed. By the heavens he made her so mad! Qastursh's relationship with his wife was more like that of best friends or brother and sister. They were good friends but they also had terrible fights and it was always often over Spargapises.

It was the only time Tiirmirise's slow well modulated tones became a high piercing shrill and she sounded more like a screaming banshee. That in itself was terrifying except that Qastursh's answering screams held a higher pitch than his wife's.

They were like a pair of fish wives when they argued. Priceless vases broke as they smashed against the mirror behind Tiirmirise. He just wanted to hurl things at that beautiful head not that it would ever sink any sense into it. She in turn either deflected the vases or dodged them. She didn't have the luxury of hurling things at the King, that was treason.

They never actually committed physical violence against each other but they did on anyone else that was handy. When the disagreements began the slaves got out of the way. Qastursh had once kicked a kneeling slave in anger broken his toe and hopping from foot to foot in the middle of Tiirmirise's hysterical giggles. The terrified slave lay cowering on the floor. Tiirmirise generously dismissed him.

Now once more in the middle of a blazing row between the king and queen a row which Tiirmirise was not going to win because Qastursh was very determined.

"I have seen it. It is whispered in the palace and in the streets have you seen the graffiti on the walls. My son with a dagger in his hand plunging it into my back. Whilst my wife sits her head buried in mountains of scrolls of deadly dull laws and trade treaties more interested in building the biggest chariot racing arena on the plains."

"I care about the economy!"

"The economy! Don't give me that! You are like all the other bloody Massagetae and Sarmatians on the planet. All you bloody care about is gambling on your bleeding chariot races!"

"I care about you Qastursh! How can you doubt me? I swear to you that if Spargapises were to stab you with a dagger I would kill him myself!"

"That would not suit me my dear because I would already be dead!"

"Then Make Derastes your heir." Tiirmirise urged

"What put my grandson in danger? Make you vulnerable to Ninyas plots? Would you be able to cope with Spargapises plotting? You may be physically stronger than I but we both know you are emotionally weak. I know you could not cope with your own son trying to kill you! It would devastate you wife and be assured he will plot against you because he would see such a ruse as an attempt by you to seize power. No my dear I will just have to live long enough to see Spargapises reach his majority."

"Let us hope you do." Tiirmirise muttered frustratedly under her breath

Tiirmirise stood over at her window watching the setting sun.

"You miss her don't you?"

The Queen did not need to turn round to know who it was that spoke. She recognised the voice even as the woman stepped out of shadow and into the light.

"Bierae, you are normally asleep at this time. What brings you to my chambers?"

"I could not sleep. I was worried. I thought you might like some company. A game of chess perhaps?"

Tiirmirise nodded and motioned for a slave to set up a game. They played of a while in companionable silence.

"Since Minae left you have become remote and reserved even. When you are not screaming at Father."

"Your father deserves to be screamed at. Besides I have ever been reserved Bierae except with Qastursh. The man is maddening." She moved a chess piece and continued speaking. Bierae was annoyed. Tiirmirise was doing it again. Effortlessly thrashing her at chess.

"Once Spargapises becomes king," She continued "I will pack up and leave this place."

"Why?"

"I cannot live here. Death stalks these walls like a vengeful spirit. Something is not right something bad is about to happen. I can feel it."

"So can I. I hear there has been a deputation for my hand in marriage." Bierae said hesitantly.

Tiirmirise was amused. She now knew the real reason the princess could not sleep. She was worried that Tiirmirise was about to marry her off.

"There have been several deputations for your hand in marriage princess but since Minae left your father has become reluctant to marry off any more of his daughters." Tiirmirise smiled wryly "I don't think he realised how much he would miss her."

"Nor did you."

"Nor did I." Tiirmirise agreed "Checkmate!" the Queen reached for a goblet of her wine."

Despite the many frustrations Ninyas had received he yet continued to plot. On the one hand his scheme to ally with the Simian had been very profitable indeed. However his last intrigue to seize the crown had ended with Magba Massinassa double crossing him and mounting his own assault on the Ivory throne and in the process killing two of his own sons.

It was a mistake he would never make again. He did not trust Magba and he could not bring him to justice as it would expose his own part in the sordid plot to kill the King. This time he was more careful to weave his next plot outside of Sarmatia where it could not be so easily traced to him.

He had arranged for Gypsos to ally itself with Sarmatia. Gypsos had excess food and it was also known as the bread basket of the world. Its fertile alluvial plains always inevitably yielded a

great harvest and the Gyptians always needed Wood from the Sarmatians to build ships to transport their goods.

They had access to a seaport and had built a huge lighthouse at Menes the capital of Gypsos. It was said to be the seventh wonder of the world and helped sailors to navigate the treacherous waters around the coast of Gypsos. The Mastabah of Gypsos had died leaving 3 children.

Khufu, Khafren and a sister Nefer. All power resided in the Mastabah but according to the law of Gypsos succession it passed through the female line. To be Mastabah a claimant had to marry the dead Mastabah's sister, mother or daughter which ultimately had incestuous consequences which in this case was further complicated by the fact that Khufu and Khafren were the sons of the Mastabah by different mothers born on the same day in the same moment so neither could claim to be the first born.

Naturally they both fought over who should marry their younger sister Nefer and had been doing so with the result that not only were they ruining the country but they had also managed to embroil most of the continent in the family quarrel.

One such protagonist was the self-styled Emperor of Sirahn, Eugertes Grossbelly. So called for his phenomenal appetite for all things edible. He was famous for his orgies of food and wine and his appetites also extended to conquest and Eugertes thought Gypsos was ripe for the plucking.

At first time of trying he had to return to Sirahn to deal with a coup and consolidate his power which he did ruthlessly. It was during this time that Ninyas persuaded the High Council to make an alliance with the Gypsos. The trap was clever because it played on the greed of the merchant class, those viziers who did a roaring trade with the Gypsos. The favourable trade concessions with the Gypsos were obvious and the profits to be made were enormous.

So that when Eugertes turned his greedy beady little eyes on Gypsos, the Gyptian royal family hurriedly called a truce and then went running off to the Sarmatians for help. Having ruined the country with their incessant internecine fighting they were in no condition to oppose the Sirahn Empire single-handedly.

When they arrived at Ado, the capital of Sarmatia and traditional home of the Massagetae, Qastursh was extremely reluctant to give them any aid. However Ninyas had planned well.

Firstly he used Nefer to seduce Tiirmirise to their cause. Tiirmirise, Ninyas noted like all Massagetae had a weakness for beautiful women. Especially those who played the victim. It was easy for Nefer to play the helpless princess and convince Tiirmirise that they needed aid. She also thoroughly enjoyed seducing the Queen and wished all her royal duties were as enjoyable.

Khufu's approach was less subtle. He simply gifted Qastursh with a pair of handsome rugged young Gypsos soldiers. So that by the time Tiirmirise and Qastursh were trying to persuade the Viziers in the Council Hall to send help to the Gypsos, Ninyas the cunning fox was bribing the Viziers with the money he received from King Silenion of the Simian in his last plot to refuse, which so exasperated the King that he rode roughshod over the Viziers and jeopardised his

political allies in the council.

"Enough! I am King. Tiirmirise go and kick out Gross Belly from Gypsos."

Ninyas got up and strode to the centre of the dais to take up a dramatic pose and address the Chamber of Viziers.

"If that is your command brother, we will not disobey it but I would remind his majesty that the Viziers cannot agree to spend the money required to outfit another army. Your majesty has already commanded young prince Spargapises to escort princess Minae to the Simian border and assist them against the threat of the Dominion attack come spring."

"We sent only ten thousand troops. We can raise fresh troops." Nnandi yelled at him from the floor as the General whose portfolio was to sort out logistics and operations, she was an really an administrator not a politician. However she was also a Vizier in council, representing her clan and these matters concerned her."

"How many troops do you intend us to outfit for the war against the Sirahn empire. Ten thousand, twenty thousand fifty thousand and who will pay for this war Gypsos or Sarmatia?"

Makeda glared at Vayanes. "She hated politics. She much preferred being on a battle field. War was so much more straight forward. You saw your enemy, you killed your enemy. In the chamber you did not even know who was friend or foe.

She leaned over to Jbenga, Tiirmirise father. "There is mischief afoot here my lord mark my words."

"Aye and his name is Ninny!" Osamaye finished.

His words drew a smothered chuckle from the elder statesman. Ninny was one of Ninyas Nicknames which he was affectionately called by his enemies in the chamber of Viziers although no one actually used it in public. It meant "silly".

He was a rising young star who had attached himself to Tiirmirise faction and was angling for a military post. He was not Massagetae like Jbenga but a Sarmatian from the Getulae tribe.

Since the fastest way to a distinguished political career was to distinguish oneself in battle and thus gain a post in the council and then the Grand council young men like Osamaye were often warmongers. It was why neither Nnandi nor Tiirmirise and her supporters would have guessed that Ninyas could have a hand in such a diabolical plot.

There were so many parties who wished to go to war for political gain and there were other factions like the peace party which was made up of merchants like the Ijesha family who claimed they wanted peace to build up their already enormous fortunes but who had formented the war between the Simian and the Dominion for trade concessions and were now backing Tiirmirise over another war against the Emperor of Sirahn.

"We don't have time for this!" Khufu roared

"Prince Khufu I would like to remind you that you are merely a guest here and should only be seen and not heard." Vayanes yelled back at the young Gypatian Prince. Who subsided in his seat under the glare of Scaures the newly appointed speaker of the Council Chamber.

"We must keep our obligations to the Simian." Magba Massinassa thundered.

"I propose Queen Tiirmirise go to Eugertes and tell him to return to Sirahn." Magba Massinassa finished smiling evilly.

"I am sorry Dread Lady but we all heard the King and his command must be obeyed." Ninyas shook his head mournfully.

"Are you proposing Lord Ninyas, that We should go alone with no army to Eugertes Grossbelly and demand he return back to Sirahn?" Tiirmirise asked incredulously her deep smooth modulated voice rising in barely controlled anger.

"Actually I am not proposing anything." He turned around and counted the situation on his fingers.

"Firstly, The viziers have refused to vote you troops, secondly the King COMMANDS that you go and tell Grossbelly to return to Sirahn.

He waved his hand negligently" Besides you wouldn't exactly be alone would you. You can always take your beloved Massagetae, and the King's standard and sceptre to show you have the royal Imperium to contract treaties."

Ninyas smiled ferally knowing how well he had neatly trapped her. He might as well have said checkmate.

Tiirmirise groaned inwardly. Eugertes Grossbelly would likely kill her where she stood and ignore her ludicrous suggestion that he retreat when she only had 500 Massagetae at her back to his 30,000 strong army.

She could almost compute his next move. Qastursh would die in an accident and with Spargapises yet to reach his majority it was only a matter of time before he killed her son and took the throne either that or he would frame the prince for treason.

All he then had to do was marry off his various nieces for political alliances leaving him clear to rule unchallenged. She could have kicked herself and kicked Qastursh. She didn't instead she glared at him and Qastursh realising his political blunder put his hands on his head and closed his eyes as he realised the import of his situation.

Tiirmirise bowed "If that is the will of the council."

"The Princes and Princess shall of course remain behind till you have the country back under control." Ninyas smiled ferally. He had won the first round.

This time Saronne knew she had gone too far but there it was. She had done nothing when the Massagetae Princess had beaten two of her colleagues till their bodies were nothing but a bloody mass of flesh but she was damned if she was going to allow the child in front of her to be assaulted or used in such a way.

She did not care how much it was going to cost her personally. She herself had a daughter somewhere and she hoped if her own daughter ever found herself in such a situation some kindly stranger would do as she had done.

She had taken one look at the terrified young girl and smuggled her out into the household of Archimenides and his wife. Archimenides was the miller. Everyone bought corn or wheat from the market place but invariably they had to go to a miller to grind it.

Archimenides had inherited two silver mill stones from a distant Simian cousin. His bread did not have stones and other bits of gravel which fell from the grind stones into the flour as it was ground consequently he was one of the most popular Millers and also very rich.

A kindly man he had befriended Saronne when she first arrived after she treated him for gout free of charge and on the house. Naturally she knew she would not be able to keep her guilty secret for long and waited anxiously for the Brothel keeper to find out and kill her.

He did find out and he was furious. He ordered that she be thrown into one of the rooms whilst he decided what her fate would be.

He never got to decide because he died of a heart attack and the niece a genteel lady decided she did not want to sully her hands with such a sordid business. All the slaves were to be sold as was the house and everything in it.

In the meantime the woman had Saronne herself catalogue all the slaves, all the debts owed and all the items outstanding so that her actions were not discovered and once more Saronne found herself facing the prospect of another slave auction in Gypsos due to another genteel do-gooder.

Chapter 5

The Making of the Legend

Tiirmirise went to her chamber and immediately started giving orders. Her Massagetae were to

go and make the young Prince Derastes safe. She placed him in the care of his great-grandfather Jbenga and his great Uncle Xango. They were to retreat to the ancestral home of the Massagetae with the Princess Aleye Derastes mother, till further notice. The southern Massagetae lands were large and could be quite inhospitable to an invading army or force.

"Let me come with you sister" Xango begged.

"You have no offspring brother. Had your line been secure I would have welcomed your sword this day. However I am a grand-mother at barely thirty six. I can afford to lose my life."

"Do not do anything stupid daughter." Jbenga warned.

"I will take Candace and 300 other Massagetae with me Makeda and Nnandi will go with the others and to see to the safety of my grandson and his mother Princess Aleye.

The other Massagetae generals, Pasiphae included can meet me in Gypsos. Spargapises has twenty thousand troops with him. If they cannot protect their prince they do not deserve to call themselves Sarmatian."

Tiirmirise continued to put on her armour angrily. She carried her helmet under her arm and went out into the courtyard. Her purple cloak denoting her royalty blew in the wind swirling violently around her. She clambered onto her big black stallion Mordenes, in one elegant athletic movement.

In her black armour with the silver face mask she looked quite terrifying. She rode out with the Massagetae behind her in a sea of black and purple. Above their billowing cloaks, and rising on top of a gold pole was her personal emblem the golden Falcon.

They travelled over land as far as they could before taking a pleasure barge up the river to Menes and then proceeded on horse until they encountered Eugertes Grossbelly of Sirahn and his army. She stood at the top of a hill several thousands of yards away. She made camp set up her tent and after a light lunch sat down to wait patiently for him.

Eugertes did not have a sophisticated scouting system. He did however have a large army. The largest standing army in these parts, the Gyptians were in disarray and he did not expect any resistance. Therefore the King was not happy to see the Sarmatian Flag, draped with the Royal standard of Imperium of the whole of the People of the Plains and even worse what looked like a possible Sarmatian army.

He was on bad terms with the Dominion and he needed all the friends he could get. He did not need a war with Tiirmirise. The only person who had so far managed to defeat the Dominion. However he also had his eyes on Gypsos. After waiting several hours he eventually approached the Sarmatian command tent.

The King waddled over to where Tiirmirise stood in full terrifying battle armour. Her face unreadable behind the terrible silver mask that formed part of her helmet. He knew of her many

titles which she had earned amongst which was the Lady of battles given by the Simian King Silenion in recognition of her help to the Simian Nation, The Falcon of Sarmatia and Queen of the Massagetae and Dread Lady of the Plains, the ancient honorific for a warrior Queen.

King Eugertes frowned at her. "Sarmatia has no business in Gypsos." His three his chins wobbled angrily as he spoke sternly.

"And Sirahn" said Queen Tiirmirise in dangerously dulcet tones "Has no business in Gypsos."

"Go back to Sarmatia." said King Eugertes

"Go back to Sirahn" retorted Tiirmirise.

Neither moved. Each sized the other up. Eugertes knew Tiirmirise reputation. He knew she had never lost a battle in her fifteen years as Queen and during that time Sarmatia had gone from being a country of barbarians to a military Superpower that even the mighty Dominion feared.

He himself paid tribute to the Dominion and had witnessed how they broke his father. He was aware that his relationship with them was not good and even worse if it had been they were in the midst of a civil war and would not be able to come to his aid.

"King Qastursh commands me to order you to return to Sirahn."

"You and who's army?"

"I am Tiirmirise, Queen of the Massagetae, Dread Lady of the Plains and by the Imperium invested in me by the People of the Plains I am ordering you to leave."

"Absolutely not! Now see here...I..."

The black Queen drew her sword and advanced towards the shrinking King.

Tiirmirise and the Massagetae dispatched his personal bodyguard of eight in a matter of moments. Isolated, exposed and several hundred yards away from his army except for the four trembling slaves who carried his great girth on his Litter, Tiirmirise drew a circle on the ground with the tip of her bloody sword around the traumatised and now trembling King and his slaves.

"Before you step out of this circle I advise you to ponder your actions most carefully. Your **Imperial** majesty and when you do step out of it ensure you are facing east and well on your way home to Sirahn."

Time stood still as Eugertes' face turned beet red under his black, oily, curled and wired wig beard at the realisation he had just shat himself. He ordered his men to turn around to face East and he marched off taking his army with him.

Tiirmirise returned to Gypsos where she found the trembling Gyptian army. Gypsos treated her

like a conquering hero and opened its gates to her. Tiirmirise then sent word to the Princes Khafren, Khufu and Princess Nefer in Ado.

She was riding toward the Docks of Menes to visit the infamous lighthouse that the Mastabah Narmer the great had built in Gypsos with her Massagetae bodyguard. Tiirmirise was chatting desultorily with Candace when she saw her. She was being auctioned on a platform with six other female body slaves.

She took Tiirmirise's breath away.

"A Goddess made flesh." was the thought that came to her mind. She did not realise she had said the words out loud till Candace groaned and rolled her eyes. Tiirmirise shifted uncomfortably on her horse and was glad her helmet and face mask covered her expression. It was not seemly for a Queen to be seen drooling in public.

Candace turned her head to regard the Queen. She too wore her helmet but no face mask. Candace's eyebrows almost disappeared into her helmet as she turned to see what had gotten Tiirmirise so entranced. The Queen of the Massagetae and Sarmatia was staring at a slave auction. Hell half the docks was staring at the slave auction. Many slaves were bought and sold on the docks of Menes every day but not like this one.

Her beauty was raw and sensuous yet innocent. In a country of beautiful people of all colours, hues and skin tones she stood out from the others who stood on the raised wooden platform. The fact she stood out from the slaves on the dais was a testament to her sheer beauty because the other slaves on the dais were absolutely stunning.

Tiirmirise stopped Mordenes, her stallion and the other two Massagetae bodyguards almost clattered into her. She barely heard the auctioneer's sales pitch as he persuaded potential buyers how skilled and well trained the body slaves were.

She was especially expensive but then Tiirmirise knew she would be. However she was not expensive because she was a beautiful body slave she was expensive because not only did she read and write but she was also a healer.

Candace cleared her throat in an effort to regain Tiirmirise's attention. They were supposed to be meeting with the Gyptian Viziers and putting forward their solutions to the current political crisis in Gypsos and here was Tiirmirise mooning over a slave girl!

"Excuse me, Your Majesty the meeting?" Candace inquired.

"Those old farts can bloody wait. They will do nothing without me."

"Your majesty let us go you can send one of the factors to bring her to the palace." Candace said exasperatedly.

Tiirmirise ignore her as though she had not spoken. The Queen was still dressed in full battle gear for she had planned to intimidate the hell out of the Gyptian advisers and ministers.

Tiirmirise rode to the raised dais where the auction was being held and slid off her black stallion Mordenes ignoring what she knew would be another roll of the eyes from Candace. Candace was well justified in rolling her eyes too.

Tiirmirise already owned eight exquisitely beautiful and extremely talented body slaves in Ado alone and twice that many bath attendants had been put at her disposal in Gypsos so she really did not need another body slave. Candace knew from experience however that once decided on a course of action Tiirmirise would not listen.

Tiirmirise was determined to possess the blonde beauty whose eyes watched her almost challengingly from the wooden dais. The black Queen was aware that the slavers and their customers were terrified and awed by her presence and reputation.

The crowd parted for her to pass. Only a dithering idiot would have stood in her way. She terrified grown battle hardened warriors with her sheer presence on the battlefield so the effect on a soft civilians populace unused to fighting was akin to watching a living nightmare come to life.

Her black leathers worn under burnished black steel armour which glinted in the noon day sun gave her a sinister appearance. She wore her sword, daggers and a bull whip which hung from her slim waist.

Now she was amongst civilians she had taken to wearing a whip. She could not just cut off their heads if they annoyed her like she did to enemy soldiers and by the very God of the heavens Gyptian civilians did indeed vex her most sorely.

She climbed the steps slowly till she stood at the top of the platform. They all cringed away terrified. Tiirmirise still wore her helmet and face mask so none could see her face. After she lost her eye Qastursh had a face mask made to protect her face in battle. It was made of steel and polished to a silver like shine. It also made her look like some evil sprung out of a Hellish nightmare.

The Queen walked along the platform with her long legged ranging stride inspecting them like she would examine a piece of horseflesh. She walked nonchalantly up and down the row of seven girls, dispassionately surveying what they had to offer.

The auctioneer an astute and greedy man smelt a profit. The Queen's silver mask was famous on the continent. Who did not know of Tiirmirise and her silver battle mask? The merchant knew if he was clever he could make enough to take him out of the odious family business of trading in the human suffering and into something more lucrative yet suited to his sophisticated sensibilities like gems or spices or even silks.

He surmised that the barbarian Massagetae Queen unused to the sophisticated luxuries of Gypsos and especially the city of Menes would not know the value of what she beheld. However he also had to be careful because she did not know their laws and if she was anything like other barbaric ruling heads he had dealt with she could just as easily behead him on the spot.

Tiirmirise walked up to the first one and coolly asked her some obscure question. She was petrified, and simply fainted at her feet with a whimper. The Massagetae bodyguard snickered and Tiirmirise turned to them till they quieted. They could almost see her glare from behind the mask. She turned her attention back to the slaves.

The second girl hardly fared any better. She just stood there shaking her teeth chattering in her head. Tiirmirise stopped and turned to face the merchant. He swallowed hard and his two slaves pushed the third girl forward.

They ripped off her dress and turned her around for Tiirmirise viewing pleasure to the cheers and wolf whistles of the appreciative crowd but Tiirmirise was not looking at her.

The girl was whimpering and sobbing as the merchant groped her showing off her assets. Tiirmirise shook her head to signal her displeasure and he ordered the next girl forward. The Massagetae Queen observed her surreptitiously as the next but one girl to her was assaulted.

At least that was the only way Tiirmirise could describe it because the merchant's assistants were offering her breasts making her bend over to show off her assets one of them even penetrated the protesting woman with his fingers.

The crowd seemed to be enjoying the show. Ooohing and Aaahing with each revelation. Tiirmirise watched the play of emotions across the horrified faces of the remaining waiting slaves.

However when the merchant's assistant's reached forward with relish to touch her Tiirmirise's whip snaked out viciously and caught the assistant's wrist. She yanked it hard pulling the man off the stage and into the crowd who parted so he crashed onto the sandy floor.

"Do not touch her." The Black Queen hissed venomously. It was a sibilant command all the more shocking because they were the first words the crowd heard her utter. Silence fell like a blanket on the market.

Candace's eyebrows shot up into her hairline. Firstly Tiirmirise never bought slaves herself preferring to describe what she wanted and then send out the palace factors to get her body servants. Secondly She'd never seen the queen pay attention to anyone like this before.

Candace admitted that the girl was indeed beautiful by any definition. Her body was perfectly proportioned she was generously endowed and brave, very brave or very stupid for she did not cower from Tiirmirise instead she stood up to her. Candace felt a spark of admiration for the poor girl.

From the moment their eyes met Tiirmirise knew she was looking at her destiny, her Afereni. She also felt a searing lust that burned right into her heart which was beating faster for no reason and for no reason she could discern, her hands felt clammy she was short of breath, she wanted to drag her somewhere and ravish her, no she needed to devour her alive, drown in her beauty and never ever come up for air.

She was small this one, her head barely reached the Queen's shoulder. Her hair was the colour of golden summer wheat, her eyes like blue sapphires all passionate and flashing fire, intelligent and piercing they seemed to see into the very depths of her soul.

Her lips were rouged red no doubt on the instruction of the slave master and full hinting at a buried simmering passion. Her neck was slender and her frame perfectly proportioned.

Tiirmirise surmised that the reason her skin was only barely bronzed by the sun of Gypsos and her complexion flawless instead of blotched or dark from being in the sun all day was probably because with those generous high full firm breasts, she would have been a temptation to any passer by and her previous owners probably kept her under lock and key.

The Queen resolved she would not allow her to spend too much time outdoors either at least not without a full complement guard. Tiirmirise continued cataloguing her assets, the slim waist, flat belly and gently flaring hips. The queen could imagine her long shapely legs wrapped around her in the throes of lovemaking.

On her way to see the Gypitian courtiers and nobles who ruled in the Mastabah's absence, Tiirmirise was still in armour. Her purple cloak was lifted by the wind her face hidden as it was by the huge black helmet and steel mask.

She knew she looked as intimidating as the hounds of hell. She terrified armies of grown men so she was intrigued that she did not have the same effect on this little slip of a girl. Finally she took off her gauntlets and gave them to the Merchant to hold for her.

Tiirmirise ached to touch her. Her eyes swept down her body savouring every glorious golden inch before suddenly pulling her forward so she could feel her length against her body.

The Massagetae Queen nearly howled with frustration when she realised she could barely feel her womanly softness because of course she was wearing her fucking armour. The girl rested her hands on Tiirmirise chest but surprisingly she did not fight back or struggle.

The girl continued to stare up at her unblinking even when Tiirmirise ran her hands down her body and under her tunic. Her skin was soft and smooth like satin. The slave closed her eyes as Tiirmirise's hands wandered down to cup her firm bottom and then slowly upwards to her breasts. Her thumbs flicked across her nipples which hardened under the gentle caress.

As she stood on the dais all the other slaves looked away from the terrifying warrior, they stared at the ground or up into the sky all eager to avoid the unholy gaze except for her. She looked straight at the black queen as though throwing down a challenge and Tiirmirise burned to possess

her.

"What is your name Slave?" The queen asked softly.

"My name is Saronne, my lord." She said in that soft lilting accent of the Northern Angles. The people from there rolled their 'r's when speaking and the dialect of Northern Angles was very easy on the ear.

So easy in fact that most of the best Storytellers, minstrels and singers were born in the Northern lands. The lands across the seas. The land known to the People of the plains as the land of the Angles.

The Slave merchant had dressed her to show off her considerable assets and Tiirmirise could feel her whole body tightening with desire, she could barely wait to get her home and drag her into bed. She knew it was merely a matter of time before she lost it completely and took her right there.

She continued to slide her hands over the girl's body thoughtfully staring into her eyes. Tiirmirise lowered her head to her neck take in her scent and was considering suckling on her hardened nipple also rouged shiny and very inviting.

Before she knew it thought almost became reality as she became so caught up with lust from touching her that it was only the whimpering sob of the terrified slave cowering next to her that brought her back to her senses. Well that and the fact she still had her silver face mask on!

She was absolutely furious that she had lost her self-control so easily and so publicly. She was also filled with a burning desire that needed to be assuaged immediately. She struggled for breath within the face mask.

"Saronne you do not fear me?" her words came out harshly from behind the silver mask.

"Should I?" She replied softly.

The merchant's eyes widened in horror and he stammered his apologies for her. Tiirmirise barely heard him. Instead she was still looking down into the mesmerising blue eyes that seemed to reach inside her chest and touch her heart.

She wanted to ignore the sensation and move on to the next slave, but she really could not take her eyes or her hands off her. Instead she found herself enquiring about her price from the merchant.

"How much?" Tiirmirise asked hoarsely

"Well my lord although she is insolent she is worth her weight in gold. Why she...."

"Make it so Candace." Tiirmirise said never taking her eye off Saronne.

"Make what so your majesty?"

"Arrangements to pay her weight in gold." Tiirmirise had made up her mind and swept the girl into her arms effortlessly and carried her like a baby. "And don't forget my gauntlets." She tossed the words over her shoulder.

The merchant passed out. A gasp went over the crowd and Candace squeaked. One of the Massagetae guards retrieved the Queen's gauntlets and handed them to Tiirmirise after she settled the slave Mordenes.

"Are you out of your royal mind."

Tiirmirise glared at her. Even though she still wore the mask and Candace could not see her face, the steel mask did absolutely nothing to mask her displeasure. Candace could actually feel the Queen's steely gaze boring at her through the steel mask.

The first time she had given anyone her attention since she had seen the slave and Candace swallowed. Tiirmirise placed the girl on her horse in front of her. One hand loosely held the reins and the other was wrapped possessively around the woman and then they rode towards the Gyptian royal Palace.

Tiirmirise rode with the girl to the Palace built by the Mastabah Narmer which was now the residence of the Gyptian rulers called Mastabah's and not Kings.

She was extremely reluctant to let her go that she was only persuaded to do so when Candace assigned two Massagetae guard to take her to Tiirmirise's private quarters and stay with her swords drawn. A privileged not even reserved for royal princes except in dire circumstances. Whilst she made her way to the seat of Gyptian government, the Mastabah's throne room.

The Gyptian grand-vizier Thothrameth was droning on and on and on. Finally Tiirmirise impatiently proposed that when the royal princes and princess returned that Khufu and Khafren both marry Nefer.

After all was said and done a Mastabah was entitled to have many wives no reason why the Queen should not also be allowed to have many husbands They could then rule co-equally. There was uproar in Gyptian throne room.

The Gyptian viziers said it was taboo, it was wrong, unthinkable. This from a people who saw nothing wrong in brothers marrying sisters! Tiirmirise could not care less anymore. Let them sort out their own bloody dilemmas. All she wished to do was to return to her private quarters and her latest acquisition.

Whilst they were digesting this latest uproar few of them would think to question why the Gyptian treasury was missing the weight of a woman in gold. Naturally when the princes returned they would blame the viziers, the viziers would assume the princes spent it in Ado and Tiirmirise would be long gone before they realised what had happened.

She justified her actions on the grounds that she deserved some reward for extricating both the Gyptian royal family and Sarmatia from Ninyas' schemes. Besides she shrugged she was not a bloody temple maiden was she.

In the palace Saronne was met by an older man dressed in Gyptian fashion. He wore a long linen loin cloth that fell past his ankles but was gathered in front. On his chest he wore a multi-coloured collar made of gold and semi-precious stones.

At his waist he carried a whip and his bald pate shone in the sunlight whilst his kohl lined eyes condescendingly stared down his beak-like nose with the icy hauteur of a prince.

He cracked his whip and pointed at her imperiously. "You come!"

Saronne slowly approached him and the Massagetae soldiers who had been watching bowed unobtrusively.

"I am Menkiti, Slave master of the royal harem. You will obey my orders. His eyes were grey and colourless like stormy seas. All Saronne could read from his expression was patronising condescension and supercilious pride. He led her down a long corridor with a tiled floor and through an archway to a chamber.

Menkiti clapped his hands loudly and two women immediately appeared willing and ready to obeyed his summons. They were dressed in plain white linen tunics their hair was pulled back at the base of their necks into simple ponytails. Saronne noticed that they were not unattractive and they were also immaculately clean. Menkiti spoke to them in the same condescending lofty manner he used to Saronne and ordered her to sit down.

She sank down with relief her knees felt like water and she would need every ounce of her strength to deal with the frightening monster that had carried her off from the market place. If there was one thing she was sure about the warrior would be returning.

The two women entered the chamber carrying food and drink She drank from the clay drinking vessel. It was Gyptian Beer, the local brew but since it was served in the women's quarters it was sweetened and did not have the dry bitter taste she had come to associate with beer.

They set down a tray of sliced lamb seasoned with coriander, fried onions and garlic, a salad of cucumber, cabbage, olives cheese and radishes, and off course the Gyptian staple, bread made from wheat flour. The desert was a bowl of pomegranates.

Saronne felt slightly apprehensive. Her experience of slavery thus far had taught her to eat when she was able so she made an effort to eat but she could only manage a few bites and after awhile when nerves finally over came her she stopped eating.

Beside her another slave appeared carrying an armful of the softest Gyptian cotton towels. In front of her was a scented pool of hot water. She could tell it was hot because she could see

clouds of steam rising up from it. Menkiti nodded for her to take her cloths off so she could step into her bath.

"I will not take my clothes off in front of you."

"Strip her!" he commanded. He was a busy man and was not about to take any nonsense from this delightful piece no matter how gorgeous she looked.

Saronne struggled but finally she stood naked in front of the slave master her eyes like daggers. He ignored her and simply ordered the slaves to prepare her bath.

Behind Menkiti she heard a sharp intake of breath and Saronne shrank back as the Massagetae Queen strode into the chamber. She felt extremely vulnerable as the black steely gaze fairly caressed her body. Saronne considered herself a good height for a woman but the Queen fairly towered above her.

Tiirmirise stood still and watched, her eyes drawn to the girl. A pale silken mass of pale golden curls tumbled down back; a back that was a delicious ivory curve. All delicate curves and rounds, her sweet round breasts thrust upwards were tipped by what looked like pink rosebuds.

Her waist was so narrow Tiirmirise imagined she could span it with one hand. Her bottom swelled gently before tapering into long silken thighs and slim legs. Her complexion was flawless and her skin unblemished.

"Bathe her and send her to my bed." Tiirmirise said huskily. Then she strode out.

Saronne's eyes widened. She had stayed at many brothels and with many slave masters but she had always managed to talk her way out of being used for sex because of her other skills which were more often than not more adjudged to be highly valuable.

Except for the Massagetae Lord who was her daughter's father she had not slept with anyone else and now the Massagetae queen was going to bed her without giving her any choice in the matter. "Please give me something to cover myself."

Menkiti's eyes rose "Gyptians find no shame in the naked body. In fact we display it at every opportunity."

"I am not Gyptian."

Menkiti's mouth tightened and he gestured to the other women. "That much at least is obvious." He motioned to one of the female slaves "Bathe the new slave!" He commanded.

Saronne found herself being gently coaxed into the hot pool. The women's eyes were sympathetic but she knew they would force her if she resisted and besides why would she resist? She was already naked and she felt hot and dirty and greatly in need of a bath.

She had not been in Gypsos long enough to be acquainted with the heated Gyptian pools and she was startled when they poured something from a flagon into the water and clouds of scented steam rose up to fill her nostrils.

When Tiirmirise returned to her bedchamber that evening, she summoned Mya, her Gyptian chamber maid to present her new purchase. Saronne had been stripped of her slave rags and given a bath and some new clothing.

As was the Gyptian and Massagetæ custom she had been oiled and dressed in the traditional clothing of a Gyptian slave which was a simple white transparent linen long tunic robe, fitted and cinched in at the waist and breasts which left very little to the imagination.

Her face and body had been painted. Her eyes lined with kohl, her lips and nipples rouged red and shiny. Tiirmirise was pleased they had not attended antimony and the heavy white make up that made most of the Gyptian court look like painted whores. Menkiti had done well in allowing most of her natural beauty to be displayed instead of disguising it under a thick slab of pancake mix.

When Mya brought her in and walked her over to the rug that stood in the middle of the room and left to do the rest of the Queen's bidding.

Tiirmirise was in her bath naked most of her body under water. The water scented with pine and sandalwood. She was surrounded by several beautiful women who washed her body and hair with wet sponges.

All were naked under their wet tunics which clung to their lithe bodies outlining their curves, thighs and breasts under their clothing and leaving no one in any doubt that they were naked under the sheer clothing they wore.

Saronne stood waiting in the centre of the room. She had expected to be raped by the monster that had assaulted her earlier in the afternoon. However she could see no evidence of the menacing looking creature that had swept her off her feet and onto the black horse.

As her eyes got accustomed to the smell of incense and smoke she could make out a very black woman sitting in a large silver basin surrounded by several other women. She vaguely heard the slave Mya close the door close softly behind her.

The woman stepped out of the bath and was swarmed by the body slaves who dried her body with thick cotton Gypsos towels. The softest and best in the world.

The queen chose a pot of oil from the tray and motioned to the slave Mya to use the oil on her body. Tiirmirise closed her eyes as her small hands applied the oil thoroughly and expertly all over her body kneading muscles tense from swordplay and political negotiation.

"Leave us!" She dismissed them with a contemptuous flick of her wrist.

Saronne regarded the woman who now stood naked in front of her. Her hair was short and wavy. She wore a thin diadem on her head. A black eye patch made from wire mesh covered one eye and the other glinted with a steely brilliant intelligence. Her face scarred from a sword slash was mocking and a twisted half smile played about her firm lips.

The woman was lean, lithe and muscular yet curving in all the right places from her pert soft breast to the sweeping line of her hips. Every muscle rippled under her skin which shone like polished ebony under the lamplight. She had one breast the other was horribly scarred and flat.

All over her body were battle scars, marks of her trade. This was no soft noble or spoiled princess. This was a woman forged in the horrors of war. Although the Queen was naked and Saronne fully clothed it was Saronne who felt self-conscious beneath that steely all seeing gaze.

Tiirmirise caught hold of her hand aiming to yank her against her so she could feel her soft body pressed against hers. Instead she cupped her fingers around Tiirmirise's larger hand and held it comfortably.

Their clasped hands were a perfect fit. Hers so small, soft and fragile, holding her warrior's callused one. Tiirmirise felt a tightness in her chest as though tiny birds were fluttering around inside. Her heart beat faster thundering in her ears.

What the hell was happening? Tiirmirise stared down at their clasped hands for a moment and then yanked her off her feet against her and ripped the linen tunic to reveal her pale white skin.

Tiirmirise stared down at her for a moment then her hands began to slide caressingly all over her beautifully naked body. The slave was nervous, Tiirmirise could feel her apprehension, The queen watched fascinated as she bit her lower lip.

Saronne was horrified her treacherous body was reacting to the caresses of the queen with unconscionable abandon. Her nipples were hard and throbbing as long black fingers explored her curves deliberately. Tiirmirise looked into her blue eyes arrogantly.

She would break the slave's resistance and then she would make her serve her. As Tiirmirise lowered her head to kiss her Saronne turned her head away so that the queen's lips met with her cheek.

"You can have my body but I beg you leave me my soul." Saronne whispered because she felt vulnerable and ashamed. She was a princess and an educated woman not a sex slave subject to another's bodily desires.

"I could take the kiss from you unwillingly." Tiirmirise whispered forcefully against her ear.

"Yes you could but you would be taking, it would not be willingly given."

"Is that what you want? For me to force you? Bloody your back with a whip to make you willing?" The quiet question was intensely alarming and held more menace than if she had

roared that she would cruelly savage her.

"Oh my God No!" She whispered placing her hands on the black queens chest, displaying a vulnerability that deeply thrilled the queen and set Tiirmirise's heart to further fluttering in her chest.

"Then give in to me." Tiirmirise said softly.

"No, I cannot." Saronne trembled slightly her refusal no longer defiant but firm.

"Give me a reason why you cannot," Tiirmirise said caressing the trembling girl's hips. They were so close her scent teased her, elusive and womanly yet alluring, her hair was soft in her callused hands.

"I have never slept with a woman before." She blurted and moved away from the queen.

Tiirmirise laughed "I bought you from a Gypitian slave market and you say you have never slept with a woman before next you will be telling me you are a virgin."

"No, I am not a virgin but I have never slept with a woman before."

"That is ridiculous! You are a slave. A slave's only purpose is to give pleasure to her master or mistress. Do you say that even as a bath attendant you have given no woman pleasure?"

"In my culture women do not sleep with women."

"Well know this, from this night you are mine and your sole purpose in life is to please me."

Her black eyed gaze bored into her blue ones even as she was caught in a her dark embrace and kissed with a brutal intensity designed to prove that She was the master and Saronne only a slave.

Tiirmirise groaned inwardly. Her mouth was deliciously soft and compliant beneath hers, then suddenly Saronne fastened her sharp little teeth into the queen's bottom lip and Tiirmirise had to give her golden hair a vicious tug to force her to let go.

Saronne drew back panting, a victorious light glittering in her ocean blue eyes.

"It is I who have bloodied you Massagetae."

Tiirmirise was absolutely furious! She raised her hand to hit her but held back her hand in mid-air as she realised with a sickening twist of her stomach that any blow would have smashed the delicate bones of her face. She lowered her hand slowly and glared at the little blonde.

She strode to the doorway and flung it open. "Menkiti!" She roared.

In a moment the eunuch was there kneeling at her feet. His forehead touched the floor. He had

lowered his head so the arrogant Queen would not see the light of admiration he felt for the new slave. He knew instantly Saronne had not yielded. The slave still wore her clothes though the queen herself was fully naked.

"This *lady* thinks she is too fine to come to Our bed." Tiirmirise drawled the word "lady" with emphasis. "She is not yet convinced that she is Our slave. We are sure that between the two of Us we can persuade her to agree that We own her."

Menkiti remained kneeling in obeisance. "I will do my best Dread Lady." Menkiti's hand went to his whip but before he could brandish it he saw the Queen wince at the punishment he threatened and the Eunuch was amused.

This was no Pasiphae. The Queen wanted the blonde slave desperately but she also did not want her marked or hurt either. He wondered if Saronne knew how much power that gave her.

"You will not beat her!" The queen said softly only for Menkiti's ears. Her face an impenetrable mask her voice not betraying the turmoil of desire that was wracking her body.

"You will replace her fine linen with an ugly grey cloth like those street urchins wear, cover her hair with a plain head cloth, scrub her face and body free of cosmetics free from paint and give her only bread and water."

"I have worn ugly clothes since I became a slave and was stolen from my home this means nothing to me!" Saronne cried.

"Ah, but now you have had a taste of looking exquisite, of feeling light linen and soft silks against your skin your female vanity will not put up with dirt and ugly coarse rags for long.

Even as a slave she had never worn rags because of her looks. How did she know how to attack her pride? She could not know that Tiirmirise had spent many years in a Harem watching women preen and beautify themselves in front of a mirror for a man they would rarely if ever see.

"Tomorrow before the sun is up put her to work scrubbing the tiled floors then you will bring her to Our couch and we will see if the lady has had a change of heart."

"I shall deny you even unto eternity" Saronne said defiantly.

"One way or another I shall have you and I shall have you on your knees to me! Now take her away!" Tiirmirise gestured throwing her hands towards the door before crossing her arms across her chest.

Saronne followed Menkiti to the small but airy sleeping chamber. Its walls were plastered in Apricot and there was a motif of the Gypitian sun god Amon-Ra. There was also bed and an ornate golden and lapis lazuli headrest in the Gypitian style but beside it was a simple Sarmatian Pillow stuffed with feathers on the bed.

Saronne much preferred sleeping on the Sarmatian pillow it was similar to those used in the land of the Angles. The Gyprian headrest was made of wood and looked distinctly uncomfortable.

There was a corner hearth for a burning brazier, a dressing table and mirror and even a couch. It did not look like a slave's room. Menkiti had summoned the house slaves who appeared with scented towels and hot water.

She did not struggle with Menkiti, he was only doing his job. After washing and dressing in the coarse slave tunic she got into bed and winced. Even the silken sheets had been replaced with coarse sheets. Menkiti dismissed the other slaves so they were alone.

"Do not be a fool, give the Queen what she desires. I have never seen her hurt one as vulnerable as you. She prides herself on her self-control and in all the time I have been here I have never seen her lust after anyone the way she does for you. Give her what she asks. It is so little."

Saronne shook her head. "I cannot." She whispered

"Will not, you mean. You were so exquisitely lovely tonight you could have her wrapped around your smallest finger with barely the flutter of an eyelash."

When Menkiti left shaking his head after extinguishing the torches and candles Saronne reflected on her encounter with the Massagetae Queen. Firstly there was something very familiar about her yet she could not put her finger on it.

She saw her black eye glittering with lust, her coal black hair, wavy on her head, her curving feminine body, yet muscular and powerful rippling with muscle. She could see her face with its high cheekbones and eyebrows shaped like knives, so proud, so imperious with the scar that slashed across her face from temple to cheekbone.

Then she reflected on Menkiti's words as she lay in her bed and admitted she did indeed lust after the ebony Queen. She wanted her to initiate her into the mystical rites of loving a woman all she had to do was give Tiirmirise what she wanted her body and with that God help her a part of her soul.

Tiirmirise lay naked on top of the bed her arms were folded behind her head. She could not sleep. She could not sleep because her body was still throbbing from the encounter with her new slave. She was a ruthless Queen, a battle hardened warrior, she exerted the same iron control over her army as she did her body.

The problem was that as she watched the wax melt with each candle mark her clitoris throbbed, her nipple remained hard and her woman's parts ached incessantly begging for the relief that she could take with the little blonde slave.

She got up to call one of the bathers to come and take care of her body's lust and cursed as she realised that would not do any good. Perhaps if she was dressed like a Massagetae body slave she

would act like one. Massagetae slaves wore red chiffon silks. Their nipples and lips were rouged with red shiny body paint, their pubis shaven their bodies scented with exotic heady perfumes. She moaned as she imagined Saronne in her fantasy dressed as such.

Yes she would order Menkiti to adorn Saronne in such a garment. Tiirmirise wanted her company at the evening meal each night when her duties were done.

Instead of sitting getting drunk with Makeda and Candace or visiting the stews and upper class brothels with Pasiphae she would have Saronne entertain her with civilised conversation instead of an evening of bawdy mime or even worse Gyptian politics.

She would have the slave recline on her dining couch facing her so they could touch and taste each other intimately. Tiirmirise poured herself a goblet of blood red wine and drank it unmixed.

She absently fingered her signet ring the one that carried her seal of delegated authority. She offered thanks to God for the gift of the female slave and another to the ancestors by splashing a dash of wine on the ground.

Well the wine did not help because the Queen found herself pacing her chambers restlessly then she found herself in the slave's chamber.

Saronne's eyes flew open. Menkiti had extinguished all the torches and candles so she could not see anything but she sensed someone was out there.

The movement was so quick she barely felt when her hands were bound above her head.

Terrified she kicked out with her feet which were seized in a vice like grip as her eyes became accustomed to the dark and shadow that loomed above her she realised it was the Sarmatian Queen.

Saronne found her voice in a low and breathless whisper. "Please don't do this."

The black all-seeing gaze caressed the curves and mounds of the beauty spread before her like a feast. She was so refined so totally different from any other woman she had ever known.

She looked almost ethereal, the way she would imagine an angel to look. Her face so delicate yet sultry, her hands small, her fingers elegant and slim even down to her tapered well manicured nails.

Her mons was doomed high like an arch crowned with golden tendrils, Tiirmirise wondered if the petals of her female centre would be the same rose pink as her soft mouth and the aureolae that crowned the tips of her breasts which were now thrust up like luscious fruit, ripe for tasting. Tiirmirise stood transfixed, drunk on her loveliness, drowning in desire, burning with need.

"Please....don't do this?" Saronne begged

"I am...I want you." Tiirmirise said slowly in a low voice as though she had difficulty forming the words.

Saronne bit her lip and whispered "If you rape me..."

"I have not come to rape you." Tiirmirise said hoarsely.

"Then why are you here?"

Tiirmirise grimaced "I couldn't stay away. I need to touch you." Tiirmirise wrapped one arm about her legs above the ankles and lifted her knees. "I am not going to hurt you." She reached out to her woman's centre. Her touch was light and gentle and tauntingly brief. "I want you to touch me." The Queen whispered.

"Never!" Saronne hissed

"Oh you will. You will."

Saronne's eyes widened with shock as she felt a delicious frisson of pleasure shoot up inside her as Tiirmirise finger slid up her pink cleft with a sensual lingering caress that made her centre pulsate before sliding up inside her.

Suddenly she was hot and wet, her sheath gripped the finger with a tiny convulsive shudder and then Tiirmirise withdrew her finger slowly and licked it like a cat licking cream.

The queen untied her bound wrists and lowered her body to gather the blonde slave back into her arms so they could continue their lovemaking. Her wrists freed Saronne placed her palms on the Queen's chest and then turned a freezing icy blue glare on the Queen of the Massagetae and made her feelings clear.

"If you don't mind I would like some sleep, Your majesty I have many floors to scrub tomorrow."

The fact that she preferred to do the work of a menial slave over sleeping with her enraged the Queen no end. Only her iron self-control prevented her from taking the little baggage right there. Maybe she did not believe she would actually order her to do such demeaning work. Well cometh the hour she would Tiirmirise vowed as she stormed out of Saronne's room.

A female house slave awakened her at the appointed hour and Saronne wished she had indeed eaten when given the chance because apart from donning the slave clothing (clothing which she had never worn during all her years in captivity) she was given a loaf of bread and some water for breakfast.

The young boy who brought it was on the thin side and he definitely had not yet reached puberty. His eyes seemed too large for his small face and his head too big for his skinny body.

"You must hurry" He urged

"I will not."

"If you do not hurry" the female slave who had brought in her garments said "Simsim will be flogged."

She was furious. The Queen seemed to have her assessed her well. Tiirmirise would not have her flogged because she did not fear a flogging but she knew that Saronne was the type of person who would not cause an innocent harm and could not bear to allow another person to take her own punishment. Hence Simsim would bear her punishment.

Saronne worked her fury off by wiping the floors determined to ask no quarter. She had just finished the main hall and the largest room in the Queen's apartments when two huge hunting dogs came barking through the front door. Saronne screamed at the large ferocious creatures. However when they did eventually leap on her it was to slobber all over her wagging their tales.

She laughed at their exuberance and patted them.

"Rebes! Remes! Heel." The pair of mastiffs rushed to the Queen's side panting with adoration for their mistress. Saronne sat back on her heels in utter disbelief. The dog's paws and the queens boots had brought in black mud from outside undoing her hard work in a moment.

Saronne knew Tiirmirise had done it on purpose to provoke her. Her eyes swept her over as though she did not exist when last night the Massagetae Queen had come into her room and stared at her as though she would die if she did not touch her, and then proceeded to touch her obscenely, her hands had touched Saronne gently as though she were made of the finest porcelain now she looked at her as though she were just another female slave in the Gyptian palace.

She dashed tears from her eyes and with each paw print she cleaned from the marble floors she plotted her revenge on the arrogant Queen who thought she ruled the world. She was going to enslave her and have her begging for mercy reverse their roles so she was mistress and the Queen her slave.

Her resolve hardened as she thought it through. She was beautiful, intelligent and sophisticated compared to the women in the palace and if she could not bring the infuriating Queen to heel she deserved a miserable fate washing floors for the rest of her life!

When next she spied Menkiti directing the slaves, she staggered under the weight of the bucket of dirty water, her hand fluttered to her head and she managed to drag the ugly brown cloth from her hair and pretended to almost swoon for a moment before making a valiant effort to straighten her shoulders before sinking to her knees.

Menkiti filled with concern went to where she knelt. "Lady keep your head down till the dizziness passes. After a few moments Saronne raised her head and gave a tremulous sigh before

allowing her eyes to flutter open.

"Had enough?"

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps! You look like you are about to keel over!"

"Let's just say I am ready to negotiate."

Menkiti ordered them to bring her food. Bread and honey with fresh salad, wine and melon and dates. She went to the hot pool for a bath and by the time they brought food she was ravenous and ate well. For awhile Menkiti ate with her in silence.

He watched her graceful movements with hooded eyes and the delicate way she chewed her food. She was absolutely enchanting and he could understand why Tiirmirise was a fool for her.

"Menkiti you said the Queen lusted after me and If I gave her what she asked she would be more than generous to me. If I become her concubine it would also give me a great deal of power. We would do better as allies than as rivals would you help me?"

Menkiti smiled "I will do all I can to aid you lady."

"Good. Rather than wait till the end of the day when the Queen will come here demanding I submit to her I think I should like to... how do the Dominion say? "Carpe Diem" seize the day.

As Menkiti listened to her audacious plan he wanted to tell her to forget it but with her eyes alight with feminine mischief and her voice filled with passion he began to come around to her daring plan. One that would ensnare and hold a Queen. She was shrewd and clever and a slave like him. How could they be anything but allies.

Bathed perfumed and dressed in the violet silk and chiffon robes and jewellery they chose together. She looked beautiful. Her dress hinted at her womanly curves so you caught a glimpse of her skin with each movement she made.

The slaves, painted her face to highlight her eyes and a touch of pink lip paint rather than the customary red so she did not look like she painted her face.

She looked magnificent as he brought around the chariot they were to drive to the Massagetae training camp.

"The moment we enter the training camp you are on your own because I will not answer to her for what you do today. The responsibility is all yours." Menkiti warned.

Saronne closed her eyes in trepidation for a moment. What if she enraged the Queen? What if she heaped humiliation on her or worse had her strung up and beheaded. Well so be it. She would rather die than scrub any more floors. She was a princess and it was time she started

acting like one.

On the training field there were at least five hundred Massagetae all watching the Queen as she fought her five opponents with her wooden scimitars. She was lightening quick moving with a preternatural speed and striking strength that her opponents could not believe emanated from such a slender body.

A cheer went up as she dispatched her opponents in quick succession without breaking a sweat. She was about to start explaining the theory of the manoeuvres and movements when Saronne's chariot came in sight of the warriors.

"What an entrance." Menkiti murmured under his breath as all eyes fell on them and the cheers degenerated into a murmur and finally utter silence.

Tiirmirise stood arms akimbo and stared in utter disbelief at the sight of her beautiful female slave and the Ggyptian head slave master as they made their way slowly towards the training field. She tossed the wooden scimitars aside and strode towards the vehicle glaring at Saronne, as she neared with each elegant efficient stride her black-eyed gaze blazed with fury.

Before the Queen could say anything Saronne utterly disarmed her, holding out her arm she spoke intimately for her ears alone so the Queen had to lean close to hear what she was saying as she said softly "Help me down Tiirmirise, or your warriors will think you uncouth."

Tiirmirise swore "You will soon learn just how uncouth I can be." However she muttered the words under her breath so only Saronne heard her.

Saronne gave her a dazzling smile. "Smile, you do want everyone to think you ordered me here do you not?"

Tiirmirise smiled wryly but ignored her outstretched hand and lifted her off the chariot by her waist causing the Massagetae warriors to cheer unashamedly. The blonde woman was so beautiful she took her breath away.

She smiled up at the dark head that towered above her. "They think I'm your concubine." She said seductively.

At the thought Tiirmirise felt her whole being melt into a pool at her centre and her heart fluttered in her chest. Her black-eye glittered with victory. "Is that what you have come to tell me? That you surrender?"

"Of course not, you brute" she teased.

A blazing hot need almost consumed her and the queen actually found herself considering taking her right there on the training field and possessing her thoroughly. Tiirmirise wanted to fuck her silly and leave no one in any doubt that this beautiful woman belonged to her and her alone. Instead she slid her hands which were still resting on Saronne's waist down to rest on her hips.

"So what the hell are you doing here?"

"I...am...here," She paused after each breathless word, she said and reached up to trace a delicate fingertip along the wicked looking scar on Tiirmirise face, so that every warrior sucked in her breadth wishing they could trade places with the queen, "so that you may invite me to dinner." She licked her lips slowly and made a little moue with her mouth.

Tiirmirise groaned inwardly. She longed to cover her pink lips with her own. Lust pounded her body like roaring waves on a seashore, She could even hear her blood pounding in her head. Tiirmirise swallowed hard she had to her throat had stopped working.

"You are my slave, I order you to dine with me." Except the words came out hoarsely and totally lost their commanding tone.

Saronne smiled provocatively and Tiirmirise hands involuntarily tightened on her waist. "If you invite me to, it will be my greatest pleasure to accept. Then after we have eaten," She said the last word with a smile and another provocative lift of her eyebrow, "I shall proposition you."

"You will?" Tiirmirise asked stupidly

"Perhaps." She shrugged, saying the word in a way that conveyed, promise, and mystery. Saronne could feel the Queen trembling. Her hands were warm through the material at her waist. She did not wear her gauntlets like she had the first day they met and she knew she had the black Queen enthralled.

"You will come to dinner tonight." Tiirmirise commanded hoping she sounded imperious but it sounded more like a question even to her own ears.

Saronne smiled as though she knew some secret. "Why you silver-tongued fiend. How could I resist such a charming invitation?" Her hands trailed a circle absently on her chest in the one area not covered by her black tunic. Her scarred breast. Tiirmirise shuddered with desire. The woman was going to be the death of her.

The Queen scooped her up by her bottom and placed her gently into the chariot beside Menkiti.

"Till tonight." She said curtly

As Tiirmirise watched her go she couldn't quite keep the stupid grin off her face. Saronne had cleverly turned the tables on her. This morning she had deliberately allowed Nefer's hunting dogs to muddy the tiles she had so slavishly scrubbed just to provoke her but when it came to being provocative Saronne won hands down!

As they drove back to the palace neither Menkiti nor Saronne could believe she had gotten away with such outrageous behaviour. She had deliberately whispered words to seduce and entice because Saronne admitted to herself she was intrigued. When Tiirmirise touched her she loved it.

She loved the fact that Tiirmirise could not resist touching her and she liked the smile that lit up her dark face.

Saronne glanced over at a stunned looking Menkiti. "She did not censure you did she?"

"Lady, She did not even see me!"

Well bloody fucking hell! Pasiphae was furious envious and jealous and randy as she watched the drama being played out between Tiirmirise and her new slave.

Pasiphae was furious because she had seen her first in the brothel. When Pasiphae had tried to buy her from the brothel keeper he had refused and because it was Gypsos and she was on official business she had not been able to do anything about it. Even worse the Brothel keeper had not even allowed Pasiphae one night with her.

She was jealous and envious because here she was, fucking Tiirmirise with abandon and all she had ever seen in her eyes was anger and censure. Well Tiirmirise always made free with her slaves and she saw no reason why she would not be as generous with this one.

When they both arrived at the Palace Saronne followed Menkiti into the kitchens.

"What are you doing here?" Menkiti asked sternly

"Well I want to make sure everything is perfect for her."

"I do that already."

"Yes you do. However I have lived with the Massagetae for a year and I know they like to eat a lot of pork and wild boar. Something you Gyptians abhor. Let me make a Massagetae dinner for her."

"Lady you need to rest; take it while you may!"

Saronne blushed but insisted. "I will make the wild boar, you send someone to the market and I will let them make the vegetables."

"Eating pork gives you leprosy." Menkiti shuddered.

"No it does not that is an old wives tale. It will make you ill if it is not cooked well. I will cook it well Get the wild boar then. A female please, the male tends to have a much stronger smell and the flavour can be overpowering."

The wild boar seasoned and in the oven under the care of a Sarmatian slave of beriberi origin, Saronne finally left the kitchen and made her way to the gardens on the east side of the palace not far from her own sleeping chamber.

The gardens were lush and verdant with scented flowers and gurgling brooks and fountains. There were sundials, ornamental pools teeming with fish of every colour size and shape. Trees of every shape and variety some bearing fruit others did not. She sat on a bench and took it all in.

She had learned that this palace was for visiting princes. The main Palace where the royal family resided was huge and further up. It looked magnificent covered in Limestone and fairly dominated the rest of the city.

An older woman with plain white linen dress and collar walked towards her. In Gyptian fashion the linen robes were white and transparent. It seemed Menkiti was right the Egyptians were indeed proud of their bodies.

She offered Saronne a drink. "Thank-you."

"Please sit with me awhile." Saronne looked at her closely. "You look like you are from the land of the Angles in the Northern Chaldees."

The woman smiled. "Indeed I am. I was a slave of Pharaoh's. The only one to bear him a daughter all the others were boys."

"You are the mother of Queen Nefer?"

The Gyptian line passed through the daughter. The eldest female automatically became Queen on the death of her mother whereas the Pharaoh had to be crowned and he took the throne by marrying a female of the royal line usually his mother, sister or daughter.

The older woman nodded. "I am Funlola but in the lands of the Angles I was known as Branwen."

"This is cider, oh its delicious?"

"Yes my child. Another piece of my homeland. The Gyptians drink a lot of beer which is made from grain and makes me full of air," she wrinkled her nose. This is much nicer with a lot less side effects."

As Saronne got ready for the evening ahead with Funlola helping her choose what to wear she sat before a silver polished Gyptian mirror.

"I think I will wear the purple silk gown."

"I agree." Funlola continued "It makes your eyes look almost violet and she will be happy to see you wear it. In Sarmatia it is the colour of royalty. It is almost as though you were declaring yourself to be her consort the hidden Queen."

"The hidden Queen?"

"Ah the legend of the hidden Queen. The Massagetae have a legend that a time will come when

two queens will gift the Sarmatians with the greatest queen they have ever known. The hidden Queen will protect them from a great evil and cleanse the line from its taint restoring once more to the Massagetae and the Sarmatians their rightful ruler.

Qastursh her husband, well his line is tainted. All their children are touched. Incest, lies, murder and other uncontrollable lusts, you name it all are rampant in the children of Qastursh."

Funlola smiled as Saronne finished dressing "That looks lovely on you. When the slaves finish with painting your face you must use the Jasmine scented oil between your breasts and a little at the base of your spine."

"My back?"

"It will not go to waste I assure you."

"Last night I wore a Gyprian musk."

Funlola wrinkled her nose "Yes but that can be a little cloying and it is too heavy a perfume for one your age. For what you have in mind I believe the Jasmine is best."

"Are you ready?"

She nodded and Menkiti led her to Tiirmirise in the dinning chamber. Tiirmirise came forward to greet her and kissed the hand Saronne held out to her.

The hint of a smile played about the Queen's thin lips. "You obey my orders like a goddess bestowing a gift on a mortal."

"That is because you issue your orders arrogantly like a mistress ordering a slave."

"Which is precisely what you are. A slave." Tiirmirise said arrogantly

"Well you may be mistress but I am not a goddess, only flesh and blood and very mortal."

Tiirmirise lowered her head and said huskily "So you are ready to accept you are my slave?"

Saronne reached up a hand to run her fingertips along the Queen's stubborn jaw and said softly, "I came to amuse you Tiirmirise. If it amuses you to play mistress and slave then you must teach me."

Tiirmirise inhaled sharply not only at her touch but also at the sound of her name on Saronne's lips. She could not recall giving her permission to use her name without her honorific title but it sounded good to her ears.

The black-eye glittered in its intensity "This is no game."

Saronne looked up at the Queen's mouth and then ran the tip of her tongue over her own top lip.

"Tiirmirise when it is between two such as we it is always a game."

"You said you would yield to me tonight." The Queen said softly.

Saronne smiled and gave the queen a teasing glance from beneath her long thick eyelashes. "I said no such thing and you know it."

"You intimated that you would surrender to me!"

Saronne laughed up at the Queen. She was enjoying their banter. "Do you delude yourself like this every night or just tonight."

"You are doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Alluding, hinting, intimating that tonight will be special when it cannot be any such thing unless you yield to me willingly."

"That my dear Tiirmirise is how the game is played, with alluring hints and a little intimating. If you recall what I actually said was after we have I dined I will proposition you."

She placed her hands on Tiirmirise's bare chest. The queen was not naked but wore a black silk robe belted at the waist which stopped short of her knees. Her silk trousers fluttered in the breeze about her legs.

"And I said...what did I say? Forget what I said. You said Perhaps." Tiirmirise's dark eyed gaze devoured her mouth. "What kind of word is that I wonder?"

"A tantalising word filled with promise. If I told you no, it would anger you and if I told you yes, you would bend me to your will which would take away the speculation. Perhaps? well it preserves the anticipation, draws out the suspense and heightens desire."

As she spoke Saronne's fingertips drew a sweeping series of concentric patterns on the queens chest, stroking her neck and her muscled shoulders.

Tiirmirise was going to kiss her and there was nothing her or anybody could do about it. Her lips were so temptingly close and her arousing words stoked desire in the Queen's belly.

Tiirmirise claimed her lips, slowly exploring her softness, enjoying her lushness, tasting her sweetness and drawing the tip of Saronne's pink tongue into her own. Her tunic had loosened with Saronne's mind blowing caresses and the Queen trembled with desire as Saronne's hand accidentally brushed against her one hard turgid nipple.

Saronne lifted her lips till they were barely touching, their breadths mingling in the cool evening breeze.

"Are you hungry Tiirmirise?"

"Starving!" Tiirmirise lowered her head again and Menkiti entered the room carrying a large serving tray and making a lot of noise. Tiirmirise scowled blackly at the intruder and Saronne used the opportunity to put some distance between them. Tiirmirise was proving to be a handful.

"We have prepared a Massagetae meal for you complete with wild boar."

Tiirmirise knew how the Egyptians abhorred Pork so she was well aware that in Gypsos at least it was a delicacy for a Sarmatian.

"Wild boar your majesty prepared by the lady herself."

"Hmm the aroma of food is tantalising." Tiirmirise lied because all she could smell was Jasmine. Tiirmirise helped her unto the dining couch and Saronne lay on her stomach resting her weight on both elbows. She did not think reclining facing Tiirmirise was a good idea yet.

Tiirmirise traced the curve of her back with one long callused finger till it rested lightly on her bottom. The Queen had found the spot her back where Lola had persuaded her to spray the delicate Jasmine scent. Now Tiirmirise fingers moved over there with her fingers releasing the scent till it filled her nostrils.

"The food cools your majesty."

Saronne rolled over to her side just as Tiirmirise moved away and her hands inadvertently brushed against her sending a thrill of sexual arousal through the blonde captive.

"My lust burns hot Saronne."

"The sooner we eat the sooner we can..." She paused for a moment shooting Tiirmirise another provocative look "Negotiate."

Tiirmirise gazed at her longingly but the Queen subsided and they ate. Wild boar was actually one of her favourite meals and though it was simple fare she enjoyed it immensely, it made a change from the rich sauces and exotic food she had been served at the Gyptian Palace.

The wild boar seasoned with crushed fenugreek, cumin and coriander, was cut into thick juicy succulent slabs and served on a silver platter and garnished with fresh herbs.

It was accompanied with a vegetable dish of peas and leeks, freshly baked Gyptian bread straight from the ovens and a salad of crispy green and freshly washed lettuce, red onions, fresh garlic, radishes, pungent goat cheese and long thinly sliced cucumbers lightly dressed with olive oil, honey and lime juice.

The meal was rounded off with an exotic fruit salad of melons pomegranates, dates, sycamore

figs sprinkled with tiger nuts and a sweet cheese.

Tiirmirise was hungry after all the physical exertion of the day and so was Saronne herself after a day of scrubbing floors tucked into her meal with relish that took even her by surprise.

The Queen however did not take her eyes off her blonde captive for a moment. Her eye took in the graceful movement of her hands watching her delicately lick her fingers and sip her wine.

Saronne for her part was surprised the Queen had excellent manners. She had seen the way some of the rich merchants ate in Gypsos with their mouths open so you could see everything between their huge masticating jaws. Tiirmirise did not eat like that. She ate the same way she did everything else with a controlled unhurried efficiency.

After they washed their hands and wiped their fingers with hot scented towels Menkiti cleared their meal away and left Tiirmirise got up.

"Well, I am ready."

"Wait!" Saronne put out her hand and Tiirmirise regarded her steadily for the moment but sank back down on the couch.

She watched Tiirmirise for a moment. "You want me to acknowledge that I am your slave. You want me to obey you implicitly. You want me to yield to you willingly. All this I will do **but**" Saronne emphasised the word "When we are alone you will treat me with respect, You will treat me as your lady."

Tiirmirise stared at her as though she were crazy " You want to pretend to be my slave?" Tiirmirise asked incredulously.

"For all intents and purposes I will be your slave, your property and to everyone else including your entire household, all will know me as your slave but when we are completely private our relationship will that of friends and lovers."

Tiirmirise regarded her with her black obsidian like eye and said nothing into the silence that stretched for so long it was now almost awkward. Tiirmirise did not really see a difference. It was her slave's duty to obey her will.

She noted Saronne left out the part of willingly joining their bodies and for Tiirmirise when it came down to it that was the crux of their bargain.

"Do you agree to willingly yield your body to me? Kiss me of your own volition?"

"Only when you have wooed and won me." She said softly.

Tiirmirise had never wooed anyone in her life, had never needed to, men and women attracted by her power and wealth just threw themselves at her.

"When do you allow me to begin this wooing my lady?" Tiirmirise drawled with heavy sarcasm

Saronne threw the queen a provocative glance laden with unspoken promises "You and I both know that your wooing has already begun and I enjoy it excessively Tiirmirise."

She couldn't help it. Tiirmirise threw her head back and laughed at the girl's sheer impudence.

There was a sudden commotion in the hall way and Pasiphae burst through the terrified Gyptian guards. She was covered in Sweat and gore. Blood dripped down her muscular arms and stained her royal robes.

Tiirmirise moved like lightening a sword appeared in her hand and her body was protectively before Saronne's who had fled to Tiirmirise couch and sank to the floor at the Queen's knees.

"The Princess Pasiphae your majesty." Menkiti announced as the royal princess burst through the doors.

"Pasiphae is all well with you?" Tiirmirise sheathed her sword, concern lined her dark brows.

"I am lately come to dine, Tiirmirise, I have just had a most interesting visit to the temple of Isis."

Tiirmirise frowned "We have finished eating and there is food in abundance. You are welcome to Our table but you will change out of those bloody clothes."

Pasiphae swayed on her feet her dark eyes glinted ferally in the soft glow of the torch light as they settled on Saronne and took in her loveliness. "I am not come to eat food, Tiirmirise." Her meaning was clear.

"What are you come to do then?" Tiirmirise asked in a dangerously soft tone.

Pasiphae's eyes continued to strip Saronne naked "Does your hospitality not extend to sharing the wench?"

"This slave is my private property for my own exclusive use, tonight and every night." Tiirmirise eyes blazed fury and her meaning was clear. However her gentle stroking of Saronne's hair did not belie the temper that threatened to explode out of control at the mere thought of allowing another to touch her.

"So it is true. Candace said you couldn't even bear for the slave merchant's assistant to touch her."

"We will ignore your insulting words because We smell wine beneath the blood you wear on your body from the sacrifice. Tomorrow We will make you wish you had never even considered disturbing us like this."

Pasiphae laughed "Well Step-mama, if you will not share your woman then I will take you up on your offer to share your wine."

Tiirmirise ordered Saronne to her sleeping chamber and then proceeded to deal with the princess. After having her washing her thoroughly in the steam pool by the bath slaves she ordered Menkiti to put the intoxicated princes to bed.

In the Queen's bed chamber Saronne got undressed into her sleeping shift and got ready for bed herself. By now Tiirmirise must be furious at having to deal with her drunken step-daughter. Her desire had been rampant by the time they had finished eating she could not imagine what state of mind she was in now.

It was amazing but she had lost some of her fear of the Queen. When Tiirmirise returned Saronne was fast asleep on the bed her hair spread like a halo of pale gold tresses about her.

Tiirmirise smiled wryly and turned to Menkiti who had come in to help the Queen with the last of her ablutions.

"How many floors did she scrub today?"

"Six, Your Majesty." Menkiti said curtly unable to keep his displeasure from showing.

Tiirmirise sighed.

Saronne woke up slowly and stretching and yawning. When she opened her eyes a thrill of excitement fizzled through her when she realised she was still in the Queen's bed. She still wore her silk robes and she knew without a doubt that Tiirmirise had not touched her. Beside her she could faintly smell the mix of pine and sandalwood that was Tiirmirise. The Queen had kept to their bargain and although she could have imposed her will at anytime and exercised her power she had not.

Tiirmirise it seemed was a woman of honour and more importantly somewhere deep within her black heart there was a playful and tender side to the formidable queen.

She had been terrified in the market place when she'd first seen the figure in black leathers and steel armour with her purple cloak swirling majestically about her in the wind staring avidly.

When the warrior had first approached, Saronne realised as she got closer that there was a mask where the face should have been in the helmet. She was not sure if she was dealing with man or monster.

Then beside her she saw the other girls assaulted, their legs spread open their sex penetrated and she struggled to hold back tears in case that was to be her fate also. However it was not. The

merchants assistant barely touched her when his hand was literally whipped away.

The Queen had taken her breath away when she yanked her forward so she fell against her steel clad body. The leather was warm but the Simian metal was very hot. The linen tunic she wore barely protected her from being burned by the Queen's armour.

The warrior's touch had been firm yet gentle on her body and warm through her tunic. When her hands slid under the white linen tunic she could feel her treacherous body responding as the Queen's warm hands explored her flesh. Her nipples hardened and desire pooled in her aching centre.

Saronne was indeed from the Land of the Northern Angles. A land with long winters and short summers. The men and women had hair the colour of golden wheat sometimes it was even red like carrots. The men were hairy big and muscular with booming voices and bushy beards.

They were nothing like the effete Gyptians she had met. Their skins ranging from simply dark to swarthy. They were slim and lean with black hair and definitely nothing like this black skinned powerfully beautiful creature that was about to possess her.

She cringed when she thought that she who had once been a loved and revered princess had been captured and sold as a body slave. At first she had been angry and feisty. The merchant sold her to a black Massagetae man who took her and impregnated her. He then took her beautiful daughter and sold her to another merchant. She never saw her daughter Nitocris again.

She had not felt like living she had wanted to die but somehow she survived and lived through the grief. Her healing skills and her ability to read and write kept her out of brothels and away from the lust of her masters. She always made herself unattractive whether by artifice or perceived dirt so as not to draw their unwanted attentions.

When she looked at Tiirmirise she so reminded her of the man who took her child. Muscular, tall, arrogant and that mocking twisted smile. Yet unlike her any of her other previous slave masters the Warrior Queen was comparatively much gentler.

Saronne rolled over and she found herself looking into a black smouldering eye. Tiirmirise stared at her unblinkingly however before she could say anything a knock at the door of the Queen's apartments sounded dimly in the distance.

Tiirmirise victim of many assassination attempts was instantly at her feet sword in hand and padded over to the doors. "Don't move!" She hissed to Saronne.

"Who goes there?"

"It is your humble servant Candace, Dread lady."

The door opened to reveal Candace the queen's lieutenant in a linen robe of the Gyptian style. She like Tiirmirise was Massagetae. She wore white trousers underneath a short sleeved tunic

which belted at her waist and draped a green cloth, around her before being draped over her left shoulder to cover her left breast but her right shoulder was naked bare and also battle scarred like her cauterised breast.

She wore a short scimitar at her waist and bowed her head. The Massagetae never offered obeisance. The other tribes in Sarmatia traditionally did but the Massagetae never.

"I apologise Tiirmirise, I did not know you had company."

The Queen nodded and Saronne's eyes widened. Candace had not used the honorific for the Queen. Candace she was to later learn never used the honorific when news was grave or they were in private.

"What brings you to my chambers so early this morning?"

"I have grim news."

"We must ride hard for Ekiti. Prince Spargapises begs your presence."

Tiirmirise felt her heart lurch. Ekiti was the capital city traditionally dedicated to the crown princes and princesses of the ruling family.

When the two largest ruling tribes of the plains fought the Massagetae Queen promised to give the people of Ekiti a prince who was neither Sarmatian or Massagetae. She presented her son, born of a marriage between her and one of the greatest Sarmatian Kings that had ever lived. King Xango the first. Ever since that day Ekiti the twin capital city of Sarmatia was dedicated to the crown prince of Sarmatia.

Spargapises would only seek refuge in Ekiti if Ninyas or Qastursh were after him. Ninyas wouldn't dare lay a hand on him openly, not whilst Tiirmirise was alive and that left Qastursh. She felt a cold chill come over her.

"What is it? What is the news?"

"Tiirmirise calm yourself."

"Has something happened to my son?" She felt something like a lead weight grip her heart which sunk down to her feet.

"No my lady it is the King."

"Qastursh?"

"Assassins broke into his quarters and stuck a burning poker up his asshole. He died of his wounds."

"And Ninyas?"

"Has accused Prince Spargapises of murder." Candace finished the sentence for her.

"So it begins." Tiirmirise turned to Candace. "We travel light." She smiled grimly "Well you will be travelling light the girl comes with me."

Chapter 6

The Taming of the Falcon

They travelled very quickly crossing lands by boat, and on fast horses. The Gyptians loaded them with gold, gold she could not refuse because she would need the money to bribe the viziers and save her silly son's scrawny neck.

She knew quite well Ninyas and Vayanes would have a strangle hold on the council. Then again the viziers might all be manoeuvring to ensure the two wily old men did not become too powerful.

They reached the borders of the Simian Kingdom and travelled without event into Sarmatia. At the border of Sarmatia they were met by a delegation of the Trigantae one of the tribes who occupied the plains and who insisted that the Queen attend a banquet in her honour.

Tiirmirise knew it was probably a chance to do some politicking but their main aim was to get her to throw an orgy in appreciation for some of the Trigantae troops who had fought by her side against the Simian and naturally get her to fund it also.

Now that they were no longer at the Gyptian Palace Saronne found herself taking over the running of Tiirmirise personal household under the personal tutelage of Nnandi. Tiirmirise was aware that once they reached Ado or went on campaign Nnandi would be in charge of the army and since Menkiti was attached to the Gyptian household managing Tiirmirise's household fell to her.

Saronne liked Nnandi, she was elegant well educated and did not to look down her nose at her like the rest of the Massagetae leaders. She was also a patient teacher and dare she even say it a friend.

In the great scheme of things Tiirmirise had no problems with Saronne managing her household except she did not want her to handle the feast for the Trigantae soldiers to this end she called in Nnandi to the quarters that had been assigned to the her by the local Trigantae noble.

"Your majesty?" Nnandi bowed. Her movements were elegant and efficient her voice low and well modulated. She did not have the stealthy predatory movements of Candace who moved more like a thief and could appear in a room and disappear at will with no one noticing.

Nnandi was beautiful and always made an entrance she was a woman many found hard to ignore. She wore Massagetae armour even though they were on friendly territory her breastplate was burnished to a silver shine unlike the Queen's burnished black armour.

"We have a problem regarding the feast, that is being held to honour the Trigantae soldiers."

"I do not understand. You, yourself gave me the task. Are you displeased with what I have planned?"

"No not at all. The problem is not with you. It is with Saronne."

"Ah" Nnandi exhaled as she realised the delicacy of the matter. It was the same reason Saronne had not been asked to organise the feast in the first place.

The feast for the Trigantae was more of an orgiastic flooding of the senses and all the soldiers were looking forward to it even the Massagetae. They would eat until they disgorged, drink until they spewed and fuck till they were delirious.

"Well she should be safe enough from any lechery just lock her up somewhere till the feast is over."

"Well some of the Sarmatian nobles that are coming are people that We cannot afford to offend if We are to have their votes in council. We would not be able to deny a request from them, neither could We deny a public request from Pasiphae and We know Pasiphae has cast covetous glances at her." Tiirmirise scratched her head.

Nnandi regarded her steadily. "She is a slave Tiirmirise, why are you having issues over sharing her with Pasiphae and indeed any at the feast."

Tiirmirise growled and glared at her general. Nnandi merely raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Sarmatian tradition requires you share your wife with us, as Queen it is our divine right. Would you be happy if We requested it?"

"Epiphany is not subject to such law she is Massagetae," Nnandi said dismissively "and besides she wears my gold, she is inviolate."

"And what if she was subject to such law?" Tiirmirise persisted.

"You are my Queen. Your will is my command besides I know you would never ask." Nnandi smiled

"And if Ninyas were to ask."

"I would kill him!" Nnandi said harshly. "Oh.." she sat down as realisation dawned. "Perhaps you should divert her somehow maybe Makeda can take her to the cock fighting or bear baiting

or the theatre.

In fact I would be more than happy to take her to the theatre I don't like orgies, I personally find such gatherings vulgar in the extreme." Nnandi shuddered delicately.

"She is not a blood thirsty Sarmatian We think perhaps a visit to the theatre would suffice. Besides who would organise the orgy?"

Nnandi looked disappointed "I suppose Candace would not mind taking her."

Tiirmirise was wondering how to broach the subject to Saronne when she returned from the market place with Candace. The Massagetae warrior withdrew and they were left alone in Tiirmirise's chambers.

"As you are aware there is a feast for the Trigantae, Pasiphae and Lord Radenses will be attending."

Saronne looked alarmed "Oh Tiirmirise do I have to go? Can I not go somewhere else instead?"

Tiirmirise concern dissipated. She was not going to prove difficult at all.

"Well I thought perhaps you would enjoy an evening at the theatre in Candace's company since you two seem to get on so well together."

"That is a lovely idea." Saronne was extremely relieved. Lord Radenses resembled a hairy mangy giant and Pasiphae fairly terrified her.

So Candace was to escort Saronne to the theatre. In the evening as Tiirmirise slipped into her hooded black tunic and silk draw string trousers, a dress sword by her side. Her biceps fairly rippled. As always in the Massagetae style the scarred breast was exposed.

The Queen would have made love to her captive but the road did not afford them much privacy and neither did the inns since either Candace or often shared a room with them. Although she had been tempted she respected what Saronne called her "modesty" but which the Queen preferred to see as her prudishness.

The inns were not large and were few and far between and further as aristocrats and in Nnandi's case a member of one of the ruling families they could not be expected to sleep in the barn with the rank and file.

She watched Saronne wear an aquamarine gown. Its folds draped about her in the manner of the Trigantae. It showed her lovely white shoulders and hinted at creamy breasts.

"I hope you enjoy your visit to the theatre."

"I hope you enjoy your feast."

Tiirmirise felt wretchedly guilty and made a strangled sound when Saronne's eyes lifted questioningly and she caressed Tiirmirise jaw and stood on her toes to drop a butterfly kiss on Tiirmirise chin. Tiirmirise was still stroking her chin where Saronne had kissed her even after her blonde captive had she left.

Saronne enjoyed the evening immensely. Candace had chosen to take her to a musical entertainment that combined acting with singing and dancing. It was nothing that she had ever seen not even as a princess in the land of the Angles.

The entertainment finished quite late and she sat with Candace at a tavern that served excellent food and wine. They were still laughing as they returned back to the villa provided by the Trigantae she was surprised to hear the loud noise. Candace's attention was diverted by one of the slaves and Saronne entered the villa by herself.

She saw naked men and women everywhere in every state of debauchery and orgiastic pleasure. When Candace tried to coax her away she managed to find Tiirmirise with a naked woman clinging to her arm. She had jet black hair and was amply endowed with heavy pendulous breasts and wide buttocks.

Saronne turned tail and fled into the night and back out the gate. She didn't know it could hurt so much what had she been thinking. Soon she was lost in the town.

End of Part 1

Continued...

**Lucien St Clare's Scrolls
Index Page**

~ The Falcon and the Handmaiden ~

by Lucien St Clare

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Part 2

She was caught and dragged unceremoniously back to Tiirmirise chambers. As soon as she entered the angry Queen's chambers, Tiirmirise grabbed her by her upper arms from behind and forced her over to the bed. She literally ripped off her clothing and pushed her face down on the bed, and straddled her.

She took her arms and extended them over her head and bound her wrists with the torn material from her tunic. She then bound her wrists to one of the bedposts.

Tiirmirise was going to whip her to within an inch of her life. At least that was her initial plan. Instead as the girl lay on her stomach shaking with fear, Tiirmirise took deep breadths to regulate her erratic breathing caused by anger that her blonde captive should put herself in danger and to calm her nerves which jangled from the anxiety that Saronne could have been hurt.

She held her whip in her hand and trailed it across her flesh and groaned inwardly at the sight of her plump buttocks and the lean beautiful lines of her back and her calves.

"I'm going to beat you!" Tiirmirise said softly. She fully intended to but then as she started stroking Saronne's plump white quivering flesh she was assailed by a wave of Red hot lust.

She kneaded her bottom spreading her butt cheeks and felt her clitoris harden into an unbearable ache that pooled in her centre when she caught a glimpse of her blonde curls and pink slit she found herself gently caressing the blond and sensuously stroking her sex.

Saronne's legs quivered from the anticipation of the beating. She had no doubt that Tiirmirise would chastise her and she was terrified and aroused. She waited anxiously for the bullwhip the queen held to punish her unprotected body. Tied as she was she felt utterly helpless and vulnerable. She shuddered as she felt the bull whip stroke across her flesh and tensed waiting for sting of the whip.

Tiirmirise went to the chest in the room and pulled out one of her toys. It was a present from Minae but they had never used it together. It was black like her skin and shaped like a penis thick and made from something the Dominion called rubber.

The large protruding phallus felt like skin. The wearer strapped it on over her waist and one part of it fitted over the wearers clitoris with a suction cup and the third piece had a smaller finger sized phallus which Tiirmirise pushed inside her own wet cunt. So that with each thrust the wearer gained her own pleasure, with each withdrawal the suction cup sucked on her clitoris.

Saronne moaned as her aching wet sex was penetrated slowly by the thick black ebony phallus. Tiirmirise's left arm was wrapped around her waist holding her tight as she thrust in and out while her pelvis ground against her bottom. It was rough, not particularly painful but it was also extremely pleasurable.

Saronne gasped lost in her pleasure. Behind her she could feel Tiirmirise's juices from her sex against her. As she moved in and out of her. Her fingers tugged and pulled at her nipples as they swung with the motion of the fucking she was receiving. "I ought to beat you for running away." She muttered thickly.

As Saronne's body responded to the Queen's increasingly sensuous caresses a whimper escaped her lips as her breath caught in her throat her breathing was so heavy, she struggled for breath, the pleasure... she was so close.

Unfortunately for Saronne, the Massagetae were a cruel breed and Tiirmirise was no exception. Whilst Tiirmirise was extremely reluctant to physically cause her pain there were other ways in which to discipline a recalcitrant body slave and the Massagetae Queen was extremely knowledgeable about such ways having owned many such recalcitrant body slaves.

They should have climaxed at the same time but Tiirmirise would not let her. Between the Queen's phallus, tongue and fingers, Tiirmirise used her body tormented her body teasing her until she climaxed several times but she would not allow her helpless slave to do so.

She would skillfully bring Saronne to the edge again and again but would never let her fall into the abyss of fulfilment.

Her senses became heightened, she screamed, pleaded, begged, cried, cajoled to no effect. All she wanted to do was come yet Tiirmirise seemed to know just when to stop and start again turning her into a quivering sex starved wreck.

Eventually she released Saronne from her position on the bed and after having her kneel and lick her sex so she climaxed again. She then motioned for Saronne to get into bed so they lay spoon fashion, the phallus inside her,

Saronne's hands still tied behind her back. Tiirmirise cupped her sex with her hand. The only way Saronne was going to find any release was to rub herself against the Queen's hand and Tiirmirise knew it.

At first she lay still hoping that the Queen would fall asleep and she would find her release. However Tiirmirise's other hand would squeeze one of her nipples, or caress her cleft stimulating the sensitised bud between her womanly folds or she would simply slide slowly in and out of her and stop.

"Please...Please..." Saronne begged almost whimpering with unfulfilled need.

"You know what to do slave." Tiirmirise said coldly "take your pleasure."

Saronne closed her eyes and felt a tear fall, slowly she moved against Tiirmirise's hand now afraid to show her pleasure in case the Queen stopped but Tiirmirise did not and Saronne surged on to reach her climax at last crying out her pleasure and Tiirmirise watched her climax.

Yet even when she was at her most vulnerable and her weakest she still refused Tiirmirise's kisses determined to keep a part of her separate.

Tiirmirise cut her bonds and took off the phallus. In the night Saronne turned into the Black Queen's body for comfort and cried herself to sleep and it was the Queen's reassuring arms and gentle touch that was to soothe her troubled state.

Tiirmirise was absolutely furious with Saronne for attempting to runaway. She did not hit her.

She could'nt, she did not particularly like hurting her slave. Another major annoyance since Tiirmirise had never had any problem using capital punishment to discipline slaves before.

Instead she had her taken to the goldsmith and had her pierced. Her ears sported gold earrings, just like the queen's, her nipples now had gold nipple rings and gold bracelets and anklets adorned her wrists and ankles. Her generals were horrified and Candace made her feelings clear.

"Do you know what you have done?" She fairly shrieked at the petulant Queen.

"What have We done Candace?" The black Queen sneered. Saronne sat in a corner of the room crying. A sheer silken robe protected her modesty. Tiirmirise was still angry. We have treated her very well and she decides to run away."

"I was not running away, I just wanted to get away!" Saronne cried forgetting that Candace was present.

"Runaway getaway what is the difference!" She threw her hands up in the air exasperatedly. "Do you know what they do to run away slaves in Ado? They break their legs."

"Maybe We should break her legs." Tiirmirise said to no one in particular.

"That would be infinitely better than giving her gold nipple rings. Dread Lady I know you are angry but only married Massagetae women wear gold piercings. Slaves do not wear gold piercings of any kind!"

Tiirmirise whirled round and glared at Candace. "Get out and take the little slut with you."

Saronne wept. Candace tried to comfort the slave. Candace unlike Tiirmirise had grown up in the bosom of a loving family where slaves were a part of the family. That she had chosen a military career did not impact on the fact that she had a stable up bringing.

Whereas Tiirmirise had been born into a family of over achievers, Candace had been born into a well balanced Massagetae family. She had not lived through assassination plots and was not married to a weak conniving husband who had to try and keep his head and family alive through a maze of intrigues and plots.

She had a Massagetae wife, who wore her gold piercings proudly and willingly, but she also understood that being stolen from your home and forced into a life of slavery was not easy.

Eventually when Saronne stopped crying Candace made her something warm to drink. " You know you should not have run away. Anything could have happened to you out there."

"I know." Saronne sniffed.

"I was'nt thinking I just wanted to get away and...." Saronne subsided unable to say another word.

"The only way you can be free is if Tiirmirise herself frees you. Even if you were to steal money and escape and you were caught especially in Sarmatia you would indeed have your legs broken and not even Tiirmirise could save you as she did today."

The time had come for her to accept that unless Tiirmirise freed her she would become a slave forever.

After Candace left, Saronne began to wonder why Tiirmirise was so cold unfeeling and cruel, why could she not be kind like Candace. Unable to control her emotions she dissolved once more into tears and could not think, she kept forgetting that Tiirmirise was a brutal evil woman, capable of great acts of cruelty.

Well into the night the door of the room she shared with the other Massagetae women slowly opened to reveal the Queen in all her terrible glory. The other Massagetae sat up immediately and she cleared her throat.

"Saronne," she commanded. "Come back to my bedchamber now." It was a demand. As soon as she said it, the door closed. She left without looking back. Saronne took her time, she felt sulky, surly and rebellious. Tiirmirise herself had ordered her out of her bedchamber she could wait until she was good and ready.

Saronne got up and was embarrassed to be escorted to Tiirmirise's bedchamber by two grinning Massagetae women. She found the Queen lying in bed. She climbed in on her side defiantly keeping her sleeping cloth on. When she looked over at her, she was naked. She was also staring at the ceiling and had her arms folded under her head.

The torches burnt flickering in the breezy night, illuminating the chamber well enough to give her a good look at the Queen's face. The Queen stared solidly at the ceiling looking straight upwards. She noticed the Queen's jaw moving almost as though she was grinding her teeth. It was almost as though she was ravaged by some sort of emotion.

What was she thinking Tiirmirise had no emotions she was a pitiless, merciless warrior queen she was probably plotting another diabolical scheme of some sort. She risked another glance at her, she did indeed look troubled and then when she realised she was being watched it was replaced by her mocking smile. Her arms reached for her and Saronne closed her eyes and surrendered herself to the inevitable lovemaking that followed.

When they reached the border of Sarmatia, Nnandi sent her a message. Prince Spargapises is being held prisoner in the palace dungeon at Ado and the Council had named her co-regent with Ninyas.

"That must really piss him off! Candace you must go and gather intelligence. We will need to know what is going on in the capital. Unfortunately We cannot keep you at our side. Send a message to Makeda ask her to join us. We will let you know what we have decided."

"Where you command I obey, Your majesty."

Tiirmirise rode to the Palace of light in Ado. The first person she consulted was Bierae. Although young she had Qastursh's political astuteness and insight. She had grown up on palace politics all her life and although she was young Tiirmirise valued her opinion. They would need to move carefully if she were to survive this time at all.

"So I am Co-regent with Ninyas. That must have really set the cat among the pigeons."

"Well the threat of the Dominion army is very real and Ninyas is not known for his military genius. The viziers need you as a balance against the faction of Vayanes and Ninyas. Already some nobles feel they are getting too powerful."

Tiirmirise nodded thoughtfully.

"There are a few other matters I wish to discuss your majesty."

Tiirmirise frowned "Bierae what is this? Always in private you have called me by my name? Have I done ought to offend you?"

"No it is just that whilst you have been away other things have happened."

"What things?"

"Spargapises and Pradae have been having sexual relations since they were children."

"No!" Tiirmirise was horrified.

"Yes and Ninyas knows."

"How did he find out?"

Bierae sighed "It was my fault. I was long promised to Prince Volpi. A prince of one of our tribes. He is strong handsome and vigorous. But he does not want me he wants Pradae. In my jealousy I told him of their relationship and he challenged Spargapises to a duel before father's death. Spargapises won and Volpi was injured."

"Good boy."

"You would say that!" Bierae said disgustedly

Tiirmirise cleared her throat "Continue."

"Well Volpi was injured and I think he might have told Ninyas."

"Then again he might not."

"I'm sorry Bierae but I will have to marry Pradae off to Volpi before this scandal breaks."

"I was afraid you would say that."

"You would make a very good vizier."

"You would make me a Vizier?"

"Why not. You are of royal blood. Pasiphae commands an elite Massagetae unit, Minae is a Princess of the Simian and as you cannot hold the throne I have no doubt you will always have Samartia's best interests at heart."

"I notice you said Sarmatia and not Spargapises."

"The two aims a very different. I believe only a person with your experience of diplomacy and intrigue can appreciate the difference."

"Now I know why father loved you so much. You seem to be clearly focused on the most important things."

"So no broken heart over Volpi?" Tiirmirise teased

"You know I really did not want to marry Volpi. I wanted the chance to be able to plot and intrigue which you have given me. Volpi is like Spargapises not much good at plotting and intriguing. I thought I could compliment him but his powerful mother would never tolerate an intelligent wife as you well know."

Tiirmirise winked and the new slave Bierae had heard so much about entered. She appeared to unsettle Tiirmirise. Her blue eyes screamed innocence. Her pale golden hair which fell about her in heavy luxuriant waves fell past her shoulders.

Her complexion was flawless, her teeth white everything about her was perfect from her small delicately formed hands and slender neck to her flat belly, trim waist and dainty ankles and feet. At first she made Bierae feel inadequate and ugly. However Bierae had to remind herself that she was a Princess and the girl was no more than a body slave.

Everything about her fired up a lust in Tiirmirise such as she had never known. She was barely twenty three with the maturity of someone twice her years. She was an excellent physician and she could also read and write. Already Tiirmirise had engaged her in the role of a scribe.

Often Tiirmirise felt herself aroused from her scent alone. It was elusive. She used Jasmine and Lalie she was told by the eunuchs, exotic flowers whose perfumes were not found on the continent. Extremely expensive and rare they were also Saronne's favourite.

Tiirmirise ordered the eunuchs to always make it available for her. She had also replaced the

eunuchs in the harem with totally emasculated men bought from Arabia. The ones who had no inclinations towards women at all.

"This is your new slave?" Bierae asked inquiringly "The one everyone is talking about?"

Tiirmirise barely heard her when Saronne arrived in the dress she had commissioned for her from an up and coming seamstress. Her heart seemed to have stopped beating, her stomach clenched in knots.

She was absolutely gorgeous. Desire knifed through her, as she caught her tormenting scent. Tiirmirise knew that if she did not get herself under control soon she was going to ravish her on the spot right in front of the Sarmatian Princess.

Bierae was surprised. Saronne wore the transparent red silks of a slave. Her clothing was cut to hint at her curves without revealing them. Her lips and nipples were rouged in the Gypatian custom. However she also wore gold earrings, bracelets and anklets. A privilege only accorded to wives of the Massagetæ.

There was also the matter of the scandalous price Tiirmirise had paid for the girl. Her weight in gold? It was like something out of legend but surely it could not be true could it? Tiirmirise was the most sensible woman she knew. Surely she was not falling in love with a....a.....slave??

Bierae walked around the girl who stood watching her warily. The girl was indeed beautiful, but then most of Tiirmirise bath attendants and body slaves were beautiful. She was about the same height as herself which was barely up to Tiirmirise shoulder but then Tiirmirise was a tall woman. Taller than most men.

"The one you spent a fortune on in...."

"She makes healing herbs for my eye. Bierae and you should learn to mind your own business." Tiirmirise interrupted her testily before Bierae could finish speaking.

Bierae smiled "I make everything my business. That's why I am so useful to you."

"Well go make yourself useful somewhere else." Tiirmirise stripped off her clothes methodically. Bierae left and Tiirmirise sighed and got into her bath.

Ordinarily Saronne shared the duty with several others but more often than not she found she was the only one.

"You have bathed and eaten?"

Ever since the day she had tried to runaway Tiirmirise had tried to distance herself from the girl. She rarely referred to her by name unless they were in alone.

"Are your new quarters to your liking Saronne?"

Again she answered "Yes."

That was an understatement. Firstly Saronne had her own room. The only bath attendant and body slave who slept in the harem. Her new quarters led right to the Queen's apartments and they were sumptuous. She actually had other slaves at her disposal and was in charge of overseeing Tiirmirise's household which included her slaves, her horses, her meals and even her medicines. She actually enjoyed it.

The only concubine in the harem of princesses, the other occupants were Bierae and Pradae. Olayrae the eldest Princess she had never met because she lived in the temple and often travelled throughout Sarmatia.

Minae she'd met when the Simian delegation came for a short visit to bring tidings that Princess Minae was now pregnant. Pasiphae she'd also met and Pasiphae terrified her.

Pasiphae was the kind of person that Tiirmirise should have been but was not. She had often had to tend to Pasiphae's slaves after spending a night with the princess. She flogged, whipped, burned and assaulted them. She enjoyed inflicting pain on others.

She could not remember a time that Tiirmirise had ever laid a hand on her in anger. Except perhaps for the time she tried to escape. The piercings she understood that not only was it an honour it was a protective device.

Anyone who assaulted or even touched a woman wearing gold piercings without her permission was liable to execution. Only the women who belonged to Massagetae warriors could wear such. The Male and Female Massagetae were extremely protective of their womenfolk.

Saronne herself had at her disposal two Eunuch body guards who followed her everywhere she went. They were in charge of her diet, her exercise and beauty routine and her safety.

Tiirmirise stepped out of the bath and Saronne patted her down with Gyptian towels. Tiirmirise was not wearing her eye patch for her eye no longer wept when exposed. Saronne had been applying a herbal ointment she made to her own recipe to dry out the wound and it was working very well.

After applying the ointment to her eye she placed an eye patch made of silk cloth over it. Tiirmirise still felt self conscious of the wound and insisted on covering it even though it no longer wept.

Saronne washed her hands dried them and then proceeded to rub oil on her body. The Queen was tense and Saronne forgot her plan to keep an emotional distance between them and began to knead the tightly corded muscles on her neck and shoulders.

It was when Tiirmirise released an involuntary moan that she realised several things. Firstly she was enjoying touching Massagetae Queen way too much, in fact she was now caressing her,

secondly Tiirmirise was fairly smouldering at her and she enjoyed the effect she had on the powerful ruler and thirdly she could not breathe because she was holding her breath.

They rolled over so that Saronne lay on her back on the bed and Tiirmirise knelt between her legs and when the Queen leaned forward to kiss her, Saronne placed her bare foot against the Queen's chest. Her toe rings glinted in the candle light.

"You promised." She whispered.

The Queen stared into her eyes for a long moment, her glittering black gaze held the blonde woman captive, then she captured her ankle and proceeded to suck her toes one after the other. Saronne's blue eyes widened in shock and then her pupils dilated as they darkened with desire and a low moan escaped from her throat. The kisses continued in a burning trail down her ankle, over the calf of her leg up her thighs and hips before rubbing her face against her belly.

By the time Tiirmirise's hot mouth closed around Saronne's turgid nipple she was definitely ready to be kissed. The Queen dispatched the rest of her clothes with ease, a mocking sneer about her lips which evaporated when Saronne's knowing fingers caressed her sex, stroking her expertly till she reduced the queen to a quivering wreck.

Their love making was intense, a hot burning passion that seemed to blaze out of control as they made love all night long. Sometimes Tiirmirise was domineering demanding her abject submission and settling for nothing less and other times she was tender even gentle and in rare moments even playful.

Saronne snuggled against the black Queen, their bodies lay in a tangle of limbs, Tiirmirise rhythmic breathing and her steady heart beat lulled her into a deep slumber.

When she woke up Tiirmirise was gone. Saronne sighed as she noticed the tattered remains of her clothes on the floor. Tiirmirise could be very demanding and this was not the first nor she suspected would it be the last of her garments shredded by the passionate Queen.

Tiirmirise herself had commissioned the dress a beautiful long-sided silk transparent robe (all her clothes were virtually transparent except for during certain times of the month when only the top half of the long robes she wore were transparent.) which she had then proceeded to shred to pieces last night.

Even worse she had brushed her lips against Saronne's. She knew what Tiirmirise wanted, surrender. She was playing a game. There was no war so she'd decided to conquer her slave and everyday she made sure she brushed her lips against Saronne's trying to get a response. Every night Saronne refused to return her kisses but it was getting harder and harder.

The wind blew violently and she went to close the shutters. Suddenly she realised she was no longer alone. She screamed and scampered under the bed covers.

A young woman sat at the end of the bed watching her carefully.

"Saronne"

"Who are you?"

"You know me. You have seen me before."

The voice did indeed sound familiar. The woman was blind. Horrible scars marked her face where her eyes should have been and Saronne reached forward.

"Do not touch me!"

"But I can...."

"Help." Olarae finished her sentence for her "I know what you can do healer. You have all but healed Tiirmirise's eye. Only the scars remain. If you touch me though you will heal me completely. I have the sight and I am not ready to lose it."

Olayrae moved closer the young woman who sat on the bed.

"You are the handmaiden. The one that will tame the falcon."

Saronne shook her head. "You make no sense."

"I have brought you a gift. It will help you to focus and channel your healing power but you will have to continue to meditate everyday. Get dressed and I will show you."

Olayrae gave her a pendant. It was a hand with an bird with outstretched wings flattened against it as though the hand was holding the creature and keeping it safe. She slipped it around Saronne's neck. "Come I will show you how to use it."

Tiirmirise had gone to the palace dungeons where Spargapises was being held in relative comfort far away from the other prisoners who had been tortured and bleeding, far away from the stench of death and human suffering. Yet for the once powerful and mighty Prince of Sarmatia it was still a prison.

When he saw his mother he could barely look at her. This was not lost on Tiirmirise. She said nothing for a long time just stood there staring at him. Drinking him in happy he was safe.

"What I would like to know is how with Twenty thousand troops at your disposal you still managed to end up in prison."

Spargapises blushed beet red "I believe that Ninyas scheming and...."

Tiirmirise shook her head exasperatedly. "Ninyas had no army. You were in the driving seat. When he made a move to arrest you, you should have used the army why didn't you?"

"It would have meant civil war."

"Is that what your idiotic and cowardly advisors told you?"

"You would have me war on my uncle?"

Tiirmirise shook her head. "No!" Spargapises was not as utterly ruthless as she had thought perhaps there was hope for him yet.

"Did you kill him?" The question slipped out from her lips and she cursed under her breath.

"Did I kill who?"

"Your father. Qastursh the King?"

"I did not."

"I'm your mother. You can tell me the truth."

"I did not kill him." Spargapises turned his back on his mother as he said the words.

"I do not believe you. No one in the country believes you. The assassins who were tortured all named you and Ninyas in this plot before they died."

"Why have the council not named us in this vile murder"

"Because I gave instructions to have the other plotters all killed. I do not want my son executed for Parricide but where I will not punish you God will and...."

"There are no Gods."

"Do not say such a thing! It is one thing to anger me it is quite another to anger the God of the heavens. You should do some form of reparation perhaps a sacrifice to appease...."

"I will do no such thing! I will not connive in your stupid mumbo jumbo. That man deserved to die!" Spargapises spat. "He was a fucking sodomite! What he did was unnatural just like what you do is unnatural!"

"And sleeping with your blood sister is that natural?"

"Well there must be something irresistible about my sisters because you were fucking Minae!"

"Minae was no blood relation to me." Tiirmirise hissed

"No but by law she was your daughter and you fucked her!"

Tiirmirise backhanded him and strode out of the palace dungeon. She was furious. She was

frustrated she was confused. What had happened to the sweet little boy who had adored his father?

It was still early morning and she decided to go to her offices. She would need to appraise herself of the financial situation, treaties alliance and other financial and intelligence reports.

She would then go and exercise at the barracks with the other Massagetae. The High Council would sit tomorrow. She would have a meeting with the viziers who would be favourable to her cause in the evening after dinner.

After a full day she returned to her chambers and ordered the bathers to attend her. All except Saronne who would be having her own bath. They were going to go to the theatre. As a rule it was also a good idea to patronise the arts and to be seen socialising with the people.

The opening night of the new play by the Bard and Poet Ptalanes and his talented wife Aero would be an excellent opportunity to unwind with her family. It was also an opportunity for her to quietly observe the political affiliations of the viziers.

She wore the purple, the colour of the ruling house. They were not at war so there was no need to wear any ceremonial armour so she decided to wear robes of white and gold with her purple cape. On her head she wore the Regent's crown.

It was made of gold leaves and Ninyas would be wearing something similar had he been attending. The Prime Vizier would be wearing silver leaves and the rest of the royal family would be wearing Diadems.

She had her litter brought to the front of the palace. It was palatial as befitted a queen and was carried by twenty four slaves. There was enough space in it for four women.

If she had been going alone she would have simply walked, riding would have meant she arrived smelling of horse which was most uncivilised. However since Saronne was accompanying her she would take the litter.

Saronne lay reclining inside the litter amongst a pile of soft cushions. Once Tiirmirise was settled she gave the order for them to proceed. Tiirmirise could barely take her eyes of her.

"You look beautiful." Her voice came out in a rasping whisper.

Saronne had decided to wear blue. A modest colour and modest attire. She did not think she was daring enough to go about the city of Ado half naked no matter that custom dictated she wear the transparent silks of a body slave. She decided to do this in spite of the protests from eunuchs about protocol and her status. Tiirmirise did not seem to mind.

"Thank you. I took the liberty of arranging something for you to eat. Before we have dinner tonight I know you did not eat lunch." Saronne produced a bowl of fruit and a wine jug and two goblets. Saronne poured the wine into a goblet and passed it over to Tiirmirise. The Queen's eyes

narrowed dangerously, Saronne stared innocently back.

"Where did you get the food and wine from?"

"I bought it myself from the market. I washed all the fruit myself and I have had all the items with me at all times." Saronne was not offended by the question any more. She herself had seen what happened to careless slaves who brought Tiirmirise her meals.

One of Tiirmirise's body servants in charge of preparing her meals had been careless and paid for it with her life. The level of intrigue in the palace so high. Tiirmirise's meal had been poisoned. The slave tasted the food as was her custom and had died a most excruciating death screaming in her death throes and scratching the skin off her face in agony.

Saronne herself had only escaped death because Tiirmirise would not let her act as a food taster and had made the unfortunate slave Soraya taste the food herself instead.

Saronne took the goblet from Tiirmirise and was about to drink it herself but the Queen shook her head and taking the goblet from Saronne drank deeply.

"It is fruity." Tiirmirise was surprised "I like it. What is it?"

"It is called cider. It is made from fermented apples and is not as strong as wine. I also have a large selection of fruits. Watermelons, Papaya and Passion fruit to tempt you." Saronne gave the Queen a provocative sideways glance from under her long thick lashes.

"I see much that tempts me." Tiirmirise said hoarsely

Saronne picked up a cubed water melon and fed the queen with a piece of fruit and Tiirmirise caught her finger between her lips. She ate slowly her tongue licking the fruit juices from Saronne's fingers all the while training her steely gaze on Saronne's blue eyes.

Saronne wanted to look away but found she could not. The anticipation of watching the Queen, feeling her touch and watching her taste the fruit was like a fire in her blood.

"It would appear I am hungrier than I thought." Tiirmirise said wryly when Saronne moved her fingers away.

Despite the fact they were in a litter and on their way to the theatre Saronne knew it was inevitable they would make love and the thought of it made her want to scream with excitement.

One of the slaves stumbled jolting the litter and throwing Saronne up against Tiirmirise and the need to taste her was so overwhelming that Tiirmirise simply enfolded her against her body and her lips came down on Saronne's in total possession and once they started kissing they could not stop.

Her lips opened to the Queen's fierce demands as Tiirmirise was lost in her sweetness. Saronne's senses overflowed with Pine and sandalwood, the fresh clean scent that the queen wore, and the

sensual erotic love play of their duelling tongues. Tiirmirise nibbled and sucked on her mouth taking endlessly till Saronne's lips were red and swollen with the excess kissing.

She wrapped her leg around the Queen and arched her back so that when Tiirmirise dipped her head to lick at her rouged pierced nipple, it hardened with arousal and then the Queen drew the whole luscious crown into her hungry mouth before devouring her lush breasts.

She needed Tiirmirise's fingers to play with her, even go inside her. She slid her lips up the column of the Queen's throat and closed her teeth around the skin just under her ear.

Saronne forgot that they were on a litter being borne by 20 odd slaves who could probably hear their cries as they melted into their orgasm. Tiirmirise shocked her with her wickedly intimate lovemaking.

Her lips nuzzled her, then her tongue sought her tiny bud of pleasure melting away her prudish inhibitions as she arched herself against Tiirmirise's glorious mouth screaming out her pleasure with wild abandon and then when it was her turn to give Tiirmirise pleasure she gloried in the helpless cries of pleasure made by the Queen of the Massagatae.

When they arrived at the theatre it was packed. The performance would not start without either the Queen or Ninyas and since Ninyas would not be attending they waited for her. Everyone stood up as they made their way to the royal box.

Saronne was seated on her left and on her right the next High ranking Person in the Royal family after Tiirmirise, was the princess Bierae. Through out the entire performance Saronne giggled and made hilarious observations to the Queen who chuckled along with her as Saronne pointed out the subtle comic nuances of the play.

The play was funny indeed. Generally light hearted amusement, filled with witty jokes and poking fun at all levels of society from everyday slaves to rich merchants, aristocratic farmers and their spoiled brats, not even the co-regents Ninyas and Tiirmirise were spared the comic's lampoons.

Tiirmirise enjoyed Saronne's presence. Her lover was very tactile and the Queen was extremely amused and pleased.

She enjoyed Saronne's touch on her arm to catch her attention, she especially loved her unconsciously lingering caresses on her face, her forearms, her chest and was utterly captivated by her infectious laughter and consequently she was in such a good mood she did not take offence even when the jokes were directed at her personally or the laughter was at her own expense and the people loved her for it.

At dinner that night held at Nnandi's townhouse in the city they discussed the play and eventually the talk turned to politics. Epiphany, Nnandi's partner rolled her eyes at Saronne and giggled "Politics, Politics, politics always politics." She was relaxed and feeling happy with the wine.

"I am going to take Saronne on a tour around the townhouse to see how the simple people live. I hear you have not allowed her out of the Palace of light since she arrived in Ado."

Tiirmirise's lips twitched in amusement. "I would hardly call your sumptuous villa with 2,000 slaves simple. You just want to show off"

"Off course I do. Come" Epiphany got up "Let me show you around and we'll leave these two old war dogs to their tales." She gave her embarrassed looking partner Nnandi a long lingering lusty kiss and led Saronne out of the parlour.

"That was diplomatically done." Tiirmirise smiled amused at her friend's sheepish glance.

"Epiphany knows her place. Just because she's bigger than me does not mean she can boss me around."

"Right." Tiirmirise drawled disbelievingly

Nnandi threw her head back and laughed heartily. "I am not fooling anyone am I?" Tiirmirise shook her head and whole heartedly joined her laughter with Nnandi's.

Saronne was startled she rarely heard Tiirmirise laugh. She was always so serious so commanding so imperious. As a slave she had not expected kindness from Epiphany. At court she was despised by a lot of the Sarmatian nobility.

The noblewomen hated her because they felt she was not entitled to the gold piercings and the slaves were terrified of her because the piercings denoted that she was not one of them and therefore could not be treated as a slave.

Epiphany was the first person to treat her like an equal since she had arrived in Ado. Even Tiirmirise's Massagetæ women called her Lady and bowed when she entered the room.

They chatted desultorily about different things for awhile, supervising the slaves, keeping track of expenses in the household finding the balance between a healthy diet and impressing the different courtiers and guests that they both had to entertain on an almost daily basis. Saronne liked her.

Saronne giggled "You know Tiirmirise baffles me sometimes. She often refers to herself as "We" when we are with other people and "I" when we are alone."

"Ah the royal "We". Sarmatian Kings and Queens represents the Nation and traditionally refer to themselves as We."

Epiphany also knew that Tiirmirise only addressed herself as "I" when she was speaking to close family members and people she loved. She wondered whether Saronne knew the implications of her words and decided to ask her.

"Tiirmirise is in love with you. You know that don't you?"

"I am nothing more to her than a slave."

"You are so naïve it is frightening. You control her household. You already said you are personally in charge of her food and medicines. You have an honour guard larger than most Sarmatian nobles, she paid your weight in gold, You wear piercings of the purest gold and most scandalously of all you carry her personal seal." Epiphany lifted Saronne's left hand on which rested a large gold signet ring. Not even Spargapises her own son carried her personal seal."

"But I am not free. If she loved me she would free me."

"None of us is ever free." Epiphany sighed. "I may be a Massagetae noble and first cousin to the Queen of Sarmatia and as much as I love my partner and life mate our marriage was one of duty but I fell in love with Nnandi. Makeda was actually my first love. "

Saronne inhaled sharply. Makeda was quiet thoughtful and extremely intelligent. She was tall with a muscular physique. Unlike Tiirmirise who was all lean whip cord strength, Makeda was a handsome woman with bulging muscles and raw strength.

Nnandi on the other hand was smaller. About the same height as Saronne. She was studied elegance personified. She was beautiful herself and surrounded herself with beautiful things.

She was personable and witty and liked challenges just not on the battlefield. She was a competent warrior but the art of war itself did not interest her.

She was more an administrator, a logistics person. She liked to inspect uniforms, make sure supplies arrived in time. She was ideally suited to be a merchant. She was one of those people who whenever you needed anything whether it was obscure or impossible to find like ice in the desert Nnandi would invariably find a way to get it.

She successfully managed to feed and clothe Tiirmirise's army on a shoe string budget, in areas where it was difficult to forage for food and always managed to turn a tidy profit whilst doing it too.

She was nothing like the warlike Makeda who more often than not reminded her of a silently lurking panther just waiting for the right moment to strike.

Saronne was surprised Epiphany had not become a Massagetae warrior herself and she said so.

Epiphany looked horrified. "Most Massagetae women have a choice unless they are born into an aristocratic family like that of Tiirmirise or Nnandi in which case the choice is taken from them when they are five years old.

Usually we get to choose at about thirteen summers and I would never deliberately have my right breast cut off I am way too vain for that. Besides I enjoy being a spoiled and pampered Massagetae wife."

Do you have any idea what type of barbaric military training those women go through. It dehumanises them and turns them into animals and killers. It is why most Massagetae are married young. Otherwise they become cruel and wicked in their old age without a partner to stabilise their excesses."

"Like Pasiphae?"

"Like Pasiphae." Epiphany agreed.

"What about the Men?"

"Massagetae men are just as bad as the women. Rarely will you find a Massagetae who is not a warrior. A few are merchants but most are ferocious fighters."

"How is it you were not married to a Massagetae man."

"I made it very clear from the beginning that I wanted a woman. After that my parents simply sought someone for me from the Massagetae tribe."

"I don't know anyone in my country married to another woman."

"Which probably explains why you do not know how to handle our troublesome Queen." Epiphany muttered under her breath.

There was a long silence before the next question came.

"Saronne," she started. "When you and the Queen are physically intimate, do you enjoy it?"

Saronne blushed and stammered "W... w... why... why do you ask that?"

"Well as I said before Makeda was my true love but my parents contracted a marriage with Nnandi's family and I had to marry her."

Epiphany sighed "Don't let that elegant exterior fool you. Nnandi like all Massagetae can be very demanding but as I got to know her, I came to enjoy her touch and now we are happy together. I know what you do is a..."

Epiphany floundered for a word and came up with the word "service" but do you ever get any pleasure from it."

"I... I..." Saronne stammered and then blushed. "She's a woman."

"So is it impossible for you to feel pleasure when you are with a woman?" Epiphany asked gently.

"Yes, I mean no. I mean," a long sigh followed. "Sometimes She can be so gentle and so... so tender and... and sometimes...." Saronne trailed off into silence. *And sometimes she made her head spin*, Saronne thought unable to actually say what she was thinking.

Into this silence She heard Epiphany's hesitant question "Saronne, do you love her?"

Saronne stared at the floor. How to answer that one? How could she have fallen in love with such a person? She couldn't help it she started crying.

"It's alright." Epiphany whispered embracing the trembling younger woman as she stroked back the strands of Saronne's golden mane.

Inside Tiirmirise was reclining on the couch with Nnandi sharing a companionable bottle of wine and playing chess.

"Jurugun of Numer in our Western Provinces has rebelled against us. The high council is all in an uproar." Nnandi sipped her wine. "But then the Numerians are always rebelling." Nnandi drawled "And, I expect the sitting at the High Council of Viziers tomorrow will be all about the war with the Numerians."

"Why are they rebelling this time I wonder?" Tiirmirise stroked her chin thoughtfully

"Same reason all our vassal states rebel. We send out a governor they start off well then they become corrupt, they rape the women, enslave the children steal all the gold and come back to Ado with money to run for Prime Vizier.

The people get pissed off they rebel, we crush them send out a good governor. He does well builds up the place, makes too much money he gets greedy and corrupt, they rebel...."

"I get the picture!" Tiirmirise said wryly "Although I was rather hoping I could stay awhile longer. I seem to be spending more and more time at war and less time on construction projects and trade treaties."

"Tiirmirise I am horrified. I thought you wanted to be the greatest warrior in the land. You know live for war, blood and glory and all that." Nnandi waved her hand negligently in the air whilst taking another sip of wine.

"There are many paths to glory my friend. When I walk in the Bazaars and the Docks, I see statues and temples, roads and sewers, Queen Candace built this, King Mauro built that, even warrior Kings and Queens build something to remember their reign. Mine has thus far been spent in a saddle with a sword in my hand. I don't even know what my grandson looks like."

"Ye gods Tiirmirise is this slave making you soft in the head?"

Tiirmirise scowled and knocked back the rest of her wine. "The quest for glory is not for the faint hearted."

"There is one good thing about this war I suppose. It will give Spargapises a chance to make himself useful. The council may even forgive the part he played in Qastursh's murder"

"You believe him guilty?"

"As sin!"

They had been at Ado for several months now. The intrigue and political cauldron that was the city was simmering gently waiting for an explosion. Plot and counter plot. The political casualties were few. Apart from the murder of the king. A few Viziers had been exiled in disgrace.

They were officially still in a state of war with the Dominion not to mention the escalating political hostilities with Jurugun of Numer. Tiirmirise unwilling to let the political situation escalate further had decided not to prosecute Ninyas.

It was not just because she feared the political repercussions that would befall her son but also because she did not want the country to descend into civil war.

It had become rapidly clear to her that she did not have a majority in council but then neither did Ninyas. The political situation was poised on a knife edge something was going to happen. Everyone could feel it in the air.

Saronne's diary

I have been body servant to the Queen of the Massagetae for several months now and I can say with all sincerity that it has not been easy. Sometimes she acts like all Massagetae treating her slaves like their lives are meaningless. Although most of the time she is extremely considerate and caring.

As her body slave my duties stretch from the mundane to the sublime. I run her personal household which is quite apart from the palace. As well as being in charge of the welfare of her personal bodyguard who are not attached to the Palace, I have to oversee the care of her clothes, her armour her weapons, ensure her apartments are clean, as well as buying and cooking her food personally. Tiirmirise will not eat anything without a taster unless I bought and cooked the food myself.

I actually enjoyed this because it gave me an excuse to leave the Palace and explore the market.

My other duties included bathing her and off course pleasing her sexually. I would be lying if I said I hated every moment. In the evenings I would read to her or she dictated to me and asked my opinion on the political situation raging in Ado.

Sometimes I felt like she was coming to see me as person and at others that I was nothing more than a slave. When we share a bed my body burns with her every caress and I ached from her touch, at other times I would be filled with self loathing for wanting her and wishing I could just throw something at her head which I did in private on occasions when I was annoyed with her.

Tiirmirise is a curious mixture of civilised barbarity. One day she could toss a goat into a crowd of Massagetæ in some ancient barbaric ritual and watch them rip it apart with their bare hands whilst she was sprayed with its innocent blood in a frenzy of adulation and that same evening she would be dining in a banqueting hall in silks and conducting harmless conversation with socially studied elegance.

At night I was not allowed to sleep anywhere but her bed. Whether or not it was during my monthlies. Sometimes she would come to me stinking of another woman or palm wine or even the revolting alcoholic brew made from milk and yet she would still expect me to have sex with her.

Other nights she would just fall asleep in my arms whilst I stroked her head. I dared not leave the bed till morning when she was awake unless I went to use the chamber pot and even then I had to tell her where it was I was going.

During my first month at the palace when I slept in her bed, I woke up late in the night and sought to use the chamber pot, her eyebrows had furrowed in her sleep and her arms tightened around me.

The more I tried to slip away the tighter knit her eyebrows became as her arms closed around me like steel bands. Eventually I was so desperate I yanked myself out of her arms and slapped her.

"Let me go you lecherous goat I need to use the chamber pot."

I did not see the smile that played about her lips as she rolled away. When I came back I trembled realising what I had done unsure of myself I waited at the edge of her bed expecting some repercussion for my foolish actions.

At length she started to get fretful and her arms started searching my bed space. Perhaps I had got away with it and she was so far in sleep she had not heard me. Gingerly I slipped into bed beside her thinking her asleep.

"Lecherous old goat huh?" She chuckled and wrapping her long powerful arms around me went back to sleep almost immediately.

As her scribe I often went through her papers every morning. Military dispatches trade treaties even personal letters. I was reading one such personal letter when I read about Xango's daughter

Nitocris, Tiirmirise's niece. I began to weep for my own daughter who I had not seen since the day I left my Massagetae Master.

I had not had time to grieve because I was so busy just trying to survive in Gypsos. Suddenly I started crying and I couldn't stop. It was in this miserable state that Tiirmirise found me.

If I didn't know better I would almost say she cared. She swept me up in her arms and cradled me against her as I just let long held tears out. I might have been wrong but I imagined I even felt her lips on my hair.

"Why do you cry Saronne?" She asked softly. Her deep dark voice was gentling and calming.

I shook my head still unable to speak it was so painful to think about and I could not help myself I just started crying again till my head hurt and my eyes were red with my tears.

"I asked you a question why do you cry? Has someone upset you? Tell me who it is and I will deal with them sorely."

I heard the note of command in her voice and I started to pull myself together.
"I was just thinking about my daughter."

"You have a daughter?" She corrected herself "You had a daughter with another master?"

"Yes." I whispered the last. It was the first time I brought the subject up and Tiirmirise looked absolutely furious.

"Is this why you cry? You miss your last master?"

Saronne sighed. Saronne did not make the mistake of answering that softly asked question. Tiirmirise had a jealous streak wider than the River Araxes. I shook my head knowing I had to measure my words carefully. I got off the Queen's lap and Tiirmirise did not prevent my leaving.

"Did he hurt you?" She asked curiously.

"No, he was very kind. But I don't miss him I miss my daughter."

The queen stood up and paced the room. Eventually she turned around and folded her arms across her chest her lower lip jutting out belligerently.

"You say you had a child with this man."

"I miss my daughter Nitocris, not her father."

"My niece is also called Nitocris." Tiirmirise looked at her thoughtfully. "It is an uncommon name amongst the Massagetae I am told it means.."

"Mother Returns. I know, that is what it means in our language also."

Tiirmirise frowned thoughtfully. "Of course I have never met her. Margravine her mother refuses to let her come to court. Something about turning her into her wicked old witch of an aunty."
Tiirmirise grinned

Saronne smiled back reluctantly and Tiirmirise laughed "I take it you agree that I am a wicked old witch."

"Well I did'nt like to say." I smiled reluctantly through my tears.

Tiirmirise came to the bed and beckoned for me to come into her arms. I obeyed watching her warily and tried to smile up at her through my tears. I did not struggle when she scooped me up in her arms. I often enjoyed being held like this by Tiirmirise.

"Tell me about your daughter Afereni." She said softly.

Afereni was a word I did not know the meaning of. I spoke Gyptian and Angle the language of my people. I was fluent in the language of the Massagetae but only spoke a smattering of Sarmatian. I supposed it to be a Sarmatian word.

I had learned the language when I lived with Nitocris' father. However there were some words that I still did not understand like "Afereni" which I assumed was probably Sarmation for slave.

"My daughter has black hair like her father's, but her skin is golden like the daughter of the sun god Apollo."

"I thought you did'nt worship the pagan gods of the Hellenes."

"I don't I'm just using an allegory to describe her. Poetic license I believe it is called."

"If you remember the man's name and tribe I will search for him."

"I do not know his name but I have seen him at court with her."

"Well then you need only point him out to me and I shall kill him and have your child brought to you."

The frightening thing was I knew that Tiirmirise spoke the truth. "Kill him!" I was horrified
"Why would you do that?"

"The child of a Massagetae is never a slave. So the man will probably adopt her and make her his heir. If he has taken the child from you chances are he will never give her up so I will have to kill him." Tiirmirise said matter of factly as though it all made perfect sense. I did not want to believe what she was saying.

"Does that mean that somewhere my daughter is being raised as a free woman?"

"Yes. A Massagetae no less."

I did not want my child to be raised as a Massagetae. I did not want them to chop off her right breast and make her undergo all sorts of physical hardship to turn her into a cruel unfeeling warrior. I felt like weeping and I did.

End of Saronne's entry.

Chapter 7

The Handmaidens's Tale

It was March before things got moving again. The beginning of the campaigning season for some but for the farmers and common folk a time when the crops needed planting and for the traders when they traditionally sought financing for their trading concerns. If they had not already secured funds in the winter months.

The morning was crisp with a bit of chill in the air. The High Council was in session. The new Prime Vizier for the year had just been installed. Scaures was a man of integrity a conservative and a challenger for Vayanes position in the conservative party and he was firmly neutral for he had not yet declared his support for either Ninyas or Tiirmirise.

It was now clear that there was going to be a clearly demarcated line in Sarmatian politics. Ninyas made no bones about the fact that you were either with him or against him. His palpable hatred for Prince Spargapises and by extension Tiirmirise was too tangible to be ignored.

He had bested Tiirmirise in the council but as usual the bloody woman had come out of the Gyptian encounter not only smelling of roses but having improved trading relations with Gypsos and considerably increased her own personal fortune. The Gyptian Royal family had showered her with gold.

The tale of her confrontation with Eugertes Grossbelly was still being told to school children as a shining example of Massagetae courage and pride, an example to emulate. The people loved her. He they saw as a villain.

Tiirmirise sat in the council chamber draped in her royal robes of purple and, her house colours of red and white and off course she wore her customary Massagetae black trousers.

She sat pensively listening to the proceedings with her supporters Bierae, newly admitted to the council, her father, Jbenga, her brother Xango, Makeda, Nnandi, Candace, Osumares, Osamaye and Spargapises newly released on lack of evidence. There were other supporters but these were firmly in the camp of Tiirmirise, the most vocal and the most loyal.

Ninyas listened carefully to the debates raging in the chamber. He gauged who was with the Queen, who was against him, who was neutral and could therefore be bought or possibly be persuaded to enter his camp. He was well satisfied with his political gains so far.

He had successfully removed Qastursh and shifted the blame to Spargapises. He knew people suspected he had a hand in the King's murder but the thought that the crown prince himself might have murdered his own father dominated people's minds.

He hated Spargapises. The spawn of evil. Tiirmirise he respected as a fellow adversary and sometimes even admired her. Spargapises on the other hand angered him because he was really the main contender for the throne. All he had to do was find a way to separate the arrogant shit from his mother and his life and the throne would be his.

However to achieve that goal he needed an army and to get an army he needed funds. A lot of funds. Tiirmirise was rich from her years of campaigning and resolving disputes and all the trade concessions she gained as a Queen also she came from a wealthy aristocratic family and was able to use her royal position and merchant background effectively.

Tiirmirise the queen was richer than fucking Sarmatia. She must be because even Sarmatia could not afford to pay the weight of one body slave in gold. At least not without bankrupting the treasury and causing a riot.

The only other ways to raise money apart from war and trade was through taxes. The Viziers were extremely stingy when it came to spending tax money. Squeeze Sarmatians too hard and there would be riots. Riots were bad for business.

He had a cunning plan to get his hands on gold and it involved getting the command to fight the Dominion whilst ensuring that Tiirmirise was sent off to fight a real war against the Numerians where hopefully either she or Spargapises would be killed in battle. He rubbed his chin as he schemed and directed his mind to the debate that raged in the council chamber around him.

"The Dominion are not going to invade us this year they are embroiled in a vicious civil war." Candace stormed

"Nevertheless the Simian have requested we send them an army of fifteen thousand troops." Scaures interjected "They must fear an attack."

"The Simian always fear an attack." Vayanes said dismissively and the chamber snickered.

The debate raged on for three days. The outcome was just as Ninyas planned. He was given the mandate to march against the Dominion which was camped at Ijebu, just out of reach of the Simian but enough to make them feel uncomfortable.

He informed the council that he would not use landless peasants and the city poor for his army. Instead he would recruit from the traditional tribes of Sarmatia. Landowners.

Men and only men who had a stake in the land and who were willing to fight for their country. The clique of conservatives led by Vayanes followed Ninyas as he appeared to represent the old ways and Tiirmirise was roundly defeated in the council. She would be dealing with the rebellious King Jurugun and the Numerians.

The High Council allowed Ninyas an army of Fifteen thousand strong and his recruitment techniques were appalling. Men were press ganged into service without their consent, victims of state sanctioned kidnap. Mature looking 14year olds were hauled from their beds. In some homes both father and son were pressed into service.

This worked a great hardship on many citizens as the entire male line could be wiped out leaving the women vulnerable to the unscrupulous moneylenders grasping overlords like Magba Massinassa who supported Ninyas in this particular endeavour.

Since few women were trained in managing farms and estates. Even among the Massagetae, women were essentially a warrior, merchant tribe. Those that did not fight were traders, sailors, merchants even bankers. Few were farmers. Farming was predominantly a male Sarmatian occupation.

In fact the only innovation that Ninyas decided to use since the last ten years Tiirmirise had been leading the army was the saddle and stirrups. These allowed the Sarmatians to have excellent dexterity and control of their horses.

They controlled their mounts with their knees leaving their hands free to fire arrows or hurl javelins all at the same time, thus mounting lightning raids and attacks against an enemy infantry army without ever engaging them in hand to hand combat during battle.

Ninyas journey to the Simian lands took a little over 70 days which meant they averaged less than 15 miles a day. They rested in Warbo a delightful little seaside port with pellucid waters alive with shrimp, King Prawns, large lobsters, crabs and fish of different varieties. In the muddy waters of the salt water pools were oysters and dug mullets, fish that burrowed in the mud.

The local teenagers were no different from those all over the world crazy for men in uniform and for the 16 days that Ninyas left his army there Warbo hummed with irate fathers, vengeful lovers, giggling girls, lecherous soldiers and tavern brawls which kept the Military marshals busy keeping the peace and the military police in a foul temper.

Then Ninyas packed up his army and led them down into the lush alluvial plains of Ijebu. Ninyas' luck was in. Prince Aresteion of the Simian had recently won a battle against the Dominion and was pursuing them back across Simian territory.

Ninyas purred when he realised his diabolical plans were coming to fruition. The real reason he had sought this command was to find the rumoured gold of the Ijebu Simian.

A century earlier before the arrival of the Dominion at the hands of the Simian. The Simian had been in the ascendance in the plains. They had plundered the temples of the surrounding peoples

and even ventured into the lands of the Dominion.

The Dominion were Polytheistic and dedicated a lot of gold, silver and bronze to their many gods a lot of this wealth was kept in the temples and oracles which acted as banks and economic centres.

The Simian had plundered the largest of these and melted everything down in to gold bars to hide them from the Dominion whom they noticed had begun to increase in power and influence. Ninyas had heard the story whilst he'd been intriguing at the court of the Simian.

He conveniently overlooked the fact that he would be stealing from his allies possibly jeopardising the Sarmatian alliance with the Simian. All his inquiries about the gold came to naught. Most of the Simian regarded the existence of the gold as myth.

Ninyas shed his armour and leathers, wore his white tunic, purple cloak and gold leaf crown which signified him as Co-Regent of Sarmatia and wandered the town picking into every little nook and cranny.

He ordered suspicious looking fields to be dug up and excavated pastures and fields. When he found nothing he took to searching for the gold as though conducting a treasure hunt in a gala atmosphere conducted by troops who were relieved not to be facing a ferocious enemy.

He promised a share in the booty to encourage them to be more diligent in their search. The only gold to be had were those in the Simian temples the taking of which would violate the treaty in such an obvious manner it would lead to war and the disapproval of the council. The gold diviners brandished their forks to no avail and the landscape of Ijebu began to resemble the demented burrowing of a sex starved rabbit.

The rivers and lakes were alive with fish and the soldiers preferred fishing in the lakes than the swift flowing rivers. They could laze in the sun under their wide brimmed hats chewing grass and snoozing. Lost in thought Ninyas walked down to one of the larger sprawling lakes absently watching the play of light on the scales of the fish glittering and gleaming as they darted about sparkling gold and silver and then it dawned on him.

He called his generals and made the engineering corps drain the lakes. The engineering corps was an important part of the army. They built bridges and dismantled them to cover the army's retreat. They helped oversee assembling the camp and siege machinery.

There at the bottom of the lake was the Ijebu gold. It was hidden by a century of mud and weeds. 50,000 bars of gold, 20,000 bars of silver and 40,000 bars of sky metal steel. He decided to ship the steel first. Sky Metal steel belonged to the state and to keep it meant certain death. He had no intention of touching that.

It would be used to make swords and weapons for the army. The silver he melted down and paid the army completely ensuring their loyalty and gratitude. The gold would go to the treasury and he would be entitled to a quarter share for finding it. He sent his second in command with a

century of men to guard it.

The gold set out from Ijebu in 400 wagons. The soldiers minds on Warbo's idyllic life and how they were going to spend the silver that Ninyas had given them and they did not take sufficient precautions. So that when a raiding party of 1000 strong swooped down on the wagons they had little time to react and every single one of them was slaughtered to a man.

A dispatch rider encountered their bodies as he rode from Warbo to Ado. Ninyas donned mourning clothes to inform the army who wept for their fallen comrades. However now that the gold had been found Ninyas suddenly found Ijebu stifling and could not wait to get out. It was noticed that he paced and fidgeted and had sleepless nights.

In comparison Tiirmirise's army who had spent their time in Baria in Numer had more or less settled in a semi-permanent home at their base camp. Despite the constant movement, the forays and expeditions, the base camp began to take on the aspects of a town.

Most of the soldiers had lovers both male and female, some even had babies. Shops and taverns multiplied outside the wooden fortified walls with a haphazard system of narrow streets. Tiirmirise used the period of winter rains to drill her army thoroughly and sorted out the army into tents of ten who were expected to live together and mess together.

It was during the winter rains that an incident happened which whilst Tiirmirise dismissed Saronne worried about incessantly but she did not know why. She only knew that the incident filled her with foreboding. The Chief Priestess had summoned them to the temple and she had also requested rather commanded that Saronne attend.

One of the Sarmatian soldiers had raped a temple priestess something forbidden both under Sarmatian law and Simian law. However he was also one of the Queen's best engineers.

His punishment should by rights have been death under Simian law but Tiirmirise chose to apply castration the penalty under Sarmatian law for rape and the priestess had been furious hence she had summoned Tiirmirise to the temple with Saronne.

"The Gods are displeased by your actions."

"Well since We only worship one God and he preaches an eye for an eye We believe We have discharged our duties."

"He requires that you spend a night in the temple. You and the Lady Saronne."

Tiirmirise's eyebrows rose. The high priestess had bestowed an honorific on Saronne when she and everyone else knew Saronne was a slave.

"Is that to be our punishment?" Tiirmirise asked mockingly

"I do not know your majesty. The ways of the gods are unknown to us. Ours is just to obey."

"And If We do not Your Grace, what then?"

"That is between you and the god. I am only a messenger and he requires that you and your lady spend the night here and that I mark it as a special date."

Tiirmirise sighed "Is there any special ritual We must perform, any special donation We must make?"

"None the God only asks that you spend one night in the temple with the Lady Saronne."

Tiirmirise bowed mockingly "As you will Your Grace." Even the Queen was subject to the jurisdiction of the Temple.

The arrival of spring brought with it a great stirring within the camp. The soldiers sorted out their weapons for the coming campaign. Breast plates and helmets were oiled and polished and the latter padded to withstand the heat and chaffing, swords and daggers honed, chain mail shirts mended and leathers oiled.

Saronne supervising Tiirmirise's household had her own administrative duties which included compiling accounts for each member of her bodyguard as their accounts were administered separately because they formed part of Tiirmirise's household.

Each soldier male and female had funeral expenses (where the death was not in battle.) If a soldier died in battle the state paid for it. Each soldier also had a savings account which did not release the pay till he or she was discharged and yet another from which they could draw funds from during campaign. This particular system was really a paper system of promise to pay backed by gold.

Most of the accounts were seen to by Nnandi, Jbenga and Xango but Saronne oversaw that of the 1000 strong Massagetae military bodyguard who accompanied the Queen into battle and who formed a part of Tiirmirise's household. She also saw to writing dispatches, letters and as well as the other household accounts. She even had her own slaves and Sarmatian assistants to help her.

Saronne found that with each new added responsibility that she had the generals no longer treated her as they would a mere slave and some even came to ask her advice.

Well most treated her with respect except off course Pasiphae who just intimidated and bullied her. She had felt sorry for herself till she realised

Pasiphae intimidated and bullied everyone even the Queen's own father but no one said anything because she was a royal princess of the blood and stood in good stead with Tiirmirise. Even that stopped once Nnandi's wife Epiphany arrived at camp.

Epiphany had not been joking when she said the Massagetae were extremely protective of their life partners. Epiphany came from a merchant family and since most of her family were involved

in some military enterprise or another it fell to her to carry on the trading side of their business.

However Epiphany used it as an excuse to travel and she decided to visit Nnandi who was absolutely furious that she put herself in danger. After a blazing row that could be heard by all in camp the Little general had stormed off on exercises and left her weeping wife alone in camp.

Saronne took a deep breath and went into Nnandi's quarters. She was carrying a tray of wine and some fresh fruit and sweet pastries she had managed to scrounge from the supplies.

"Oh thank-you!" Epiphany smiled through her tears. "You are the only one who has made me feel welcome since I arrived. "Makeda hates my guts, Nnandi does not want me here because she's terrified I'll be captured or hurt and Pasiphae is just..."

"A cow!" Saronne laughed "I know. I think they are all just annoyed because they now have to be on their best behaviour."

"Why? what were they doing before?" Epiphany sniffed.

"Well not bathing for days after crawling around in the mud is one of my pet peeves."

Nnandi and Candace were generally well behaved but Makeda and Jbenga despite the fact the latter was married were always drunk and whoring and Pasiphae flogging her slaves and any other unfortunate person who sought her bed. Although Saronne did not think she should mention that to Epiphany who as she could see was a very gently bred lady.

Epiphany's eyes widened in disbelief "My perfect little, I can't work in this environment Nnandi going for days without bathing?"

"Sometimes the command tent smells like some of the sewers in Ado." Saronne wrinkled her nose distastefully.

Saronne managed to cheer up Epiphany and after much wine and hysterical giggling the two young women fell asleep in Nnandi's tent. In the evening when they attended dinner, just as Saronne predicted when the generals all assembled in the command tent they were all in formal ceremonial military dress. Bathed washed and well groomed.

They all sat down to a formal dinner following tradition and because Epiphany was the only non warrior Massagetae present she got to bless the salt.

Tiirmirise barely looked at her or addressed her all evening. However she was used to this especially when her generals were around. After dinner in the command tent Saronne supervised the clearing of the tent and made her way to Tiirmirise's tent to get her bath ready and ensure her tent was clean and comfortable.

When she entered Tiirmirise's chamber, she looked around for the other slaves but did not see them. In fact the chamber was eerily quiet. Suddenly someone grabbed her and before she could

open her mouth her scream was cut short by a hard punishing kiss that crushed her lips ruthlessly and then just as quickly as she was in the embrace Tiirmirise pushed her away.

Saronne stumbled over one of the cushions left lying carelessly on the floor and fell. When she looked up all she could see was the blazing fury in the black queen's one eyed gaze and something else she couldn't quite discern.

"So you were not satisfied with being my whore, you decided to fuck little Nnandi's wife yourself," She snarled.

Her heart sank. "I don't know what you're talking about, Tiirmirise" Saronne bit her lower lip anxiously.

"Don't lie to me, you bitch!" Tiirmirise grabbed her by her hair and dragged her over to the white animal rug in the middle of the tent. She glared down into Saronne's face for a moment as though looking for something and then with a feral growl she pushed her away and started pacing the room restlessly.

The Massagetae Queen moved effortlessly and economically like a big wild cat, stalking her prey, she walked around the room circling Saronne as though waiting for a moment to strike.

Saronne imagined she now had an inkling of what it actually felt like to be hunted, like the quarry of a predator that was about to be pounced on. She thought Tiirmirise was going to kill her right there and then.

"Did you think I wouldn't find out?" She sneered. "You and that fucking over pampered cunt. You've seemed to forget whom you belong to. You belong to me! And she will pay for daring to touch my property! And make no mistake YOU ARE MINE!!!" She roared out the last words with such menace Saronne fairly quivered with fear.

As she ranted and raved, Saronne tried to think of who or what it was that could cause her to think that she would betray her in such a way.

She groaned inwardly as she remembered the events of the afternoon. Herself and Epiphany had got drunk and fallen asleep on Nnandi's bed. By the time she woke up she realised she was late for all the other things she had to do.

Anyone could have seen them and misconstrued the situation. After all Epiphany was a Massagetae and Saronne only a slave a body slave for that matter. No one would think that they were doing anything other than having sex.

Saronne tried to reassure her. Epiphany was one of the few friends she'd made since coming to the land of the Massagetae and if the Queen felt that she was... she could barely think it through.

Suddenly she pounced again pulling her to her feet by the simple expedient of grasping her hair and holding her in a crushing embrace. They were so close, face to face, eyeball to eyeball she

could feel Tiirmirise's breadth on her lips.

"Tiirmirise, nothing happened between myself and Epiphany. I didn't experience any physical intimacy with Epiphany." She said softly.

The sound of her name on her very lips caused the black Queen to glare at her. Saronne felt like shrivelling away from that furious stare but she held her ground and bravely did not back down.

"Oh Cack!" Tiirmirise released her grip on Saronne and immediately began pacing again. She didn't say anything for a long time.

"The Eunuchs say they came and found you sleeping together in Nnandi's bed."

"That was all we were doing Tiirmirise...sleeping I swear it!"

"I cannot imagine anyone being in bed with you Afereni and not fucking with you, I should kill you and that bitch too!"

Suddenly Tiirmirise was on top of her, straddling her. This time she had her left hand on Saronne's throat and a dagger appeared in her right. She put the dagger to the younger woman's throat and her face within a hair's breath of Saronne's so she could smell the wine on her breath.

If she was intoxicated there would be no reasoning with her. In her heart Saronne knew she had done nothing wrong. She had not lusted after Epiphany or even done any of the things Tiirmirise was now accusing her of.

If Tiirmirise wanted to kill her let it be because Tiirmirise wanted to do it not because of one Massagetae woman who had shown her kindness and extended the hand of friendship.

"I know that if you want to kill me you can. You are stronger than me Tiirmirise but know this, as God is my witness I did not share my body with Epiphany."

Tiirmirise looked down into the innocent blue eyes and knew in her soul that she was telling the truth.

Saronne closed her eyes and waited for Tiirmirise to plunge the dagger into her throat. The death blow never came. Instead the black hand released her hair which she had used to bend her neck back painfully.

The next sound she heard was that of Tiirmirise's dagger fly through the air and embedding itself into one of the support poles that held up the tent.

Tiirmirise did not get off Saronne instead she waited until Saronne opened her eyes, and she held her gaze. "There are other ways to find out if you lie?" She sneered menacingly.

All Saronne could do was stare at the woman who held her heart, did she but know it. She was

no longer afraid she would strike her. Her anger had passed. No she was afraid of something else Tiirmirise would use her sex as a weapon to bring her into line. Make her beg and plead for release and they both knew it.

Instead Tiirmirise groaned and lowered her head to kiss her neck and throat. Gentle butterfly kisses, that burned her skin even through the robe she wore. She cried with relief each sob that came out of her mouth was like a sword that pierced Tiirmirise's very soul. Saronne wanted to say something, but was too shaken.

Tiirmirise gently undid the robe she wore. It was designed by one of the Eunuchs to be taken off easily. When she was naked, Saronne found herself flat on her back, Tiirmirise held both her wrists in one hand above her head.

Saronne shut her eyes tightly and waited. Instead of lying on top of her, Tiirmirise lay beside the younger woman and caressed her body, stroking her neck, her breasts, running her callused thumb over her nipples and caressing her belly.

"Look at me Afereni." Tiirmirise whispered putting her fingers under her golden haired lover's chin and turned her head to face hers forcing blue eyes to gaze into one black unrelenting one. More often than not when they were like this, her eye was glazed with lust. Now though it was a searching gaze that met her blue eyes.

Tiirmirise caressed her cheek gently with the back of her trembling fingers and cleared her throat "She is your friend, Saronne?" The black Queen asked hoarsely.

"Nothing more, Tiirmirise." Saronne whispered.

It was one of the few times she slept with Tiirmirise where they didn't have sex. Confused by Tiirmirise behaviour and too exhausted to think about it Saronne fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

She woke up early the next morning, the sun had not yet risen above the horizon, she was lying on her side, Tiirmirise's muscled arm wrapped around her waist. She could feel the tickle of her steady breathing in her hair and her warmth behind her as they lay like two spoons in a cutlery chamber against the Queen's naked body.

At first she was afraid to turn her head to see if she was truly sleeping. She had spent countless nights in Tiirmirise's bed since she had come from Gypsos. Even after the most exhaustive sex, They almost always ended up in an intimate embrace like this one.

Now here was Tiirmirise, holding her when she expected to be thoroughly ravished especially considering the fact that they had not had sex since Tiirmirise first set out on a scouting expedition with Candace seven days ago.

Saronne turned to watch the sleeping warrior Queen seized with an inexplicable urge to study that arrogant battle scarred face. Her movements caused Tiirmirise to moan and her grip on

Saronne's waist tightened.

Then she let out a big breath, followed by words that stopped her heart.

"Saronne, I love you, I'm sorry, please don't cry." she muttered agitatedly. A second sigh and then her breathing was steady again.

It was sometime before Saronne realized that she was holding her own breath. She just lay there, staring into darkness too afraid to hope too afraid to believe.

Epiphany returned to Ekiti before the army went on the move. The army of Tiirmirise marched under a different style from that of Ninyas. Every soldier carried his or her own gear. Which they carried in shoulder bags everything from spare tunics, women's rags, shaving kits, socks, spare tunics, cold weather leather breaches and warm weather Gypsos cotton trousers to necker chiefs to avoid chaffing where the mail shirt rubbed against the neck.

The soldiers were also issued with a red cloak, the Massagetae wore black, the archers wore green, the cavalry wore brown and engineers, artillery and other non-combatants wore grey.

The cloaks were covered with a special resin to keep the material water proof on one side and keep the soldier from getting wet. Each soldier also carried a cooking pot, water bag, 3 days rations, wooden poles for the camp palisade, whichever entrenching tools they had been allocated.

As they marched the soldiers carried their shields, strapped across their backs when they were not expecting combat but they carried it on their arm when in expectation of attack. The twenty pound chain mail shirt and its leather under pinnings were always worn for marching and the breast plate protected the torso.

The mail shirt protected the joints as did the leather and then there were greaves to protect the shins also worn over the leather trousers. Unlike other soldiers the Sarmatian wore their blade on their right so they could use one hand to draw their short stabbing swords. The dagger was worn on the left also in a small scabbard like a sword.

Each group of 10 soldiers also had a mule which carried their tents, poles, spears, extra rations, spare sections for the camp palisades. The cavalry had their own mules also and generally carried any excess baggage that could not be carried by the ranker soldiers. The heavier carts carried artillery and Engineering equipment.

When Tiirmirise went after King Jurugun in Spring she left some of her artillery behind in Baria and further deployed her cavalry on either side of her army marching abreast so that she reduced the total length of each column significantly.

They sang marching songs to the beat of the military drums and horns at the top of their voices to

keep pace and also to build military camaraderie amongst the army. Sometimes Tiirmirise marched on foot with the infantry other times she rode with the cavalry.

She was every where and spent time with engineers, artillery, medics, non-combatants, infantry, cavalry, archers so that she knew most if not all the soldiers male and female on a personal basis.

At least one had felt the force of that penetrating gaze, or been privileged to that elusive secret smile or yelled at or applauded. They saw her suffering with them, wearing down her military boots, getting saddle sores, pulling out splinters. She shared their joys and woes and earned their love and respect.

Saronne threw up for the third time that morning and she felt utterly miserable. Fortunately for her because they were in no real hurry she had ample time to get herself ready. She had just finished cleaning herself up when she came out of Tiirmirise's tent and saw a blind woman leaning against a wooden stick. Her eyes were horribly scarred and she looked vaguely familiar.

" I think ye'll find fresh lemon and ginger tea a good cure for what ails ye child."

" B...but that's for morning sickness!"

"Aye."

"I am not pregnant."

"Are ye not?"

"Certainly not. I am...I mean...I have...its impossible."

"Here child. Worry yourself not. Take some every morning it should stop what ails ye."

She watched the woman hobble off into the distance and went to make herself a tea from some of the herbs the woman had given her. She sighed with relief when late into the morning she stopped throwing up.

She began to wonder. She had not seen her last menses for two months now was she pregnant or did she have some sort of illness? She couldn't be pregnant. She hadn't been with any man apart from Nitocris father and that was almost a year ago. Perhaps there was something really wrong with her.

In the tent after they had made camp and everyone was safely within the military forte Tiirmirise was talking to the generals and discussing the strategy for conducting the campaign.

"We are going to sack, rape, pillage and loot every town, village and city we encounter."
Tiirmirise said softly to the generals who stood around watching her intently.

Saronne gasped and everyone in the tent turned to look at her. She covered her mouth with her hands and the generals turned back to their conversation. She lowered her head and continued taking notes.

She dared not speak out because to show disrespect to the queen in public meant certain death and she also knew that there were some laws even the Queen could not disobey. Spargapises her own son had been incarcerated and Tiirmirise had been helpless to intervene. How much more a slave like her?

Tiirmirise continued speaking as though she had not heard her.
"I want to break Jurugun," Tiirmirise was saying as she restlessly paced the tent.

She was surrounded by a restless energy which had long since dissipated in the other generals after a long days march but it still crackled around Tiirmirise like the sparks in a lightning storm.

"I want to break Jurugun so that the people understand that if they so much as give him a blade of grass they will suffer dire consequences. We will give no quarter. "

"Dreaded Lady" Makeda said reasonably "If we leave a trail of destruction will we not suffer when they are unable to contribute to our tribute and our own food supplies?"

"We have enough stored in the Granaries for this year and well into the next because the harvest was good" Nandi interjected.

Makeda shook her head "It grieves me sorely to say this but I agree with the Queen, let them suffer the consequences of their actions. They only attacked because they thought we would be at the mercy of the Dominion and not able to repel this attack."

"Besides the rebuilding will take their minds off war and give them something constructive to do like their survival." Pasiphae retorted.

After the generals left Saronne had almost bitten off her tongue, trying to restrain herself. Only the slave girls and a few members of the Massagetae military staff remained to tidy up the Queen's tent. The meeting had not taken place at the command tent because it was currently being mended.

She had cooked evening the meal herself, a steaming whole turbot caught in one of the rivers and served with a light fennel sauce, vegetables and bread.

There were also olives, cheeses, chickpeas and chillies which she had brought into the Queen's tent herself which was how she was given the opportunity to hear their discussion.

"I can see that you were extremely annoyed about my orders today." Tiirmirise tossed her cloak onto one of the chairs.

Saronne sat on the couch she did not recline. Her hair was in a long pony tail held by purple ribbons, a slender gold torc adorned her neck and her upper arms.

She was completely naked beneath the diaphanous green silk gown which was strategically designed to accentuate what it hid and understate that which was not hidden. So it moulded her breasts and nipples clinging to her curves yet was sheer when it covered her flat belly.

The outfit was completed with an anklet chain and two toe rings to emphasise her red painted toe nails. Her eunuch a Gyptian was like most Gyptians exceptionally fond of make up. So not only were her eyes lined with kohl but her lips were rouged as were her nipples.

Tiirmirise's eyes caressed her appreciatively

"May I please tell you when we are private your majesty?" She begged softly.

Tiirmirise's eyebrows drew together in puzzlement. Ever since her jealous episode she had sought out her cousin determined to confront her. Epiphany had told her off in no uncertain terms and she was trying to get her relationship with Saronne back to when they had first met in Gypsos. She therefore wanted Saronne to forgo the formal mode of address between them.

She tried again. "You looked really tired after the day's march did I disturb you when I returned to our bed?"

"May I please speak of it when we are private your majesty?" She did not look at the Queen as she said the softly spoken words.

Tiirmirise was exasperated. The little baggage was deliberately being annoying. "No damn it you will answer whatever questions I put to you!"

"May I have permission to answer your questions truthfully your majesty?"

Tiirmirise's black gaze narrowed but her voice remained uncompromising. "You may answer my questions any way you like as long as your answer pleases me."

Tiirmirise took a deep breath and inclined her head arrogantly. "Now we shall begin again and you will tell me what you did not like about my decision in the command tent today."

"I like whatever you like Dreaded Lady."

Tiirmirise grit her teeth at her subservience but soldiered on. "Did I disturb you last night?"

"Your nearness always disturbs me Dreaded Lady."

Tiirmirise's patience snapped and she ordered the slaves out of the tent. Saronne cast the queen an innocent glance from under her eyelashes.

Tiirmirise sighed and tried again turning round she faced the younger woman.
"Have you any idea how beautiful you look tonight?"

"For a whore you mean?" She asked sweetly.

"You don't look like a whore," the Queen said softly "You look like the pagan goddess Aphrodite just before she sails into the sea at Cyprus on her sea shell, all you need is to have your robes falling about your feet."

"Yes well I expect you will soon rectify that." Saronne murmured suggestively
Tiirmirise laughed "You are absolutely delightful."

"My only wish is to please you." Saronne replied her every word dripping with sarcasm.

"If that is true then come here and lie beside me on my couch." Tiirmirise wriggled her eyebrows wickedly.

Saronne's heartbeat quickened. She knew perfectly well that if she went anywhere near Tiirmirise in the mood the Queen was in all thoughts of food would be forgotten and she would most likely be the main course.

She needed to change the subject. "I can't believe that you as a woman would give an order to rape, pillage and loot."

"This is war and Jurugun is the enemy. I must crush this rebellion ruthlessly." Tiirmirise said unloosening the ribbon from Saronne's hair and gently brushing the long golden lock of hair from her cheek.

"Perhaps he is rebelling because your terms are harsh have you ever thought of that?" Saronne asked earnestly

"A conquered people should know when they are beaten." Tiirmirise said arrogantly and lowered her head to give Saronne a kiss. Saronne turned her head away and long recognised this tactic for what it was an attempt to distract her from the conversation at hand. Further she was not sure if Tiirmirise included herself in that statement.

"Would you? Would anyone?" Saronne whispered and Tiirmirise turned away from her all seeing penetrating gaze.

"He is rebelling because he thinks we are weak. If I allow him to continue in this erroneous vein of thought soon others will follow his example, they will rebel and disrespect me until my people are overwhelmed. I will not allow that to happen. The Numerian must be taught a lesson."

"Fine punish Jurugun by all means but why punish his people they are innocent?"

"Innocent?" Tiirmirise raised one black perfectly shaped eyebrow. "They give him shelter do

they not?, they give him food, they give their sons to fight in his armies. No I would not describe them as innocent."

"But they have to, he is their King!"

"Then they are not innocent are they. Still you are not Numerian. What do you care for their fate?"

"I am a slave Tiirmirise. I know what it is like to be captured and treated like a chattel. I, once a princess know what it is like to be dishonoured, to go from a loving home to being treated as one whose life is as nothing more than a few coins."

"We Massagetae did not invent slavery besides, I believe that in the Northern lands women are treated as chattel anyway. So what difference between that and a slave."

"That is no justification for slavery."

She usually enjoyed her conversations with Saronne although the other Massagetae thought her impudent. Tiirmirise liked being with someone who challenged her to think and not people who said yes to her every whim all the time.

Naturally she demanded obedience from her soldiers but from her equals she expected an honest opinion. She did not know when she had elevated Saronne a slave to the position of an equal.

"The economy depends on slaves. Slavery will always be with us."

Saronne glared at the maddening woman and started earnestly explaining to her the evils of slavery.

Tiirmirise poured two goblets of wine and mixed in water for both of them. Unmixed wine was drunk in the safety and confines of the city not on campaign.

Wine was mixed in with water when they were not sure of the water supply just as chilli was used to season beef for the same purpose to stop a person from being sick. She had yet to discover if that was an old wives tale or just a device by a sadistic cook.

The rest of the army drank beer or a revolting brew made from goats milk. In the south where the Massagetae Homeland was located they drank palm wine liquid sap that was tapped from the date palm tree, it was then chilled to preserve it before being drunk in wooden cups.

When first tapped it was sweet after a few hours it became extremely alcoholic and if left for longer than a day unchilled it turned into what could only be described as vinegar.

Saronne took a breadth mid-tirade and sat down she realised that Tiirmirise was amused by her passion and not a bit moved.

"Perhaps if you eat you shall feel better." Tiirmirise gently offered her a plate of food. The queen had cut up some Fish and vegetables and even a little bread for her. Tiirmirise ate her own food which she arranged for herself with gusto. Saronne pushed hers around her plate unhappily.

"Is the food not to your liking?"

"I suddenly find I am not hungry!" Saronne felt like throwing one of the silver dishes arranged in front of her at the queen's beautiful black head.

Tiirmirise held up her hand. "I have no intention of debating the merits and demerits of slavery with you."

The Queen wiped her mouth with a cloth set on the table for just such a purpose and continued "Besides I find that at this moment I am more interested in savouring your..." the glittering black gaze swept her up and down smouldering at her with undisguised sexual intent. "Exceptional loveliness than your intelligent debate on slavery."

"That is too bad, I had planned on entertaining you with my intelligence and not my exceptional loveliness."

"That would be impossible."

"What a challenge you are Tiirmirise!"

Tiirmirise smiled wickedly "Shall we adjourn to the bed and we can continue this discussion in earnest."

"Is that an order or an invitation?"

"Since you had me dismiss the slaves, I believe it is an invitation."

"Well I am glad you are playing by the rules."

"The beauty of being Queen is that I can change the rules whenever I wish." So saying Tiirmirise lifted her up against her chest. Her nipple pierced breasts pressed against the Queen's body, her naked thighs rested against her powerful forearms and the heat from her body seemed to melt her bones.

As they made their way over to the bed she caught their reflection in Tiirmirise's mirror which lay propped up against her desk. Their reflection was overtly sensual. Saronne rarely thought about the disparity in size between their bodies or their colouring but it was such a startling contrast; her's so fair and Tiirmirise as dark as ebony.

Tiirmirise laid her down on the bed and she gasped as her hand slipped between their bodies, tracing her mound of Venus and spreading her fingers through her golden pubic curls whilst her rasping tongue teased at her engorged nipples.

Saronne was gasping for breath from the sensation those questing fingers aroused as they searched her cleft with callused fingertips till they found the sensitive bud within and then Tiirmirise moved her fingers in an excruciatingly slow circular motion until she was moaning with pure pleasure.

Saronne writhed beneath Tiirmirise unrelenting fingers panting as her fingers now slid inside her and her palms cupped her sex. Tiirmirise's other hand squeezed her breast with a slow rhythmic motion that matched the rhythm of her encircling fingers.

She wanted to beg her to go faster but she could only moan her pleasure as sensation after sensation flooded her body with the slow steady rhythmic circling that that made her pleasure go on and on and on.

She arched her back as her climax came sweeping over her so hard and fast she screamed thrusting her self onto Tiirmirise hand. The Queen cupped her firmly intensifying the sensual pleasure each pulsating contraction brought her. By the time Tiirmirise possessed her trembling mouth she was too far gone to complain.

When at last Tiirmirise lifted her mouth from Saronne's she murmured "That is just a taste of the pleasure we will share this night. Now that I have entertained you, it is your turn to entertain me. Do you imagine your intelligence can hold my interest or will you have to resort to your exceptional loveliness?" She challenged arrogantly.

"I am not happy that you use sex to distract me Tiirmirise."

"To distract you from what?"

"The conversation we had earlier about Jurugun, I just do not believe that this policy of rapine and pillage is what is called for perhaps it would be better if..."

"And perhaps if your own King had been as ruthless as I you would be the one enjoying the services of this barbarian queen instead of the other way round."

"If my father had been as ruthless as you we probably would never have met anyway and you know in your heart that Jurugun will not care that these people have been hurt because of his reckless actions."

"By all the heavens, Saronne you try me sorely. I do all I can to please you and you keep pushing our relationship to..."

"Relationship?" Saronne said scornfully "We don't have a relationship Tiirmirise you own me!"

"And you would do well to remember that Afereni." Tiirmirise said angrily.

Chapter 8

The Legend of the Hidden Queen

In the morning Tiirmirise's orders were carried out to the letter. Granaries and smoke houses were pillaged to augment the armies food rations. The local populace were thoroughly brutalised and absolutely anything of value was carted away and contributed to the army's haul.

No one was allowed to keep such items for it identified which soldier committed which atrocity and apart from leading to vengeance from the locals it also created martyrs and martyrs were a rallying point she could do without.

Tiirmirise wanted no heroes. She wanted to break their spirit of rebellion so she could concentrate on keeping the Dominion off Sarmatian lands.

Every eighth day the army rested wherever they reached a river or lake they stopped for three days so everyone could swim fish and rest well.

Swimming was for obvious reasons only the higher ranking officers had slaves draw baths for them everyone else jumped in the river or lakes. It kept the camp clean and helped to replenish their water supplies. Fish supplemented their diets.

So far it had been an easy campaign. Jurugun's army never appeared the cities and towns were incapable of resisting her armies and by living off the land they had not run short of food or water.

The army supplies of bread, lentils, or chick pea soup were often seasoned with either smoked beef, smoked fish or smoked salt pork pillaged from Numerian smoke houses and had been varied by salty soft sheep's cheese looted from Numerian Farms.

There was enough goat meat, fish, veal, mutton and vegetables to keep everyone in good spirits. The fermented goats milk which the army usually drank was supplemented by barley beer which the locals called burukutu and sometimes if they got lucky dark rich red Numerian wine.

They reached a town called Ogbuku about 5 miles from the Western fortress belonging to Jurugun and where he held his western court. The people woke up the next morning to find Tiirmirise army camped outside their gates and with nowhere to go.

The elders of the town came out to beg for mercy. Old men with grey hair and long beards dressed in sack cloth and ashes. They were met by Nnandi and Makeda and led to Queen's tent.

Inside the tent they fell on their faces and begged for mercy. They were ready to give up the town, its goods every thing they owned if only Tiirmirise would spare them.

As was her custom Tiirmirise put the question to the commanders around her.

"Well let us have your opinion?" The Queen asked of her generals. "What is to be done with

them?"

At first no one spoke and Tiirmirise shook her head. "And people say We are tyrannical."

Pasiphae slapped the table making everyone jump with the loud and sudden sound. "I say we kill them all. Every last one of them and burn the city to the ground. Loot pillage and rape to our hearts desire."

Nnandi rolled her eyes. She was the least bloodthirsty of the Massagetae and notorious for her extravagant tastes and love of the finer things in life. She knew Pasiphae would say that. The blood thirsty princess would never say anything else.

"I think we have enough supplies at the moment. We can afford to proceed to the Western fortress without sacking the town. That is not to say we should not sack or loot it. The more of King Jurugun's gold we have in our coffers, the less Jurugun has to finance a war against us."

Makeda was tall unlike Nnandi and well muscled like Tiirmirise. They had grown up together in the southern Massagetae lands. Unlike Tiirmirise's lean muscle her's was very bulky giving the impression of strength and like all Massagetae had a scar on her right breast.

She was a very methodical person but her size and dreamy brown eyes, long thick eye lashes and thick sensuous lips did not give a hint as to the depths of her intelligence and she was very, very clever.

A brilliant military tactician. She was the one in charge of the details of battle. She made sure the army knew what tactic to employ and where. Unlike Tiirmirise who understood the larger picture and strategy which made her excellent at commanding whole armies.

Makeda's attention to detail and little changes when employed with the far seeing Tiirmirise made the Massagetae Queen an excellent lieutenant and together they were a devastating combination.

"It is a difficult question your majesty" Makeda said thoughtfully "Certainly we do not need to attack the town or loot it but if we are pursuing a scorched earth policy why spare this town. Besides if we spare this one town will not the others also come begging?"

Osamaye shook his head. "I never thought I would see the day when the Massagetae got soft. Some old men come a begging with rheumy eyes and we are even considering mercy?" This can only be due to the influence your slave has on you."

Osamaye said what the others all thought but had been afraid to say. Before the advent of Saronne this would not even have been an option.

"I agree entirely Xango stroked his beard. What do we gain from being merciful?"

"If I may be permitted to speak Your Majesty?" Saronne asked softly but confidently.

There was utter silence in the room as the Massagetae and Sarmatian generals turned their attention to her. She could be executed if Tiirmirise did not give her permission to speak but the Queen turned round and lifted her hand for her to continue.

"Dread Lady, I would suggest that we honour their request for mercy."

Pasiphae snorted "What else would you expect from a slave!"

Saronne bit her lip, the Queen's expression was totally unreadable. She only gained the strength to continue from Candace and Nnandi's encouraging smile.

"We lose nothing if we showed them mercy. Indeed if we show mercy perhaps we would not need to fight so many battles.

The cities and towns would give themselves up. You could take what you wished without losing soldiers in an encounter as would happen when the people defended their homes. Sometimes your Majesty, one catches more flies with honey than with vinegar."

Tiirmirise nodded at turned to the delegation still cowering at her feet.

"We have heard you all and these are our words. We will not kill the people nor will we sack, pillage nor rape the town. Your town will swear allegiance to the Massagetae and to me Tiirmirise. All your citizens male and female. Old and young you will take blood oath."

Tiirmirise looked down where they knelt she wanted them to know at what price their freedom and lives would be bought.

"You will obey our edicts and our laws without question. You will choose one man and one woman to represent you at the council in Ekiti and should I hear that you give succour to Jurugun or any of our enemies at anytime. We will burn the city to the ground. We will not sell its inhabitants into slavery We will slaughter every man woman and animal and plow the fields with salt. We will desecrate the graves of your ancestors and make it as though you had never been. These are our terms."

"Your majesty!" Osumaye gasped but Tiirmirise voice continued as though he had not spoken."

"These are our terms. Take them or leave them!"

"We shall take your message to the town elders and return at noon tomorrow. Your Majesty." They left and the other generals were in uproar.

"Your majesty is that wise?" Xango asked thoughtfully

"Those men were spies!" Pasiphae stormed. "Given half a chance they would return to kill us in our beds!"

"A scorched earth policy that is what we decided to pursue and that is what we should continue with." Osamaye reiterated forcefully

"That is our decision."

Pasiphae roared with frustration "This slave has..."

"That will be all." Tiirmirise said in a quiet voice which brooked no further argument. "You may all leave now except the slave Saronne."

Nnandi and Candace winked at Saronne on their way out but the other generals glared at her.

"Well Afereni," Tiirmirise said at length after they had all left. "We shall see where your policy of mercy gets us." Then she grinned "Are your luscious breasts getting bigger?"

Saronne's eyes widened but before she could say anything further, Tiirmirise lowered her head to lick over each nipple then covering them with her mouth till she felt them spike into sharp little spears. Her tongue licked a burning wet path from her breast, across her belly downwards till they reached her centre.

Saronne moaned and The Queen's name came out on a sibilant hiss. "Tiirmisssse." Her name was as much a supplication as an admission.

Unable to deny herself another moment, Tiirmirise tongue dipped into her cleft and traced each pink fold lovingly as though they were the petals of a delicate flower.

Saronne's fingers were buried in Tiirmirise's thick black hair, urging her helplessly on to devour her. From beneath languorous eyelids she watched the black head between her legs and realised with a deep sexual thrill that with this most intimate act Tiirmirise was on her knees pleasing her. She had tamed the Falcon of Sarmatia.

She groaned as the Queen's tongue pressed against her, plunging and curling, curling and plunging stroking her bud again and again until it swelled to bursting point until she could contain her climax no longer and arched into her mouth with a piercing cry of pleasure.

After making love till they were both exhausted Tiirmirise tiredly laid her head down on Saronne's breasts and relaxed under her soothing touch falling into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Saronne could not sleep however. She was extremely worried and she was also beginning to fear that the old woman had been right perhaps she was pregnant. How else could she explain her increasing breast size and thickening waist and swollen ankles. No one would believe she had not betrayed the Queen.

In the morning the town of Ogbuku surrendered and took blood oath to the Massagetae Queen before the Sarmatian army continued its relentless march.

The first fortress Tiirmirise encountered was on a volcanic outcrop a thousand feet high. It functioned as one of Jurugun's Economic centers and was therefore loaded with treasure and for that reason was well defended and appeared almost impregnable. Further due to Tiirmirise scorched earth policy the citizens had slammed the gates and retreated into the citidal.

The generals gathered in the command tent to have a crises meeting. As usual Saronne was the only slave who attended them.

Makeda sighed flopping on one of the couches in the command tent. "Well we can forget a frontal assault and I can't think of anyway to besiege it."

"That's because there isn't anyway to besiege it. I have been scouting the bloody mountain for days ahead of you and even after we got here." Candace said disgustedly

Pasiphae sat down and accepted a cup of wine from Saronne who though veiled was virtually half naked in her slave's uniform. She did not miss the Lustful assessing glance the Princess Royal passed her way nor the frankly lecherous look Xango the father of her child and Tiirmirise's brother was now directing at her.

Xango, Tiirmirise's brother, Xango Tiirmirise's general and Nitocris' father. When he had ridden into camp her heart had almost stopped beating. She could never betray that fact to Tiirmirise. She did not particularly like Xango but she did not want to see him dead either and they both knew Tiirmirise would kill him. Further with her pregnancy the last thing she wanted was to be seen in his company.

"We'll have to starve them out." Tiirmirise rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Nnandi you will work with Candace, scout around for a reliable drinking source for our army and allocate pools for them to swim in. Osamaye you seem to have a knack for foraging for food you can organise fishing parties and allocate others to find fruit and vegetables."

"When am I going to be blooded?" Osanes one of the newly appointed lieutenants asked and Saronne made an involuntary sound of disgust. Tiirmirise turned to her.

Osamaye was appalled "You should discipline her. A slave should not show such disrespect."

"If you can't do it I shall be happy to do it for you." Pasiphae grinned evilly at Saronne who shuddered with distaste. She still remembered her first meeting with Pasiphae in the brothel.

"We will deal with our property as We see fit. Now as to your question of being blooded. You should have been but the town of Ogbuku surrendered..."

Osanes glared at Saronne who looked away. She was the reason Tiirmirise accepted the Town's surrender.

"Why? Are you getting bored with military life already? It is not all blood and gore you know a good general is one who can win a fight without spilling a drop of blood."

"Indeed," Jbenga agreed "Why I remember when..."

Saronne was bored by tales of war they held no interest for her and she let their words drift over her. She wondered what Tiirmirise planned and mentally went over the words she had written in her diary that day.

Saronne's diary.

Tiirmirise could be cruel in her own way. During our stay at the palace, I managed to offend Tiirmirise, deliberately driving her into a jealous rage. She forced me to drink an aphrodisiac telling me exactly what it did as she held me down and poured it down my throat, explaining how it would heighten my senses and dull my inhibitions.

Then she brought me to the brink of sexual pleasure again and again never once letting me experience fulfilment and all the while she was so cold and unfeeling. Her not reacting to me hurt me, and seeing that she so obviously did not derive any pleasure in the act was soul shattering.

I did not know how much I had come to enjoy giving and receiving pleasure. Again and Again she brought me to the abyss of pleasure yet she did not allow me to enjoy it. She seemed to get off on the power it gave her.

I begged, I pleaded, I cajoled, I wept my pride in tatters, I hated her, I wanted her, I loathed her I loved her. In the morning I wept in the arms of the Eunuch Merses who gently drew my bath.

When she tried to get me to kiss her and I refused yet again she punished me. For weeks she no longer pleased me only forced me to pleasure her then she would roll over and fall asleep.

As I said earlier one of her body servants had died of poison. Well during our time at Ado there had also been an assassination attempt on the queen. A female assassin stabbed her with a poisoned blade and by rights she should have died.

The city had been thrown into chaos, armed gangs roamed the streets and the authorities did nothing for by that time Ninyas had gone to Warbo and Spargapises was still under house arrest. It was the first time I used the amulet Olayrae had given me.

I gave the one my mother had given me to Nitocris. I used it to channel and remove the poison and close the wound a little and though I could have healed her completely I did not wish to arouse suspicion. Ever since that day Tiirmirise changed towards me and I believe it was the reason she changed her mind to leave me at Ado but allowed me to accompany her on campaign.

In private she indulged my tantrums, scolding and naggings in public she did not tolerate them.

Pasiphae on the other hand was touched. When she had stayed at the Palace I had to tend many slaves with whip marks and some of them were even tortured and it was not uncommon for

others to disappear never to be seen again.

Tiirmirise never did anything to reign in the princess. Pasiphae I was told was the best warrior on the battlefield and had saved Tiirmirise's life in the battle on countless occasions.

I knew it was for that reason that Tiirmirise turned a blind eye to her cruel habits. The Queen sometimes referred to her as a necessary evil. I however could never forget having seen myself the result of Pasiphae's passions.

When Tiirmirise rode out to battle or rather pillage and loot some unsuspecting town, she was usually dressed in her black armour and purple ankle length cloak or cape which swirled about her whilst her two long curving scimitars hung from her waist.

She always insisted I see her off and one of my duties was to give her packed lunch. I remember one particular morning which was cold, the dew had just settled on the grass. My nipples always erect because of the piercings were almost painful in the cold. My modesty was barely hidden by my transparent robes though I wore a black cloak with a purple border announcing to one and all that I belonged to the Queen.

Tiirmirise held me in an embrace against her slender armour covered body and covered mine in a fiercely possessive kiss which I did not return. I was still smarting from an argument we had earlier. I did not bother to fight her I simply let her take what she wanted without returning her kiss. The cold steel pressed against my body the plates rubbed against my skin and I cried out involuntarily.

"You're hurting me." I whispered unable to keep the tears shimmering in my eyes hidden from her. I tried to ignore the look of longing in that black gaze as she released me and gently wrapped the black cloak around me and then she clambered her horse Mordenes and left.

As I tidied her things and made the fire in her tent a little warmer a sound made me turn and I found Pasiphae inside Tiirmirise's private tent.

"Tiirmirise has been distracted of late." She said softly

"I am not responsible for the Queen's state of mind."

"Oh but you are. Any fool can see she is smitten with you. Tiirmirise has not indulged in bed play with another slave since she bought you. You must remember slave if she loses this battle you may yet find yourself in another brothel and you may not find yourself lucky enough to be given to a Queen who worships the very ground on which you walk.

Instead you could be spreading your legs for anyone with enough coin or having your back bloodied by a depraved princess like me. You should think about that the next time you decide to mind fuck the queen."

"Get out!" I hissed at her and pointed to the exit of the tent.

The warrior princess laughed and leaned forward to grab me. A whip flashed through the air and caught her hand.

"Touch her and die." The voice was deliberate, quiet and instantly recognisable.

It was Tiirmirise. She pulled Pasiphae forward and backhanded her. So that blood issued forth from her nose. Pasiphae laughed and held up her hand for Tiirmirise to help her to her feet which she did. She was utterly unrepentant she bowed mockingly to Tiirmirise and blew a kiss at me and left.

Afraid I tied my robes tightly around me "I did not encourage her."

Tiirmirise smiled "I never said you did." She nodded at where Pasiphae had just been "That one is a bitch on heat. I saw the way she looked at you and decided to return to see you are well. The security lapse is mine it will never happen again. I shall put the Massagetae at your disposal. The eunuchs are obviously too afraid of her."

She looked me over, I could feel her eyes sweeping up and down my body and before she turned to go.

"Tiirmirise...." The word came out almost as a whisper.

"Yes Afereni?"

"Thank-You." I smiled at her hesitantly.

End of entry.

"We could spend the next ten years marching up and down and never encounter Jurugun," Makeda was saying "He's too crafty to risk a pitted battle with us he knows we will beat him. Our only alternative is to break his people to the point where they will either have to fight or starve."

Suddenly outside the tent there was a commotion. Tiirmirise and the other generals drew their swords and made their way out. Once outside they saw a man retching on the ground and two soldiers were hitting him with a stick.

When Tiirmirise came out she put Saronne behind her after assessing the situation she wordlessly sheathed her sword and returned to the command tent. The other generals followed her back in.

"Stop that can't you see he's sick?" Saronne said exasperatedly.

"He's not sick he's drunk. He's not even a ranker he's one of those scum arse bandit boys from the town."

"Nevertheless take him to the tents on the west side of the camp I will tend him."

"What if he is contagious?"

"You'll just have to quarantine me won't you?" Saronne said exasperatedly

The unit leader looked horrified "The Queen won't like that."

"Right now I don't particularly care what the queen likes. Now help me. Its better to quarantine just me and not the whole high command which we will have to do if we leave him here."

The tents on the west side were set aside for sick soldiers. They had supplies of liniment, ointment, ogogoro, which was a kind of distilled alchohol the Massagetæ used for cleaning wounds and tables and other medical equipment.

Seunion couldn't take his eyes off the beautiful woman. She was so gracious and kind he just started babbling about his family and before he knew it he was telling her how he had been assigned to forage for food and found a snail patch and how he had been stuffing himself with snails in garlic till he was sick but he found a way up the fortress but he had not told anyone because it went through his snail patch and would the Queen forgive him for not saying anything sooner?

Saronne had been amused calmed his fears and given him a herbal tea which made him feel much better. She had also asked him to come to the command tent on the morrow.

When she returned to the Queen's tent it was late in the evening. She had time to bathe and prepare Tiirmirise's meal and draw her bath.

Tiirmirise wiped her feet on the mat and entered the tent. She looked absolutely furious. Saronne gauged her mood exactly and wordlessly helped her undress and into her bath. After her bath and her meal Saronne straddled her and began to massage the taut corded muscles on the Queen's neck and back until she could hear Tiirmirise's moaning submission.

"I have an interesting tale to tell you, if you are but minded to listen."

Saronne could not keep the smug tone out of her voice and Tiirmirise laughed.

"I am minded to listen Afereni."

"There was a man today outside the command tent who.."

"Ah the arse bandit."

Saronne gasped "You heard us?" She stopped the gentle kneading and asked hesitantly "Truly I did not mean to offer you disrespect in front of the high command are you going...to..?"

"Saronne don't mind the high command they are all jealous and lust shamelessly after you. I have no doubt that after telling me what a disrespectful slave you are they will be queuing up to take you off my hands."

"Now what were you going to tell me?" Tiirmirise asked gently

Saronne rubbed some more almond oil on her hands and went back to massaging Tiirmirise's muscles. "Well the man I treated today, Seunion, I believe his name was, he told me he was from the Ogbuku and was gathering snails to eat." Saronne wrinkled her nose.

"What a lovely addition to the menu. I love snails. snails in garlic, snails in pepper sauce, snails in..."

"Tiirmirise this is not about snails."

"It isn't?"

"No it isn't. Seunion found a way to get inside the fortress. I told him to come and see you tomorrow at noon when I know you normally have your meeting."

Tiirmirise froze and turned round "Are you serious?"

"Yes."

Tiirmirise whooped like a bandit. She got up and threw her up in the air and caught her swinging her around.

"Oh Saronne you are wonderful. I will give you anything you desire truly name your price. Diamonds, rubies gold what?" She finally set her down standing before her.

"Tiirmirise, I am your slave, I belong to you like this pot or chair belong to you. Giving me anything is like giving a present to yourself."

"But if this man is right you will have played a large part in winning this war." Tiirmirise was too jubilant to be deterred.

"Yes, causing the enslavement and rape of people is not something for which I wish to be rewarded."

"Afereni?"

Saronne spoke so softly Tiirmirise barely heard her "My freedom, give me my freedom."

"Truly Afereni you would leave me?" Tiirmirise asked so sadly that if Saronne had not known better she would have thought she was heartbroken. She did not want to think about it. So she did what Tiirmirise did when she wished to distract someone she changed the subject.

Saronne looked down at her hands, which lay on Tiirmirise chest. "What is this word "Afereni" You use it all the time yet no one I have asked seems to know what it means."

"It is an ancient Massagetae word." Tiirmirise cleared her throat "It means "My sun, moon and stars."

Saronne's eyes flew upwards to the Queen's anguished gaze. There were tears shimmering in her eye. One of them slid down her cheek and Saronne reached up to catch it on the tip of her finger.

"Kiss me." She whispered

Tiirmirise lowered her head hesitantly and their lips touched. Their mouths melded together. A meeting of bodies and minds their tongues gently explored each other. Soft kisses, gentle kisses not that shared between a slave and her master or a queen and her subject, these were lover's kisses, shared between equals, partners two people becoming one. Tiirmirise lifted her up so her feet no longer touched the ground and upwards above her as Saronne wound her hands into the thick black wavy hair on her head.

The Queen carried her over to the camp bed and now she gently slid the robe from Saronne's shoulders and kissed her from head to toe. She kissed her eyelids, her lips, her fingers, her breasts, her stomach every inch of her was attended to and Saronne returned each kiss with one of her own. Each burning touch each nerve tingling caress.

Tiirmirise suckled her nipples and kissed her way down her breasts to her belly her tongue dipped into her belly button and down to her centre where her deft tongue caressed and flicked at her woman's folds but Saronne was not ready to reach her release yet. She urged Tiirmirise up and straddled her. Her fingers traced the scar where her breast had once been and the Queen trembled.

"Did this hurt much?"

"No it was done whilst I was still a child." Tiirmirise smiled and then groaned when she felt Saronne's lips on her skin along the ugly looking scar, and then on her erect nipple hard and black as charcoal.

Saronne slid her hands down the lean muscled body which was yet soft and womanly in all the right places and then she slid her hand between the Queen's legs.

Saronne slid her hand between them and lowered her body on Tiirmirise so the Queen could also reach her own centre. Gently Saronne pushed till she was inside the Queen, she was so tight and hot and wet, they moved together surging as one against each other. Their lips joined and they moved together till finally they reached their destination together.

They fell asleep in each other's arms waking up during the night to make love and steal kisses.

Chapter 9

The Falcon Rampant

In the morning as promised Saronne led Seunion into the command tent and after he glared at Osamaye and Pasiphae the two generals let them in.

"Before I show you the way you have to promise that you will give me the funds to set up my snail export business."

Tiirmirise bit her lip to keep from laughing "Snail export business?"

"Yes your majesty. These are the biggest juiciest snails you will ever see. Look I will show you." Whereupon the revolting little man brought the largest snails she had ever seen and Tiirmirise accustomed to the little finger snail variety had to agree with him.

Jbenga her father the business man who always had an eye for any profit got extremely excited at any money making opportunity said "How would you like to go into business with me. I know some viziers who would pay a fortune for just one of these and I know the queen is a great fan of peppered snails."

Tiirmirise rolled her eyes "Alright alright alright enough with the snails. Seunion I promise to protect your snail patch and buy a certain amount from you and father will set you up just show us the bloody walkway."

On their way out Saronne winked encouragingly at Seunion who grinned back at her until he saw the wicked glare the Queen sent his way. He gulped and scurried out of the tent.

As they were leaving Tiirmirise meant to plant a quick kiss on Saronne's lips but it became a long lingering kiss. She had just discovered the pleasure of having Saronne kiss her instead of forcing the younger girl to her will and she thoroughly enjoyed it. She was seriously contemplating the thought of letting the other general's go and scout the walkway without her.

Only her father's censorious words dragged her away. "Tiirmirise leave the poor girl alone and let's get going."

Saronne blushed and then laughed at the expression on Tiirmirise face. The Queen looked like a naughty girl who had just been told off. However Tiirmirise stole another quick kiss and strolled after the other generals.

Five days later the citadel fell to the Sarmatian army together with a vast hoard of gold coins, silver bars yet to be minted, rubies, emeralds and Sapphires and because of Saronne she did not allow her army to rape anybody but she definitely plundered and pillaged ruthlessly. They

stripped the city of anything of value and left not a single stone standing. In the fortress the army celebrated the victory. Tiirmirise had commandeered Jurugun's bed chamber no less for her own use and was now enjoying the defeated king's hospitality.

Tiirmirise lay on her back on the bed whilst Saronne straddled her with her silky thighs and lowered her plump luscious breasts against her body. The flames from the fire added to the heat in their blood and once Saronne began to kiss her they did not stop.

It occurred to Saronne that Tiirmirise had been holding back and there was an element of self-control that was creeping into their love making. Tiirmirise displayed much more control than her. She wanted to test the limits of the Queen's resistance.

She lifted one of her long golden curls and teased the corners of her mouth with it then she touched the corners of the Queen's lips with the tip of her tongue tickling Tiirmirise till she laughed helplessly.

Then she trailed her tongue down the strongly corded column of Tiirmirise's throat, then she followed that with her tongue, leaving a hot wet path to dry by the flames of the fire.

She moaned softly and Saronne sat up so that her knees gripped the Queen's black hips and her bum cheeks rested on Tiirmirise's muscular thighs, then using the same golden curl, she stroked her nipple till it became erect.

By now Tiirmirise was breathlessly anticipating her movements and knew that where she played her tongue would soon follow. She relished the freely given attention being lavished on her.

When Saronne tickled her belly by dipping her golden tresses into her navel and around it all Tiirmirise could think of was that soon Saronne would dip her tongue into the sensitive indentation, to lick and nibble at the helpless Queen.

When she did it her rasping tongue sent a delicious shudder running down the entire length of Tiirmirise backbone.

The love play degenerated to tickling and Saronne loved it when she could make Tiirmirise laugh and she laughed easier lately. However She stopped laughing when Saronne trailed her curl from her navel down her muscled ridged belly to her woman's centre lightly sprinkled with curling black pubes.

Tiirmirise drew a shuddering breadth. Saronne turned around to give the Queen a view of her aching sex and then lowered her tongue to tease the trembling Queen. Soon they were pleasing each other encouraging each other driving each other wildly closer and closer to the abyss till they fell in at the same time and came shuddering on top of each other.

Saronne turned around and curled into the safety of Tiirmirise body.

"So when were you going to tell me you were pregnant? Or perhaps your current capitulation

was to soften me up before you told me who the father of the child you carry is?" Tiirmirise said matter of factly.

Saronne said nothing for the moment as terror seized her. She could feel hot tears fall down her cheeks. What could she say? "Tiirmirise I swear to you that I have not betrayed you with another."

"You will give me his name. The father of your child."

Saronne shook her head "I cannot."

"You will and I will kill him." Tiirmirise said softly. She was angry. She was angry and hurt. She knew that no Massagetae would have touched her which only meant she must have either seduced the man or he raped her. Either way he would die. His fate was sealed.

"The only thing to negotiate now is your life."

"Guard!" She shouted and two Massagetae guard appeared at the entrance of the tent.

"Tiirmirise please do not do this." Saronne begged.

"Guards!" The Massagetae guards scurried into the Queen's chambers. "Get her out of my sight!" Tiirmirise said coldly.

They marched out of the Western Fortress and Tiirmirise spent the next three days in a drunken stupor trying to hide her pain. The Sarmatian command were extremely worried if Jurugun attacked, which he was likely to, because the loss of the citidal was a huge blow to the Numerian economy together with the scorched earth policy they had been pursuing and with his own people refusing to send new recruits they knew

Jrugun had to stand and fight and that would be sooner rather than later and that could be a matter of days and they were wholly unprepared.

"That girl has brought us enough grief. I think we should just kill her and be done with it." Osamaye stood up to address the other leaders in the command tent.

"Without that girl we would never have won the western fortress!" Makeda slammed her fists on the table knocking off one of the markers on the map of the terrain."

"Makeda are you defending her? I can't believe it. The woman is a menace! She has turned Tiirmirise soft in the head. Mercy! Next she'll be persuading the Queen to forgive her enemies and take up knitting! I say we should kill the bitch now!" Osanes tossed his wine goblet at the kneeling slave who had taken up Saronne's duties as a scribe.

"What you would kill the innocent child she carries?" Xango said

"What care you? At least with the faithless bitch dead we would no longer fear for your life when Tiirmirise finds out you are the father of Nitocris?" Jbenga sat down wearily rubbing his head.

"Father!" Xango gasped.

"Is this true?" A dark voice inquired from the entrance of the command tent.

"Your Majesty we did not know..." Osanes tried to pacify the furious Queen.

"Are you the father of Saronne's child Xango?"

Xango knew his sister well and recognised the murderous note in her voice. Her eyes glinted with a wild blood lust and her hand was already at her sword. She was his baby sister but she was also Queen of the Massagetae and co-regent of Sarmatia. She could either kill him or order him to fall on his sword.

Saronne wore Tiirmirise's gold and was inviolate. Any man or woman who touched her she was honour bound to kill just as she was honour bound to kill Saronne for the betrayal. If he had made Saronne pregnant whilst she was wearing Tiirmirise's gold then their actions amounted to nothing less than high treason.

"I am the father of her daughter Nitocris but I swear I am not the father of the child she now carries."

"Guard bring chains for this..." she glared at her brother "One."

Jbenga sat down on unsteady legs. "Tiirmirise please you need to calm down before you do something you will regret."

"I am calm father. I am extremely calm."

Jbenga knew his daughter well. She was furious. The quieter she was the more furious she was. He had no doubt that she was about to execute both Saronne and Xango. He was not surprised when her next orders were to make ready a yard arm from which the two of them would be executed in the morning.

She returned to her chamber and paced the floor of her tent. She couldn't eat she couldn't drink, she couldn't sleep. She wanted Saronne, she wanted to kill her, she wanted to hold her and hear her laughter, feel her soothing touch, kiss away her tears. Tiirmirise fell to her knees and for the first time in her adult life she started crying, really crying.

Jurugun gathered his troops and sent out his scouts. It was three days after Tiirmirise's attack on the Western Fortress and he was surprised at the way the camp seemed to have fallen into disarray.

They were vulnerable. The sentries were sloppy, there was a marked lack of discipline and

Jurugun began to wonder if the military genius the black queen was noted for was not all fame and myth arising simply because no one could believe a female leader could win so many battles. However she had been fighting barbarians and wild men not a sophisticated military machine like his army was.

Already they had won several skirmishes and even managed to get away with one of Tiirmirise supply wagons. He needed more time to get recruits to fill his army to get enough strength to fight the Queen. He needed to crush her completely because for him this was a make or break battle.

If he lost he had as good as lost the war. Jurugun planned to deploy his troops 12 days after the Western Fortress was taken and attack just before dusk when he thought the Massagetae army would be at its most vulnerable, when they were in the middle of pitching a half finished camp and the army was relaxing and getting ready to close down for the day.

The yard arm had been completed for the last three days and just sat there sinisterly in the Numerian landscape. Tiirmirise changed her mind and asked them to build two huge pyres instead then she returned to wallowing in her misery.

Eight days after the attack on the Western Fortress Tiirmirise decided that she would pronounce judgement on her two disloyal subjects. Saronne refused to name the father of her child and Xango continued to deny he was the father.

Pasiphae and Osanes demanded that Tiirmirise torture them to find out the truth. Pasiphae even offered to carry out the torture personally. Makeda and Nnandi urged caution, Jbenga forgiveness and the ever practical Candace thought Tiirmirise should take control of the camp and stop worrying about such minor details.

In her tent Saronne sat in abject misery. It seemed that every time she was getting close to Tiirmirise, every time she thought she could reach her she would withdraw and become this monster of cruel violence fuelled by blood lust.

Two nights before Jurugun's planned attack Tiirmirise found herself in the tent which she had reserved to hold Saronne prisoner, and then in the dead of night she slipped into her bed.

She had been far too indulgent with the silly girl and needed to take a firmer hand with her blonde captive and show her that she would carry out her threat to execute her if she did not give up the name of the father of her child.

The Queen reached out with ungentle hands crushing her mouth with a savage kiss intending to use her, punish her may be even kill her. Saronne did not fight back instead she simply melted against the tortured Queen. Lying between her marble hard thighs, she was all soft womanly compliance.

Her luscious breasts brushed against the Queen, her small soft hands caressed Tiirmirise's shoulders and her scented mouth opened to Tiirmirise's marauding mouth with an invitation that was irresistible. Even as the Queen plundered her mouth with her thrusting tongue, when she

withdrew Saronne whispered her name breathlessly against her lips.

"Tiirmirise...Tiirmirise...Tiirmirise..."

Her fingers traced the scar on the Queen's face and her faintest touch seemed to dissolve the red mist of rage that gripped her emotions caressing her anger away. Her fingers slid inside Tiirmirise who inhaled sharply and then it was Saronne's turn to gasp as her intimate caress was returned.

She felt like hot silk and Tiirmirise could feel herself drowning in need as they moved against each other, their lovemaking became a driving tempest primal in its intensity.

Heat flamed between them as they made love sounds which started in soft whimpers and soared to searing screams of passion till finally they shattered together and Tiirmirise held her close till long after their last tremors stilled.

The Queen watched the flickering flame of the candle light her eyebrows wrinkled in confusion. She had gone there intending to master her in an act of domination and using sex play as she had done before as a weapon.

Instead Saronne lay across her body in silken splendour, her pale golden tresses spread out about the camp bed and sleeping furs, she began to suspect that she had been defeated by her gentling presence as she felt all the anger all the rage all the confusion seep out of her and she fell into a deep and dreamless sleep. The first time she had slept since she had her blonde captive kept under house arrest.

When she woke up Saronne was sitting up in bed, her hair fell about her in soft waving curls, she held the sheet up against her body and she looked extremely shocked.

Tiirmirise followed the line of her gaze and saw a woman sitting at the end of the bed. It was the princess Olayrae, recognisable with her gouged eyes and the silver falcon she wore around her neck.

"Olayrae?" Tiirmirise got out of bed and advanced towards her in the dark her sword which she had picked up when she sensed Saronne's discomfort still in her hand.

"Yes Tiirmirise" The princess exhaled "Are you planning on killing me too?"

"Of course not. I wasn't planning on killing anybody!"

"Could have fooled me." Saronne muttered.

"Saronne are you well?." Olayrae asked softly

"I know you. I saw you before at the palace. You are the one who told me I was pregnant."

"Well now that we have had our reunion what are you doing here your highness or should it be Your Grace now that you are a High Priestess?"

"I was never one for titles Tiirmirise you know that. I came here because I promised I would be with you in your hour of need."

"Why? Do you believe I will lose to Jurugun? He is many miles away from here probably skulking under a rock somewhere licking his wounds now that I have plundered his Western Fortress." The Queen said arrogantly.

"I will get you something to drink you must be thirsty." Saronne tried to hold the furs and sheets to her to maintain her modesty as she got out of bed.

"There is no need for prudishness Saronne, Olayrae cannot see you."

"Tiirmirise just because you prefer to stride around naked does not mean others feel as confident. Let the girl go there is something I need to discuss with you in private."

"Ah if you have come to tell me that my niece Nitocris is also Saronne's daughter I am already aware."

Olayrae accepted help from Tiirmirise to sit down though she did not need it and she also accepted the glass of chilled fruit juice from Saronne and tried to smile reassuringly at her.

"This is all your fault you know."

"What is all my fault Olayrae and please don't be cryptic."

"You spent the night in the temple yes?"

"The temple on the Simian borders so what of it?" Tiirmirise wrapped a sheet around her not because it was starting to get cold but because she realised that whilst Olayrae might appear physically blind, She could still see her nakedness. She put some more logs and kindling on the fire.

"And before she left the priestess told you both to be sexually abstemious did she not?"

Saronne shook her head "No she never said anything to me."

"Tiirmirise?" Olayrae inquired of her step-mother.

Tiirmirise said nothing and had to be prompted by Olayrae. "Well?"

Tiirmirise shrugged "She might have mentioned it, what of it?."

"You didn't tell Saronne did you of the warning?"

"What warning?" Saronne looked from one woman to the other and saw dawning comprehension on the face of the Queen and then to her astonishment Tiirmirise looked uncomfortably sheepish.

"Don't be silly those are only legends. Myths! I know it was a fertility temple but what you are suggesting is impossible." Tiirmirise stuttered to a halt.

"Well since you obviously have been keeping her in the dark I better tell her the truth. " She turned to Saronne and said unequivocally "You are going to have Tiirmirise's baby!"

Saronne stared at her incredulously "I am?"

"Yes you are. When you stayed at the fertility temple Tiirmirise should have told you what would happen if you made love there. If you think back you will probably find that you cannot remember most of what happened that night."

"You are right, I felt hazy the next day and I can only remember certain details of that night, like how Tiirmirise's eyes glowed almost green, at the time I thought it was the light from the crystals in the temple she was different too." Saronne finished thoughtfully.

"Olayrae none of this makes any sense and even if it were true only a fool would believe you. There is no evidence."

"The priestess she told you she would mark the date did she not?"

"Yes but no child is born nine months to the day of conception some come earlier or later."

"There is another thing Tiirmirise."

"What is that?"

"You are from one of the oldest Massagetae lines in Sarmatia. You have a pure white birth mark shaped like a tear at the back of your right ankle. Your mother, has two on the back of both her ankles. Xango, Nitocris, Spargapises, and Derastes also have a birthmark on the back of their ankle. If this child is born with a birth mark also as I predict it will prove that..."

"It will prove that I should kill my brother!" Tiirmirise stormed.

"Xango and his daughter Nitocris have their birthmark on the back of their left ankle. Your son and Grandson, Spargapise and Derastes have theirs on the back of..."

"Their right ankle yes yes I know all this."

"So if our child has a birth mark on the back of his or her right ankle then..." Saronne was too afraid to say the words and she watched Tiirmirise as comprehension dawned on her disbelieving face.

"That can never happen!" Tiirmirise spluttered.

"Can it not? Why not?"

"Because!"

"Tiirmirise you of all people should know better. The God spoke to you did he not? Besides I am here to tell you that the child will be a girl and you are to call her the golden one - Chryseis"

"Tiirmirise closed her eyes in defeat. "If it is so willed then so let it be."

"So how come no one asked me how I feel about all this?"

"Because Lady, you agreed in the temple already."

"I did?"

"When Tiirmirise asked if circumstances were different and you met in a different time and place if you would bear her child?"

"I said yes." Saronne whispered and sank on the bed remembering.

"Tiirmirise, you asked why I am here? I am come to formalise your betrothal to Saronne and that she will be your wife and to hear your vows." She turned to Saronne "And I am here to hear your commitment to this union."

"What if I object?" Tiirmirise said testily.

"The only person who is in any position to object is Saronne." Olayrae said sternly. "You disobeyed the God that is why you are in this position this is your punishment. Even worse you failed to warn Saronne of the consequences."

Tiirmirise grinned "It's the best punishment ever."

"Yes I rather thought you might see it like that." Olayrae said dryly

"Marriage is a punishment?"

"No not the marriage, the procedure. Tiirmirise will be the one to perfect the union you will not." Olayrae glared at Tiirmirise who shrugged.

"Saronne?" Olayrae asked gently "Are you willing?"

Saronne looked up at Tiirmirise and then down at Olayrae. Tiirmirise looked unconcerned but Olayrae had a certain look about her although Saronne knew the other woman could not see her face properly in the shadow of the candlelight.

She did not know what made her say the words "Yes I am willing."

"Place both your hands in Tiirmirise's in and repeat after me. I Aeslynn Votigernsdottir also known as Aeslynn the fair and now called Saronne,"

Saronne looked at her for a moment "You know my name?"

"The vows child." Olayrae said firmly

Saronne hesitantly put her hands in Tiirmirise's. They were warm and larger than hers yet strangely re-assuring. Obediently repeated her vows to love, cherish and honour Tiirmirise and to place her above all, forsaking all others and to give her heart and soul into her keeping until by death they were parted.

"Tiirmirise?"

The Queen knew the words and said them without prompting. "I Tiirmirise, daughter of Danu and Jbenga, Queen of the Massagetae, Dread Lady of the Plains, The Queen of two cities, Lady of Battles, the...."

"Tiirmirise...." Olayrae said warningly "Enough with the titles finish your oath."

"Do hereby make blood oath to take Aeslynn Votigernsdottir also known as Aeslynn the fair and now called Saronne as my wife, to love, honour, cherish and protect with my life placing her above all, and forsaking all others and to give my heart and soul into her keeping until by death we are parted. I shed my blood for her that it may be so." Tiirmirise took the knife Olayrae gave her and cut her own hand so that her blood dripped on the floor.

"So has it been said so let it be done." Olayrae sprinkled them with water, earth oil, honey and salt. "Water for tears of joy that wash away the tears of pain, oil to smooth your way, honey that your love is sweet, salt to cleanse and prolong and earth to which you will return. Your souls are bound on earth and bound in heaven and fire that your love for each other will always burn hot."

Saronne's eyes widened "Fire did she say fire?" Saronne whispered not wanting to spoil the solemn atmosphere that Olayrae had managed to maintain.

"This is the part where you," Tiirmirise pointed to Saronne "get to cauterize my wound," she pointed to her bloody hand "and Olayrae heals it."

Tiirmirise and Olayrae had to persuade a very unbelieving and reluctant Saronne to place the burning brazier on the Queen's hand but Tiirmirise did not break a sweat and after Olayrae's touch on Tiirmirise's hand it was almost as though the cut had never been but there was a little scar on Tomyris left hand and its equivalent was sported in Saronne's left hand.

"The God is pleased your sacrifice is accepted." Olayrae smiled

The night after Olayrae's visti Jurugun attacked. Candace's scouts had sighted nothing unusual and whilst the Sarmatians were building their camp they kept their weapons near. The Numerian attack came in the brief lustrous dimness before night fell. Most of the fighting took place during the darkness. A desperate business which went against the Sarmatians for some hours.

Soldiers tore into the Queen's personal tent killing the two eunuchs before they had time to react and Tiirmirise was hard pressed to hold them off. She put the younger woman behind her and her skill with the blades was frightening to watch. She fought naked with two blades flashing in both her hands slashing hacking and beheading.

Saronne screamed and hurled a jar of oil at one of the figures in the darkness then she grabbed one of the torches and threw that too for good measure.

The Numerian went up in flames and ran shrieking out of the tent. Another one was sneaking up behind Tiirmirise and before he could sink his sword into her Saronne leapt onto his back. She didn't know what else to do so she pulled his ears as hard as she could. He howled and threw her off so she landed in the corner of the room on one of the cushions. A relatively soft landing.

Tiirmirise dispatched the last of the intruders. "Are you alright?" Her hands searched Saronne's body desperately making sure she was not injured.

"Yes Tiirmirise." She whispered.

Saronne was shaking and sobbing with shock and the queen wrapped her in her Purple cloak and held her. Tiirmirise stroked her hair and kissed her tenderly. "Hush Afereni it is well."

She shuddered as she felt Saronne's gentle touch on her naked scarred breast and groaned inwardly. In the midst of the war and carnage and fear, a gentle touch from her Afereni inflamed her. Tiirmirise groaned as she dragged her lips reluctantly away from Saronne's.

Tiirmirise would have liked to hold her and comfort her longer but as commander- in- chief she needed to go to the command tent and save her army who were probably panicking at this very moment.

"Saronne, help me put my armour on. I dare not leave you alone here so we will go to the command tent together." Saronne's tears were forgotten as she was distracted now she had something to do.

Tiirmirise acted so blasé, she was like a rock in a storm she made Saronne feel like everything was going to be alright and there was absolutely nothing to worry about.

They made their way to the command tent on foot. All the high command were there. Some injured others were not most were armed some were naked but all were ready to fight.

Jurugun was not prepared for that last fact.

An army that was able to fight on its feet as well as on the back of a horse. An organised army which once Tiirmirise and Makeda got enough torches going and could discern the situation began to mobilise.

Pasiphae and Jbenga worked extremely well together and that young woman distinguished herself. Her job was to rally the troops who were flagging or were beginning to panic whilst Tiirmirise deployed men and troops to counter the attacks and check the Numerian advance.

Nnandi was put in charge of guarding the physicians and Saronne. A job she was ideally suited for since she was more an administrator and her strengths lay in defence rather than in offence.

Tiirmirise was everywhere encouraging her army, encouraging the high command encouraging the physicians mounting attacks and charging into desperate situations and rallying her troops when they were about to rout or run. By the time the sun came up they were holding their own and victory went to the Sarmatian army.

The Numerians mounted a strategic withdrawal in good order and yet despite the element of surprise they had managed to come out the worst in the encounter and that sat heavy on Jurugun's mind.

Tiirmirise gathered up her army in battle formation and decided against a rest. The armies marched in a square. The cavalry were deployed at the front and back so that if Jurugun decided to mount another cavalry attack on their march all the soldiers had to do was face outwards in each square whilst the cavalry was ready to form wings.

Every soldier from the Massagetae to the rank and file soldier marched with their helmet and carried their shield uncovered by its protective hide with both javelins at the ready. The javelins were weighted heavily so as to collapse and bend on impact so they could not be hurled back at the Sarmatians.

The archers carried their bows at the ready and on the fourth day after Jurugun's night attack the Numerian King attacked again but this time Tiirmirise was ready for him.

The Sarmatian and Massagetae army fell into an organised formation of battle squares as ordered by their Queen. Jurugun counted on his cavalry to unsettle the Sarmatian infantry with their lightening attack hoping to ride them down. He had every reason to put his hopes in their abilities too. They were excellent riders trained from birth.

They neither used saddles nor bridles like their Sarmatian and Massagetae counterparts and fatally for them wore no armour relying for their punch and power on fleetness bravery and their deadly accuracy with the javelin and long sword.

Nnandi guarding the physicians and the baggage train was thoroughly beset and was really up

against it as the Numerian archers sent a wave of arrows at their position.

She yanked Saronne under her shield and hoped the girl did not come to grief on her watch because she did not want to be responsible for the death of Tiirmirise's life mate.

She knew Saronne was Tiirmirise's life mate even if her stupid Queen did not and it was now her duty to protect her with her life. She gasped as an arrow pinned her leg to the ground and suddenly the Numerians were upon them. Her shield was yanked away and just as the sword blow was about to fall, her body covered Saronne's.

She was splattered with gore and a beautiful voice that she recognised very well said "That's a fine job you're doing with Tiirmirise's life mate. Imagine here we all are fighting and there you are making out with the fair Saronne not to talk of the amount of trouble you are going to be in when I tell Epiphany."

"You freaking slapper, Pasiphae stop fucking about and pull the fucking arrow out of my damn leg."

Nnandi, gasped and struggled to her feet after Pasiphae had done as she requested. She grunted picking up her shield and sword and they closed ranks locking shields so that the next wave of arrows lodged in their shields instead of their unprotected bodies.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I saw Tiirmirise shitting herself when she saw where Jurugun's archers were heading. So I decided to come here and play hero. You alright there Saronne?"

Saronne was terrified. She nodded wordlessly unable to form a coherent sentence.

She had never been in the middle of a battle before. All the poems made it sound so glamorous. The reality was bloody screaming men gurgling out their life's breadth as they choked in a sea of blood, vomit and shit. It was everywhere, death was everywhere.

She reached out and touched Nnandi's ankle channelling her power to heal the smaller woman. She had watched battles before from the safety of the command tent far away from the action, she knew sooner or later Pasiphae would have to leave to deal with another desperate situation and Nnandi would have to manage the one they were in alone.

Across the battlefield the Massagetae archers were firing their own volleys and the sky darkened as the shafts flew at the enemy Numerian cavalry decimating their ranks effectively because they wore no armour. When what was left of the Numerian cavalry finally crashed against the ranks and file of the Sarmatian infantry square they were unable to break through.

Tiirmirise was shouting herself hoarse. The trumpets and bugles issuing commands telling her army which manoeuvres to perform. She had ordered the infantry to hurl only their shorter javelins at the charging cavalry and to use the second longer one as a spear to direct at the horses.

She knew full well that horses will not run at long sharp pointy things so once more chaos descended on the Numerian cavalry. Finally left with no choice Jurugun had to commit his infantry to close hand to hand combat.

Outnumbered 3 to 1 the fighting was desperate. The numbers of the Numerians threatened to overwhelm them and Tiirmirise sent her own cavalry to charge into the side of the Numerian infantry by the time the beleaguered Numerian infantry clashed with the better trained Sarmatians they were more than a match for the Numerian army.

The Sarmatians wearing more protective armour though slower cut into the Numerian bodies like a knife through butter. Makeda fought on the front line like Pasiphae going where she was needed. Candace female Massagetae assassins cut down the Infantry general and Xango and Osumaye held the centre fighting a fierce battle over the body of Jbenga who had fallen in battle. The male Massagetae surrounded him as he lay bleeding on the on dark rich Numerian soil.

Tiirmirise could only commit to battle in desperate situations and now she carried her father's living but broken body back to the command tent. She had no time to mourn occupied as she was with the overall strategy of the battle.

Desperation and annoyance at being beaten by a fucking Massagetae female kept Jurugun in the battle for too long, and by the time he decided to disengage it was against a vengeful Massagetae army sensing victory.

A vast majority of the Numerians and their allies perished. Jurugun escaped much to the annoyance of Tiirmirise though Osumaye managed to kill his charioteer.

Tiirmirise stood on a wooden dais so that the army could see her as she gave them her speech of approval.

"Today you have all shed blood, sweat and tears for the Massagetae and the people of Sarmatia and the Plains. Today you have shown yourselves to be worthy sons and daughters of a proud and great nation."

Tiirmirise looked round and continued her speech. "You have proven that you are the bravest of the brave. You have taken impregnable citadels, it was not for you to march up and down digging ditches and draining lakes," this last was a dig at Ninyas which they all understood and snickered at.

"When we return to Sarmatia we do so in a well earned triumph and no Sarmatian can say that you did not care well enough about Sarmatia to shed blood for her, to kill for her to lay down your life for her, today your deeds will echo into eternity long after generations of men are dust."

Two weeks later a triumphant Tiirmirise riding at the head of an exhausted column caught up with the straggling rag tag Numerians and made them clean the field of battle. Burning the dead of both sides and observing the funeral rights. Then they ensconced themselves in the Numerian capital which surrendered and opened its gates readily.

Saronne's influence resulted in Tiirmirise not conducting the usual scorched earth policy. Luckily for the Queen there was no need for it. The Numerians it seemed were learning their lesson.

In November Eugertes Grossbelly of Sirahn an ally of Jurugun asked for parley. Tiirmirise sent Xango and Osumaye and when they returned Xango reported that Jurugun had already infiltrated Eugertes court with spies.

"The last time I met with Eugertes we did not part on the best of terms."

"Hmm he well remembers you step-mama." Pasiphae grinned

"I am glad to hear it." Tiirmirise smiled nastily.

"He is an arrogant pompous man, overly fond of sweet meats and honeyed wine. He is also terrified of Jurugun. If we can give him a strong enough guarantee I am sure he would be willing to change sides." Osumaye said thoughtfully.

"But as I said Jurugun has his spies in the Sirahn court whispering, threatening and working on him. I advised him to ally with us because as everyone can see the writing is on the wall."

"And?"

"He wants to marry either Pradae or Bierae to cement the alliance."

"Pradae is already married to Prince Volpi." Tiirmirise rubbed her chin.

"It is a simple matter of divorcing her from Prince Volpi and then Pradae would be available." Candace drawled

"Bierae tells me that marriage is prospering well I would be loathe to break up a happy home."

"Well," Osumaye interjected, "Consider that the Princess Bierae is now a high ranking vizier in the Council with position and power. If you sent her to Eugertes you would lose a lot of supporters. I would suggest that you keep her by your side to keep an eye on Ninyas, Vayanes and that thief Magba Massinassa."

Makeda turned around irritated to find that Candace had slipped out of the tent and slip back in again and once more no one had seen her do it. It exasperated her that as chief security officer in charge of the command tent, Candace was able to slip in and out so easily without being seen.

"That is so irritating Candace how the hell do you do that?"

"If I told you I would have to kill you." Candace grinned unrepentantly.

"Continue with your report brother." Tiirmirise ordered.

"We also found out that Jurugun has come to the end of his tether. The scorched earth policy has worked very well. His own tribe have refused to send him any more men. Numer is tired of war and they cannot see the remotest chance of winning.

Their neighbours are currently prospering under Sarmatian rule. Their taxes are obviously lower because they are not funding a war and the prospect of being a province of Sarmatia is especially appealing at this time."

"I hear Scaures and Vayanes have removed the corrupt governors who started this war and the Council of Viziers in Sarmatia has passed a new law that no governor can remain in a province for more than two years." Nnandi put forward her own piece of news and then couldn't keep the silly happy smile off her face. "Epiphany wrote me." She finished shyly at Tiirmirise's raised eyebrows.

"How is Saronne?" Xango asked softly and all the generals turned around and looked earnestly at the Queen.

Saronne had been an excellent physician and she had earned the respect of all the generals even Pasiphae. Nnandi had told them the story of how she managed to rally the troops after Pasiphae left to deal with another emergency in the battle when she Nnandi herself was hard pressed.

Even though she did not fight or even know how to fight. Her contributions in other respects like her bravery on the battle field, supervising the tending of the wounded and saving many lives with her skill had earned her a lot of respect amongst the generals.

As a slave she was not expected to be brave but as Tiirmirise's life mate she was and she had been. Consequently her standing amongst the generals had increased tremendously.

Tiirmirise smiled proudly "My Afereni is well. I thank you for asking."

"Now that we have cleared that up do you thing the Numerians are ready to give up their king?" Osamaye asked the thoughtful looking queen.

"The short answer to that seems to be no." Tiirmirise smiled "Never fear though we will get him next year."

The next year Jurugun appeared to have guessed at the possible relationship between Eugertes and Tiirmirise. Pasiphae as princess royal was sent to negotiate terms and get the Sirahn emperor to betray him.

Saronne was having nightmares remembering the battle and all the people who died. Tiirmirise often forgot that she was not a trained warrior and as she comforted her she realised that she would need to have an excuse to send her back to Ado.

Saronne needed to recover from the trauma of battle. The ways of a warrior was not suited to

everyone's constitution and truth be told Tiirmirise did not like having her on the front line.

The last battle against Jurugun brought home to her how unsafe it was for her and how much Saronne meant to her. Tiirmirise held her close and stroked her hair to soothe away her nightmares.

Saronne sighed enjoying the comforting embrace. Who would have guessed that the Lady of battles would become the Lady of love. She cupped Tiirmirise's naked breast and flicked her thumb across the hard charcoal black nipple and was rewarded with a moan of pleasure.

The Queen was naked, her ebony skin glowed in the candle light a stark contrast to Saronne's pale white skin. Saronne wore a night shift for it was cold but Tiirmirise never wore anything whether it was hot or cold.

She always seemed to be cold and Tiirmirise was always warm. In summer it was annoying but in winter like now it was delicious.

Saronne lay on top of the black queen and was absently caressing her face. They were like that for several moments, kissing each other softly and caressing each other gently. Saronne touched Tiirmirise's face, neck, hair and ears.

"My beautiful, Saronne," she whispered and smiled then turning over so she lay on top of Saronne she lowered her head and kissed her lips. Her lover it seemed was in tune with her mood and feelings for where Saronne expected a bruising rough kiss full of hunger and passion she was pleasantly surprised when the Queen's lips caressed and pampered hers especially as she was currently feeling a little delicate.

They were very soft, as she invited her tongue into her mouth. They must have done nothing but kissed passionately for what seemed like several candle marks. The kisses grew deeper, more intimate, and more passionate.

Tiirmirise lost herself in her, her warmth her scent her touch, she could feel her heart beating against her, blood pounding in her ears as Saronne moaned against her lips, Tiirmirise's body was wracked by a burning soul wrenching desire that never ceased to confound her with its intensity.

When she finally removed her lips from her golden haired lover's, it was to place little butterfly kisses on Saronne's cheeks, forehead, ears, nose and neck. Saronne's hands dug into her hair combing through her short thick curly black hair.

Saronne's mouth suckled Tiirmirise's neck and she flicked at Tiirmirise's earlobe with her tongue even as she ground her sex against Tiirmirise's questing fingers. The Queen's hot breadth caressed her neck.

Needing and craving to hear the sound of her own pleasure she slid her hands between them till she could feel Tiirmirise's sex then she bent her knees and straddled her thigh between hers

wrapping herself around her long glorious warrior's body.

In that position, she could feel her wet sex grinding into the crook of her hip and thigh as Tiirmirise continued the rhythmic thrusting of her hips. Saronne was thrusting back as well. All she could think about was reaching fulfilment at the pinnacle of pleasure.

She loved touching her dark warrior Queen, It was something she admitted only to herself and she loved Tiirmirise touching her. She slid her hands down Tiirmirise's silken smooth and ebony skin down to the center of her back, kneading her muscles.

She loved feeling the Queen's muscles ripple beneath her fingertips as she rode her. Saronne grasped Tiirmirise bottom her hands wordlessly urging her to surge forward against her needing to feel more pressure, more pleasure.

Tiirmirise moved her hand, stroking her skin and caressing her body, her hands seemed to be everywhere, alternately caressing her breasts, her tongue flicked at her nipple and her teeth grazed the tight little buds alternately tugging and flicked at it with her tongue.

Tiirmirise's callused hand moved between their bodies till her questing fingers found their way to Saronne's hot centre. "You are so beautiful," Tiirmirise whispered as the tip of her tongue trailed along her earlobe. Saronne could feel her desire pooling in her centre.

"So soft and so hot." The Queen groaned the last words against her throat as her fingers explored Saronne's aching centre.

When Tiirmirise slipped two fingers inside her, Saronne gasped and the moan forming in her mouth was swallowed by the black Queen's kiss. She was hot and wet and thoroughly aroused, Tiirmirise moved inside her, Saronne thrust her hips upward against her thrusting fingers.

She squeezed her eyes shut and gloried in the pleasure she was receiving as she grasped Tiirmirise tightly against her and began kneading her bottom and pushing her body further onto her.

She could feel Tiirmirise wet and slick centre rubbing against her thigh. Saronne found herself lost in the incessant fucking of Tiirmirise's fingers, she found her whole being concentrated on her centre.

Tiirmirise kissed her again, hotly and desperately demanding, crushing her lips beneath hers, Saronne sobbed with desire and whimpered with need, the need to climax and reach culmination.

Their bodies were soaked with perspiration and the smell of sex and the incense Saronne used to freshen air permeated the Queen's private tent.

Saronne found herself screaming out her pleasure against Tiirmirise as she reached fulfilment and she was rewarded a moment later with the sound of her warrior groaning against her as she shuddered out her pleasure.

A gentle evening breeze blew in and around the royal tent, Their bodies came down from release and they settled into the afterglow of lovemaking, the Queen lowered her head to rest between Saronne's breasts and Saronne stroked her head absently.

They were both still breathing heavily from their lovemaking and lay there for several moments till their breathing returned to normal. Saronne pressed a gentle kiss to Tiirmirise's forehead.

"Saronne my father is not doing well is he? and his wounds are grave." The Queen spoke softly into the darkness.

Saronne raised her hand to caress her cheek in an effort to comfort her. Tiirmirise acknowledged the gesture by kissing her hand. It pained her to say it but she had to. "You will accompany him back to Ado and oversee his household."

"You are sending me away?"

"I am sending you to safety. It is too dangerous here and a good and gentle person such as yourself has no business on a battlefield."

Saronne was not going to argue with that, she was still having horrendous nightmares about the battle.

"As you wish Tiirmirise." Saronne said at length

"I do not wish it Saronne for I cannot bear the thought of being parted from you. But I am doing it to protect you. You must know that." Tiirmirise finished earnestly.

Saronne gave her another one of those freely given kisses that Tiirmirise had come to treasure and which fairly made her toes curl.

"I know." She said simply. Tiirmirise sighed with relief. She had not known she was even holding her breath.

Then two weeks later, Tiirmirise received a letter from Bierae. She summoned Saronne to come to her tent and read it to her. Whilst Tiirmirise could read she was not a woman of letters. She found it easier to read plans and diagrams.

She had no problems with maths and geometry but the Sarmatian royal script she struggled with and was not as fast a reader as Saronne. She often had to read out her letters out loud as she struggled to differentiate the characters.

"Is anything wrong Tiirmirise?"

"No I just wanted you to read me Bierae's letter." The queen handed her the folded scroll."

Saronne broke the seal and untied the ribbon. She sat down on one of the couches and began reading.

My Dear Tiirmirise,

I hope this letter finds you in good health. How is the lovely Saronne? I have no doubt she is reading you this letter, so I will take the opportunity to inform you that your generals think she would make you an excellent wife and mother even Queen if you are considering to free and marry her.

Now that I have made her blush and thoroughly discomfited you I will give you news of Ado. Ninyas is up to his usual tricks. It is rumoured that he consorts with Deioeces, (or Cyrus as he is better known) the King of the Medes and the Persians although those are rumours and are yet unsubstantiated.

This news is worrying because Cyrus has expansionist imperialistic tendencies. He is from the Archaemenid dynasty and has managed to single handedly unite all the tribes of the Medes and the Persians like the Parsagadae, the Maraphii, the Maspii, the Derusiae and the Germanii.

Even worse he also has the Nomadic Dai, Mardii, Germanii and Dropici tribes as allies. He has been receiving tribute from Armenians, Parthians, Drangians and Arians since he conquered them and became king of Asan.

He defeated the Median King Astyages by bribing his best General Harpagus. His father Cambyses was married to Mandane a daughter of Astyages which probably explains why the Medes accepted him as their King. He has also married another daughter of Astyages, one of his aunts in a bid to secure the throne.

He then went on to conquer Lydia which he took from Croesus and captured and executed the mad King Nabonidus. You know Nabonidus, the one who wanted to put a statue of a demon in one of our temples, you went crazy and almost caused an international incident, well he did so in one of the temples belonging to the one God in Akkad(well it is now known as Babylon, Cyrus renamed it) and the people hated him for it because they suffered 5 years famine. Cyrus takes over and they have their first year of bumper crop harvest.

Since Nabonidus also controlled most of Syria and Palestine you can imagine how big his Kingdom is. He is now very rich and very powerful with the largest army in the known world and the means to finance it.

Our Scythian cousins have already sent a delegation from Bactria and the Sacae, our Massagetae cousins have humbly begged permission to relocate to Southern Massagetae lands in Sarmatia because they fear Cyrus is planning to invade them like he invaded Gandara in India.

I have a feeling we shall soon be hearing from Cyrus. His expansionist policies seem to be heading towards the plains and especially the Simian and Sarmatia. Let us hope he clashes with the Dominion before he clashes with us.

Spargapises has entered the game of politics with a vengeance. We now know the new leader of the conservatives is Vayanes. He has consolidated his power and controls a large faction of the aristocracy. However I am told that because he used to be a slave and a Eunuch and because his promotion took place under Father's regime he is still regarded with some suspicion.

The new leader of the Progressives is Scaures and he loathes Ninyas. Ninyas has his own faction which is mainly the merchant population. However his faction is split because half of the merchant population are Massagetae who support you and the other Sarmatian half who support Ninyas. The new threat on the horizon seems to be the Dominion.

The council has suggested that Spargapises stand in your place as Commander-in-Chief and will be sending a formal request for your return and that of Ninyas home.

Since you are quelling a rebellion and restoring peace to a region whilst Ninyas is kicking up his heels doing very little in Warbo except fishing we managed to persuaded the council to order that Ninyas wait for Spargapises before handing over his command. We also managed to persuade the council to given Spargapises authority and money to deal with the Dominion.

Apparently the rumour is that I persuaded Vayanos and Scaures that to leave yourself and Ninyas at the end of the confrontation with the Numerians and the Dominion with half the Sarmatian army each was a possible step towards civil war. They both agreed with me and decided to give Spargapises command and recall Ninyas.

Spargapises is to raise a further army since it is felt that the army of fifteen thousand at Ninyas disposal will not be enough to deal with the Dominion. You would be proud of him he has chosen to follow your policies and recruit from the landless peasants and the city poor.

Unfortunately my brother is a bit of a snob and has chosen to recruit his high ranking officers from amongst the Sarmatian aristocracy and very few from the merchant class or experienced soldiers with the result that they are sadly lacking in experience. He has also become exceedingly arrogant, a bit like you really but unlike you he does not have the brilliant militaristic flair. This will be his first campaign without supervision and he is very excited.

When the council ordered Ninyas to return and hand over his troops to Spargapises, you would have thought that Ninyas would have seized the opportunity to return home and make mischief like launch a few coup plots or at least one diabolical underhanded scheme to take over the throne."

At this point Tiirmirise laughed and Saronne raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"That is hardly likely to happen. He must be fuming. Bierae doesn't know it but she has effectively outmanoeuvred Ninyas. Power in council is nothing if you do not control the army. I am surprised at Vayanes and Scaures though expecting Ninyas to just give up his troops without protest?"

"Why shouldn't he give up his troops?" Saronne asked curiously

"Because that would leave me in command of one half of the army and Spargapises in command of the other half comprising of at least 45,000 men. He is not going to make the same mistake as last time.

This time he could hold the city of Ado to ransom and force the council to banish Ninyas or even execute him. No I do not expect Ninyas would likely give up his command so easily"

"You mean Spargapises would actually march on Ado? Your own city?"

Tiirmirise rubbed the back of her neck "Well history has proven that Spargapises would not."

"But you would?"

"If it needed to be done yes." The Queen finished softly.

Saronne was beginning to appreciate just how ruthless the Tiirmirise could be. The Queen waved her hand negligently a gesture motioning her to continue reading Bierae's letter and after a long searching look at the queen she continued.

"Well Ninyas was furious. He was perfectly willing to march against the Dominion but he expected to be commander in chief of a force of 30,000 men not sharing command with Spargapises.

He sent a letter to the council to that effect and further that as co-regent he was like a king and the council should not give him orders. He gave them orders. However he was willing to allow Spargapises to learn the trade of war from him.

He then addressed the letter not to the current Prime Vizier Magba Massinassa whom he absolutely loathes and blames for a coup plot which resulted in the death of two of his children, but to Scaures the Speaker who read the letter out with ghoulish enjoyment since everyone knows there is no love lost between the Prime Vizier and the Speaker.

Naturally Massinassa was furious and the insult lead to fisticuffs in the Council chambers between, the royal supporters, Ninyas supporters and Massinassa's toughs.

There were purple robes torn as Ninyas son Almeyedes and Spargapises actually brawled on the council chamber floor. When order was eventually restored the council sent orders reiterating that Ninyas relinquish his command to Spargapises and return to Ado.

At the moment all of Sarmatia is agog with the fear of the Dominion who have managed to defeat everyone and have even temporarily quelled Cyrus advance on our territories.

All the country talks about are the Dominion. The Dominion, the Dominion, the Dominion. Everyone is terrified of the Dominion. At the rate they are expanding and conquering, they are well on their way to building an empire.

I don't think either Ninyas or Spargapises have the brains or intelligence to stop them. Olayrae is right you were made for this hour. Yes, Olayrae she has come out of the temple service temporarily and she says she is directed by the divine to assist us as the our hour of need will be upon us soon, whatever that means, I hate it when she is cryptic. It has been nice having her around though I did not know she was such an excellent politician.

Hurry up whatever you are doing in Numer and come home I beg of you. I am not up to battling the High Council of Viziers single-handedly especially when my own brother is part of the problem.

On a lighter note I was remembering a conversation with Epiphany where she said you were telling Nnandi you wanted to leave a lasting memorial of your reign. I would like to suggest a military academy in Ekiti or even the Massagetae lands so we don't lose the fighting skills of our veteran armies.

Finally I have some sad news for you. Your mother Danu was very ill and died suddenly of an illness. I arranged for a state burial for her. I hope this meets with your approval. I also suggest that you send Someone back to take charge of Derastes. Since your mother's death, he has been staying in the palace but I know you are reluctant to have him at Ado.

That is all my news. I have no doubt Epiphany will have written to Nnandi with all the details.

Your loving daughter and most humble subject. Bierae"

Chapter 10

Fortune's Favourite

Saronne's entry.

Pasiphae was to accompany myself and Ibenga back to Ado for the Queen's father to recuperate. The Queen Mother having already died, Tiirmirise gave orders no one was to tell him of it until he was safely in Ado. I did all I could to make him comfortable. I had already channelled my powers to try to heal the wound but it was a fatal one and I could only make him comfortable for the long journey ahead. I fear it will eventually be the death of him.

As we prepared to leave, I who had once loathed Tiirmirise now found myself saddened by my departure. Everyday we were together each moment was precious, every kiss was saved in my memory and every touch treasured.

Finally when the day came for us to return to Sarmatia everyone was loaded up. The entire Massagetae guard and Sarmatian army were there. It seemed the whole camp turned up to see us go.

I was very embarrassed when Nnandi and Makeda each pinned a silver Falcon on my modest robes for services to the People of the Plains. (Now that I am Tiirmirise's betrothed I am always dressed in modest blue robes and she sulks if I wear the transparent red silks and chiffon outside her tent.)

They each winked at me and stepped back. Makeda pinned her own solemnly and gravely and then gave me a hug as well. I had managed to save her son's arm from amputation during the last battle against Jurugun and the hug went on for so long that I glanced nervously towards Tiirmirise who looked on in amusement.

She only released me when Pasiphae coughed loudly and Tiirmirise raised one delicately arched eyebrow which promised some diabolical form of retribution. Makeda looked sheepishly at the queen who tried unsuccessfully to hide a feral smile.

Osumaye and Xango also gave me silver falcons, Xango gave me one on behalf of Jbenga and kissed me in a most uncircumspect way before winking at his sister. I dared not look at Tiirmirise who was being physically restrained by Pasiphae.

"That's from father." He grinned and stuck his tongue out at Tiirmirise.

Pasiphae pinned a silver falcon to my dress robes. I was surprised when she smiled at me.

"I hope that I too will find one such as you to lead me out of my darkness." She said softly

I raised my eyebrows enquiringly at her. "Pasiphae I..."

"You know what I am talking about Saronne. Never mind we will speak on the journey. I do not wish my queen to question my loyalty now. Only know this you have earned all of the silver falcons pinned to your robes." And with those puzzling words She stepped away and got onto her horse.

Finally it was Tiirmirise's turn to pin a silver falcon on my robes. Her hands shook and when she was done I stepped back and dropped a deep curtsy as was custom.

She made a funny sound and when I looked up I realised she was looking at my cleavage and her eyes were dancing a smile played about her lips for she lifted me up and kissed me thoroughly till I was breathless. I could faintly hear the sound of the army cheering in the background.

It was awhile before I realised that actually her hands cupped my bottom and she had lifted me completely off the ground eventually she buried her face in my neck.

"Please put me down." I begged, I could feel myself blushing furiously with embarrassment. Most Massagetae were black skinned and the Swarthy skinned Sarmatians were almost as dark and didn't blush or if they did it was not noticeable. It was therefore a constant source of amusement to Tiirmirise when I did blush however she did as I requested.

I cupped her head in my hands and caressed her cheek. "Please be careful." I whispered. "Caressing the long scar that ran across her face lovingly."

"I shall my sun, moon and stars. I shall." She whispered back.

I loved it when she called me her sun, moon and stars. It meant her world revolved around me although of course it was the other way round. She gave me one more heart wrenching kiss and then we were on our way back to Ado.

I spent many evenings with Jbenga cleaning his wounds and changing his dressings. He drifted in and out of delirium. I had earlier tried to heal him by channelling the Falcon Olayrae gave me but I could summon nothing. Sometimes the gift worked and other times it did not. It was highly unreliable so I did the best I could to make him comfortable.

The first night we stopped we made camp. As we were in enemy country we kept away from the settlements. We were accompanied by one hundred and fifty Massagetae guards.

I knew that each member of the royal family is entitled to an honour guard of fifty. So I puzzled who the third complement was for as I had to record their orders and obviously their expenses. I simply assumed they were for Jbenga because he was very sick.

After I had made the Queen's father comfortable, I bathed and returned to my tent to do my accounts. As a small army we had a little forte, the Massagetae had built a palisade to surround us. I had my own tent, it was not as large as the one I shared with Tiirmirise but it afforded me privacy, since most of the other soldiers tented together.

As I sat with the parchment making entries, a breeze blew making the candles flicker and I turned to find Pasiphae regarding me thoughtfully. I had not even realised when she entered the tent.

I held my breadth and watched her warily.

"Come here."

I wanted to refuse but I dare not, Pasiphae was a princess of Sarmatia and although Tiirmirise honoured me greatly I was still publicly little more than a slave until we were formally married. I obeyed and walked hesitantly over to her.

She walked around me watching me, circling me moving closer and closer to me till we stood face to face.

"What is it about you? What is it about you that has enchanted the Queen. You are beautiful, it is true, but there are many beautiful women at court, you are clever, but I have also many clever slaves who are better at book keeping, you are a healer, but there are many healers at Ekiti, why does the Queen trust you so? I would know woman tell me."

I said nothing. Pasiphae reached out and undid the pins that held my hair so that it tumbled down my shoulders. She leaned forward and stared into my eyes as though searching for something. She caught her breath and her hand went to my breasts.

I flinched away but gently very gently the princess removed the falcon that nestled between my breasts and fingered it.

"Olayrae gave you this?"

"How did you know?"

"There is a myth about the Silver falcon. It is an ancient legend of the Massagetae. Her other name is the hidden Queen. The silver Falcon represents the Queen of Sarmatia and the Massagetae, she is often thought to arrive in our time of greatest need. I had always thought the hidden Queen would be Tiirmirise or even Olayrae but I never considered that you a slave would be the hidden Queen."

"You are speaking in riddles Pasiphae. I do not know what you are talking about."

"How could you? You are not Massagetae or Sarmatian. "No doubt you are afraid of me. After our last meeting in Gypsos I do not blame you. I know you care for the slaves that I use and for that I am grateful."

"Why do that to them?"

"There is a curse on the children of Qastursh. Qastursh was Tiirmirise's husband and King of Sarmatia. His father and grandfather seized the throne from the rightful Massagetae Queen. The High priestess of the One God placed a curse on them to continue until a Queen born of the Massagetae once more ascends the throne.

Spargapises and Pradae indulged theirs in an incestuous relationship, Minae is a nymphomaniac, Bierae is a weaver of lies a deceiver, Olayrae harms herself and I..." She smiled ferally "I inflict pain on others."

"Olayrae harms herself?"

"Yes. There is a common belief that the my sister's eyes were gouged out by assassins but they were not. She did that to herself. Her sacrifice to the God for her prophetic eye sight."

"But Tiirmirise said..."

"I know what Tiirmirise said. But she is not related to us by blood. She does not have all Olayrae's confidence. I do though. They all talk to me."

"So you think that if Tiirmirise becomes Queen, you hope your torture and torment will cease?"

"When Tiirmirise becomes Queen." Pasiphae said forcefully an almost fanatical glint in her eyes.

"Your highness are you telling me that you blame this curse for your actions and not on the fact that you genuinely like hurting people."

"You do not believe?" The princess looked at her incredulously and then a smile broke out on her face.

"I believe your highness that your torture and torment will cease when you cease torturing and tormenting others."

"Perhaps it will at that." Her hand reached out to stroke Saronne's jaw. "You are so tempting. Were you not Tiirmirise's property I would take you now..."

"You mean whip me till I bleed?"

Pasiphae smiled ruefully. "I do not only beat my slaves Saronne, some of them derive pleasure in my bed."

"The one I saw in Gypsos did not appear to derive any pleasure from any of your actions."

"If you did not belong to Tiirmirise...I would seduce you." Pasiphae's thumb caressed her lips gently.

"But I do belong to Tiirmirise." Saronne removed the thumb from her mouth. Saronne could not believe she was saying the words and with such relish too.

Pasiphae unsettled her. It was not that she touched her inappropriately but that she always seemed to be touching her. She never did anything that could be overtly construed as threatening but everywhere she went her eyes followed her.

The first few days of the journey to Ado were tortuous

Tiirmirise was to hear news of the situation in Ado not from Bierae who was caught up in the politics of the whole situation but from none other than Saronne.

When the letter arrived at the Numerian palace several months after they left, Tiirmirise retreated to the privacy of her rooms. She sniffed at the envelope which carried Saronne's special scent and opened it.

My beloved Tiirmirise,

I hope this letter finds you in good health. I have missed you very much. Your father is well and

is coming to terms with your mother's loss. I believe that little Derastes is a great comfort to him.

Derastes is nothing like you or indeed any Massagetae I have ever met. He is sweet yet charming and more interested in books than in swordplay much to his great- grandfathers disappointment.

I have a lot of news to give you and as I am still a slave Bierae has warned me to write official news and not to waste expensive parchment on words of love but to inform you of the tragic and grave circumstances here.

Six months into the year, the month called June after Juno, the Dominion goddess, Spargapises left on a long march towards the land of the Simian and the lands being ravaged by the Dominion. Pasiphae marched with him as a junior lieutenant. Spargapises insisted on lugging enough grain to feed his entire forces for two months consequently his progress was slow and after 16 days he had yet to reach the river Masene.

Eventually Pasiphae was able to persuade him to leave his baggage train in the escort of one battalion and push forward with the other 14 battalions. Ninyas did not make the same mistake and reached the Simian border ahead of Spargapises.

He took only three of his fifteen battalions. One he left behind, he disbanded the cavalry as an unnecessary expense and pocketed the money. At one stage he refused to move forward till he received a letter from the Sarmatian High Council giving him command of the army and had to be persuaded by his lieutenants.

The letter never came and despite his delaying tactics he still reached the rendezvous destination ahead of Spargapises. It never occurred to him that the council would not take supreme command from his nephew and give it to him.

The Dominion were now sighted by the Massagetae scout corps attached to Spargapises army. (Ninyas refused to allow the Massagetae in his army as far as he was concerned they were your spies. This however I know is not far from the truth.)

The Simian allies unable to fight the Dominion in a pitched battle (having learned their lesson years ago when they fought with you under their King Silenion) harried the Dominion using guerrilla tactics but never actually engaged them. They retreated into the Apennine mountains to await relief from the Sarmatian Army.

Ninyas sent the council a letter refusing to surrender his troops to Spargapises and take orders from a boy and those were his last words on the matter. He deployed his troops on one bank of the river Masene and waited for Spargapises to appear on the opposite bank.

Spargapises arrived ahead of the councils reply and placed his army and non-combatants in a heavily fortified camp on the edge of Masene 5 miles north of Ninyas troops at the town of Masene.

Thus making the river serve as a defence as well as a water source. He thought the ground to the

north of his camp would be ideal for battle. He sought to use the river as his greatest protection. That in itself was a mistake.

His next mistake was to appoint Pasiphae his most experienced and able general to command the cavalry thereby depriving him of his sister's counsel. His grand strategy was to treat with the Dominion, find out what they actually wanted and try to sue for peace.

His first task was to get Ninyas from the West bank of the river to the East bank. However still smarting from the insulting insensitive letter Scaures had read in the council at Ado, Spargapises dictated a curt undisguised insulting letter to Ninyas to get himself and his army across the river and inside his camp at once.

Ninyas replied that he was Spargapises uncle and he would not take orders from the get of any pretentious silk traders (reference to Qastursh's ancestry and not yours) and he was staying. Spargapises then ordered him to hand over the army and return to Ado for punishment. Ninyas refused and threatened to institute treason proceedings against the young prince.

So the bickering continued till September. Bierae appalled by the situation was in the Council everyday trying to get the High Council to send viziers to resolve the problem but has been blocked at every turn by Magba Massinassa. Why I don't know but I suppose we shall soon find out why.

Eventually Scaures in order to keep the peace allowed viziers to attend but they were only the most junior of viziers and members of the royal family. Olayrae came after a hastily written panic not from Bierae, although I am of the opinion she was already on her way since barely was the note written than the princess was in the palace.

Olayrae is the only one who appeared to understand the gravity of the situation for all that she was not a military strategist.

Sarmatia could not afford acrimonious in fighting just before facing a terrible enemy like the dominion. Back and forth went Olayrae who could see the Dominion advance.

She informed Pasiphae that she should be inside Spargapises camp. However Spargapises wanted to treat with the Dominion and Pasiphae felt it imperative that Spargapises join with Ninyas.

Olayrae then hurried off to Ninyas who terrified of the princess agreed with her but then crossed the river ten miles away from where Pasiphae was encamped with her cavalry and then began preparing to build a fortified camp. Olayrae unsuccessfully tried to convince him to join Spargapises camp instead of building another one. Ninyas refused.

Olayrae returned to find Spargapises treating with the Dominion generals. Also at the meeting were the newly crowned King Aresteion, and princess Pasiphae. Olayrae desperately asked him to make a truce till you returned and he refused. He said the only person the Dominion fear is Tiirmirise and we need to beat them otherwise we are doomed.

The next morning the Dominion moved swiftly.

Pasiphae did not have enough time to rally the cavalry so she sent the Massagetae horse ahead to protect the royal family and warn Spargapises. I am sorry to say that She was cut down in battle.

Apart from the 100 cavalry she sent to protect her sister Olayrae and King Aresteion the rest of the 200 Massagetae cavalry corps into was cut down to the last. I send my condolences my beloved I know how much you loved her.

One hundred thousand Dominion troops overran Ninyas camp and literally destroyed his army. He barely got away with his life on a boat. Spargapises did little better, fighting against gargantuan odds. His army at least inflicted severe casualties on the Dominion.

The Simian armies were decimated and despite Aristeion's protests Spargapises had him taken off the field and ferried to safety along with Minae's complement of Massagetae guards which he is entitled to as he is married to a member of the royal family.

The most senior observer after Olayrae was the Vizier Maecenes, one time ally of Ninyas but after that day at Masene he has allied himself squarely in council with Bierae and by extension you. Out of the 200 senior officers only twenty four survived. Amongst them was Spargapises though his injuries are grave, Olayrae remained behind to tend him.

End of Part 2

Continued...

**Lucien St Clare's Scrolls
Index Page**

~ The Falcon and the Handmaiden ~

by Lucien St Clare

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Part 3

Then the Dominion looted the camp and disappeared. As in they simply packed up their army and marched away back to whence they came. We have heard rumours that there is another civil war or some sort of battle for succession in the Dominion lands and that is why they returned

back to their homelands.

Others say Spargapises killed their leader so they must return to their homeland to elect another. Either way the Dominion did not press on their victory and invade Sarmatia.

Well after the battle Olayrae informed Maecenes that Ninyas was on his way to Ado go give his version of the news there. Olayrae could not leave as she was tending Spargapises so instead Maecenes, bone tired and filled with fury took horse, and then boat to race Ninyas to the council chamber.

Ninyas for his part travelled by road and with a two days start managed to reach Ado in 7 days. However fortune had a greater favourite and Maecenes reached Ado in 4 days aided by a perfect sailing wind.

By noon of his arrival that day, the council had been summoned to an emergency meeting whilst Ninyas and his son Almeyedes were trotting up the main road into the city. Maecenes told the council the whole sorry tale.

How foolish pride prevented Ninyas from taking orders from Spargapises, how Spargapises had against all odds managed to kill the Dominion leader and how they had to return to their lands to elect another leader which was why they were not now attacking Sarmatia.

How thirty thousand men and women of Sarmatia and the Massagetae lay slain on the field of battle, twenty thousand of whom belonged to the land owning class as they were recruited by Ninyas. How the Princess Pasiphae lost her life covering their retreat.

Her body was being returned by the Massagetae to be burned on a funeral pyre and to be given as state burial as befitted a royal princess who gave her life for her country.

How Ninyas stubbornness divided the army and finishing with his utter cowardice and flight in the face of the advancing Dominion horde.

Many of the viziers wept openly. Two hundred lieutenants who fought at Masene only twenty four lived. Many were sons of viziers, aristocrats, high ranking Sarmatian nobles. Not one noble family in Sarmatia from the Royal family to the lowest ranking aristocrat has not lost at least one or two family members in the disaster at Masene. The losses in the Land Owning Classes were huge. It will mean a disastrous harvest and the Grand Vizier of the Granaries is not sure that we will not have a food shortage this year because so many Landed citizen farmers have been slaughtered.

The chamber flinched as Maecenes damning words echoed around its hallowed walls. I quote from his speech which was pasted in all the law courts and bazaars throughout the country.

"All of you here must take the blame. I, one of your youngest and least experienced members of this house was sent with Princess Olayrae, a priestess, not even a vizier, who even now tries to save the lives of the survivors to persuade two generals who couldn't agree on the colour of shit

to work together!"

It is plain to me that we must now have one commander-in-chief and that person must lead us otherwise when the Dominion return they will destroy us and do not doubt that they will return for they have tasted our blood and found us wanting."

Well Tiirmirise, we all knew who that commander-in-chief was and it wasn't Spargapises and it most certainly wasn't Ninyas.

Bierae got up and said your name with relish. "Tiirmirise!!!"

"You want that barbaric and crude Massagetae female to rule over us? Are you suggesting Princess Bierae, that the jumped up get of a horse trader be made commander-in-chief of the host of Sarmatia?" Magba Massinassa got up and manoeuvred his huge bulk off the Prime Vizier's seat.

"It is one thing to sit on the back benches and make pretty speeches it is quite another to rule. What you need Princess Bierae is a husband and a good shafting." The disgusting man waved a short stubby finger at her rudely.

He made a rude gesture with his fingers and your princess Bierae, that lovely calm elegant woman, that epitome of Sarmatian womanhood exploded with what can only be described as unladylike rage.

"Do you know what Ninyas has done? He has landed us in the shit! Deep in the shit!! Need I remind you that Sarmatia is open to attack right now. Her legs spread like a woman waiting to be raped.

If you idiots have your way we will all be raped by the fucking Dominion in every sense of the word. They especially derive pleasure in emasculating men in such a fashion. Think before you fall into the same trap as Prince Ninyas, allowing foolish pride to rule your actions. Actions which cannot be taken back. So what if Tiirmirise is a bloody woman? At least she will keep us alive."

Well the council was shocked into silence. Someone moved a motion that the country should all go into official mourning and wear black and everyone should contribute towards the war effort to beat the Dominion.

Scaures called an end to the session and the next day Osamaye moved a vote that you should return from Numer to fight the Dominion. Which was granted the only other business was to decide who was to be governor.

The vizier Cephanes asked not to be considered because he felt that he had financial commitments and he would probably rob the Numerians blind so he asked a more well off governor be sent there so the people be allowed to recover from the war. The chamber was amused but agreeable.

I have finally seen Nitocris, she is beautiful. Margravine is divorcing Xango, Bierae is trying to convince her not to because of the scandal. I now have charge of both Derastes and Nitocris in the palace. I enjoy their company. I do not think you would recognise me these days I sometimes feel like Olayrae was being economical with the truth when she said I would be carrying a daughter for I feel more like I am carrying twins.

I miss you my love and I hope you will be careful.

Your loving wife

Saronne.

Tiirmirise read and re-read the last three lines of the letter again and again and her heart swelled. She had cried for Pasiphae when she first read the letter so had missed those three vital lines. However when as now she was in the cold or the rain or simply down because things were not going her way she read and re-read those three short lines.

Chapter 11

Return of the Falcon

In Numer Jurugun was executed by his own people before he could be taken prisoner. So Tomyris gathered up her army and returned to a heroes welcome in Ado.

There were vague dissatisfied rumblings in the Council of Viziers however. Ninyas had come into a lot of money and had put on the Chariot games from his own purse. Everywhere they turned it seemed the infernal man had bribed one ally or the other.

Suddenly everywhere in the city Ninyas began projects. He set himself the task of completing the Race course began by Qastursh and abandoned by that King when he ran out of funds and then started on an ambitious project of bridge building, road building and aqueduct building in an effort to buy away the stain of Masene.

In the meantime Tomyris decided the problem with the Dominion was that they simply did not have enough intelligence about them to defeat them. She needed to know how their society functioned, how their warriors fought and what was their greatest weakness.

She was loathed to let Candace go, firstly because she was a woman and from what they knew so far of the Dominion they had a patriarchal society. Further Candace was a Massagetae with Ebony skin and would instantly arouse suspicion if she went amongst them. The only way she could do that was as a slave and she knew from experience that when talk was confidential the first people to be banished were slaves.

Secondly and more importantly she needed Candace in Sarmatia. Candace for all intents and

purposes was her Chief of Intelligence. It was imperative her intelligence gathering skills were utilised efficiently to find out what Ninyas was up to and also to co-ordinate the rapidly escalating threat that was Cyrus of Persia.

In the end she had entrusted the mission to Osanes one of the lieutenants who fought beside her during her campaign against the Numerians. Candace had pointed out that he would be perfect for the job.

He was from the Gaetulae, a northern tribe related to the Hellenes and who also claimed descent from the Nordic barbarians from the frozen North. They closely resembled the black haired swarthy skinned Dominion though more often than not they were on average a taller tribe. Tiirmirise did not think that would be a problem and had dispatched him to go and spy on the Dominion for the past two years.

He kept her informed regularly and he had risen high enough up in their ranks to become a warrior of some standing. At which point Tiirmirise had asked him if he had killed any Sarmatians in his rise to power to which he had replied that she was better off not knowing. She was expecting them to return soon with a briefing and she would then know how best to approach the Dominion.

Saronne lay on the bed fast asleep with little Chryseis on her bosom. She was indeed a golden one. Her hair was like that of summer wheat, a darker shade of her mother's. Her skin like caramel, neither Tiirmirise's ebony nor Saronne's pale ivory.

Her eyes were neither blue nor black but green with flecks of yellow and as predicted she sported a pure white birth mark in the shape of a tear drop on the back of her right ankle just as Olayrae said and she was perfect.

Tiirmirise stopped to stare at both of them for the moment just drinking in the sight of them.

The moment of calm however was shattered by two screaming children running into the bed chamber. One was Nitocris toddling into the bedroom as fast as her little legs could carry her and she was followed closely behind her by her cousin Derastes.

They both woke up Saronne who gave them a welcoming smile and they clambered unto the bed to join her. They smothered her in hugs and kisses unaware Tiirmirise was watching.

When Saronne caught her gaze she smiled "How long have you been there?"

"Long enough." The Queen said ominously

"Derastes immediately did a bow before his grandmother and Nitocris who worshiped her cousin Derastes did the same."

Tiirmirise returned their bow with a formal one of her own and then held her arms wide open for them to run into which they did with childish glee.

Despite all the formality concerning royalty at the Palace Tiirmirise in private was a warm and loving parent. Saronne had expressed surprise but the newly married Bierae told her it was because of the way she was with the children of the harem that she had developed a good relationship with all of Qastursh's children.

The Queen carrying Nitocris came over and pressed a gentle kiss on the head of the sleeping Chryseis before giving Saronne a lingering kiss on the lips.

"Yeugh when I grow up I am never gonna kiss girls."

"Me either!" Nitocris copied her beloved cousin and folded her little arms across her chest.

Much to the amusements of the two adults. It was afternoon and the meal was served in a private dining room.

There was a green pea and smoked pork soup for starter, Tender slices of lamb marinated in rosemary and ginger, a salad, Bread, ziziphus, faba beans and for desert a spread of grapes, figs, dates pomegranates and plums. The children drank a fruit sweetened yoghurt drink, The Queen and Saronne drank wine mixed with a little water.

The meal was light hearted and fun. Bierae had recently gotten married to a Grand Vizier, a member of the High Council and was on honeymoon, Pradae was happily married to the Emperor of Sirahn's son, Tiirmirise did not have the heart to accede to Eugertes's request to marry Pradae and had preferred to sanction a marriage with Eugertes's' son Arugertes instead. Minae and Areisteion came to visit from time to time with their children.

She enjoyed the peace although it rankled that Ninyas had so much influence and money. It made her position precarious.

"A penny for your thoughts?" Saronne asked kissing Nitocris on the head and ruffling Derastes hair.

It was nice to see the Tiirmirise relaxed and not constantly in battle armour.

"I was just wondering where Ninyas got so much money from."

"Everyone loathes him for it but he has so corrupted the higher echelons of Sarmatian society that no one wants to point fingers because he is so powerful now."

"Aye and extremely stingy. He only spends money if he thinks it will get him something."

"Candace told me that she suspected he took the long buried gold of the Simian. The gold meant for the treasury as booty he apparently appropriated it for himself."

She said she thought he suspected that he killed the 100 Sarmatian soldiers sent to guard it and paid some bandits money to stash it away somewhere for him. I expect that is not news to you

though is it."

Tiirmirise nodded "No it is not but I fear Candace may be right. Everyone knows but no one has been able to prove it or find the gold. Certainly I asked Candace to do some discreet enquiries but she was unsuccessful."

"Tiirmirise Candace also told me to tell you that Osanes was back and that he would like a brief meeting with you sometime tomorrow morning."

The children apparently bored with their conversation began to misbehave and Tiirmirise carried both of them and dumped them in the pool and then climbed in after them. Saronne and Chryseis joined her as they frolicked in the pool till their teachers came to take them for lessons.

Saronne and Tiirmirise played with little Chryseis till having eaten and eased herself she fell asleep. The two parents retired for the afternoon.

Although Tiirmirise was co-regent, Ninyas had undertaken to shoulder most of the responsibilities for the building work so he could claim most of the glory. The result was that she had more free time on her hands. Time which she enjoyed spending with Saronne.

Although they were supposed to be attending a musical recital together in the afternoon. Tiirmirise had firmly and politely declined by informing them by messenger that Saronne was ill and unable to attend and since it was a formal dinner it went against protocol for her to attend without her betrothed.

She didn't inform Saronne of the change of plan however she just never got round to it. So when Saronne retired to her dressing room Tiirmirise simply followed her in.

Saronne gasped when the door of her dressing room swung open and then sighed in relief when she saw Tiirmirise at the door.

"Aren't you going to get ready for tonight's recital?"

Tiirmirise didn't answer as she came into the room and slid her arms around Saronne's waist and lowered her head for a kiss.

"Oh dear heaven don't kiss me," Saronne placed her hand on Tiirmirise's chest pleadingly "Once we start we can never stop." She breathed. Tiirmirise whole heartedly agreed even as she lowered her head to kiss her lover.

"I thought we have a recital to attend." Saronne said breathlessly moaning as Tiirmirise's lips dropped butterfly kissed down her throat till they reached her cleavage.

"I am Queen. I don't have to do anything." Tiirmirise said arrogantly wrapping her arms around Saronne's waist, still slightly thickened from pregnancy and suckling on her nipple through her

silks. " I have sent our apologies and my sole intention from here on in is to lure you to my bed by any expedient device."

Saronne chuckled and her laughter was infectious "I consider myself successfully lured.

Osanes finally returned from his sojourn with the Dominion. Tiirmirise demanded he attend her chambers immediately. He started with the military situation because he knew its importance to Tiirmirise. She was a firm believer in the old adage know thine enemy, so that as well as spying on the enemy Osanes had also explored the area the Dominion intended to launch their attack and drawn maps. Osanes was an excellent cartographer it was one of the reasons Candace had recommended him for the mission.

He was just settling down when he spied Saronne. He had not seen her since the year they spent in Numer and she looked even more beautiful than he remembered, softer and more content.

"Married life agrees with you Lady."

"Thank-you Osanes." She marvelled that Osanes who once hated her treated her not just as a friend but as a Massagetae noble with all the respect that rank commanded.

She was about to offer him the Massagetae greeting when she saw the silver skulls he wore around his neck and recoiled.

"Take those wretched things off." She shivered and Osanes grinned.

"Barbaric isn't it. Its my good luck charm." Osanes sat down and sighed. He did not realise how much he missed the comforts of Sarmatia. His eyes widened when Saronne personally served him and he felt emotional eating Sarmatian food he had not eaten for almost two years.

A spicy bowl of lentils, a salad of fresh vegetables, olives, sheep cheese, More cooked vegetables, grilled fish, roast lamb seasoned with herbs and root vegetables delicately cut into thick yet juicy mouth sized bites, snails in pepper sauce, (he laughed as he remembered Seunion), crabs, shrimp, fish and a sweet milk and egg desert followed by fresh fruit all washed down with a mixture of wine and water.

"Oh how good it is to be continent again." He sighed

Saronne settled into Tiirmirise's arms and nothing was said until he had eaten his fill. And then he began to give his report.

"...the Dominion do everything to excess." He was saying, "Eat and drink till they spew all over each other or starve-half to death because they went out raiding and forgot to pack lunch. They are brave, fierce, tough and quite well organised all things considered."

"Here have some more wine." Tiirmirise smiled wryly. Osanes was a product of her own way of military thinking. She did not remind the younger man that discipline in the army was a fairly new thing for Sarmatians.

When as a child of 17 she had started training Sarmatian armies in the style of the Massagetae and using the information gleaned from studying Military Treatise like the Art of War by the oriental prince Sun Tzu, she had to fight every step of the way to get the changes instituted.

"Oh wine I have missed you so." Osanes took another sip from his goblet of wine and continued speaking. "The Dominion are great ale drinkers. I don't care if I never see another horn of ale or tankard of Mead again. When you drink ale you become a walking cistern always looking for the next piss."

"What is the difference between a horn and a tankard?" asked Tiirmirise curiously

"Excuse me your majesty, I forgot my manners." Osanes apologised. "A horn is the horn of an animal which unlike a goblet or a tankard cannot be put down. Once you have poured yourself a horn you must down it immediately. A tankard is a very large cup often made with wood sometimes from a sheet of steel.

It carries several goblets of ale and can be rested down on a table between meals. Mead is another favourite of the Dominion Soldiers made from a brew similar to Gyptian beer and sweetened with honey. Ale is darker and looks like honey, it has no bubbles, a flat beer often served with pork scratchings, the crackling off a pig and an acquired taste." Osanes grimaced he still remembered the taste.

He continued his report however. "It is rumoured that the Dominion are descended from the Lands of the Hellenes or the frozen North. Certainly they do not regard themselves as a single race and they do indeed speak several dialects although to me it sounds like variations of the same language. They live off the land they are cattle herders."

They are beef eaters, despising fish. They often eat a black hard bread and a porridge of oats. They are not overly fond of vegetables or fruit. Their lands suffered greatly from floods and they are looking for an area in which to migrate and settle preferably somewhere that will not offer them much in the way of resistance. They covet our wealth and envy our lifestyle. They will not stop till they destroy us.

Moreover their society is based on war. It has no place for the infirm and the weak. Every warrior who dies in war leaves orphans and a widow. In such a patriarchal society as theirs, such women become a liability unless they have male children who are old enough to quickly become warriors so the widows have to scramble to find husbands amongst the warriors not old enough or enterprising enough to have women already.

If a woman finds a husband she is allowed to continue. If not herself and her children are killed and their wagon is given as booty to a successful warrior. They kill any who are too old to contribute to society and also excess girl children."

Saronne gasped "And I thought you Massagetae were barbaric."

"Oh the Massagetae are barbaric. It is us Gaetulae that civilised them." Osanes teased Tiirmirise who accepted it with good grace and an amused smile. "And off course you are ably continuing that work Saronne although it is a difficult job."

"I do not think the Massagetae are so difficult to tame." Saronne teased Tiirmirise and caressing her jaw and the Queen turned her head to place a kiss on her open palm.

"Please Osanes continue with your story." Saronne said with a breathless smile.

"Well It was this that gave us an opening into their society. I found a woman and climbed into her wagon. Naturally I fight quite well and soon was able to make myself a part of the tribe.

Their current leader is a man called Marcellus Cornelius. He is a 7ft Giant. He is possibly the tallest man I have ever seen and built like a shit house. Err sorry for the language." Osanes looked sheepishly at Saronne.

"Apology accepted."

"He is educated and can read and write. He has at his disposal I believe a force that numbers almost 800,000 men. He has divided them into three. One group under Marius Lepidus numbers about 300,000. They I believe will be in Sarmatia in about six months.

Another led by Sextus Livianus consisting of about 250,000 and finally a third group led by one Gaius Formica also consisting of 250,000. They know we have a standing army of 50,000 and if they attack from different directions at the same time we will never be able to defeat them all."

Tiirmirise cursed. At the time she recruited she had thought 100,000 soldiers would be enough to see off any threat from the Dominion. However Ninyas infernal meddling, scheming and plotting meant the council only approved 50,000 soldiers.

They were hopelessly outnumbered. She could train 50,000 men in six months but by the time they sorted out all the bureaucracy and the political bickering that was likely to be involved it could take even longer than that.

"Excuse me We wish to consult something in my study We will be right back." She got up and went to one of the adjoining rooms to the chamber.

"Did you have any children with your Dominion wife?" Saronne asked quietly

"Yes actually I had two twin boys."

"Did you leave them to be killed when you left since there would be no warrior to care for them?"

"Actually I brought them back here. I was hoping to marry Hermione and that the Queen would bestow citizenship on them so they can become true Sarmatians. Would you speak to Tiirmirise for me?"

"Why do you not ask her yourself?"

"Because Saronne I have seen the changes you have wrought in the Queen. I believe you are the best person to broach this delicate matter with her. As a Massagetae she might wonder whether I had gone soft in the head. However coming from you, well it would seem a reasonable request."

"I am glad you didn't leave them behind to die, Osanes."

Tiirmirise was saying as she entered the room. "Yes We received a correspondence today from Bierae We wanted to read in the light of your news."

Tiirmirise returned and only heard Osanes say "So am I although I couldn't afford the time. I had to reach you before you returned to Ado to answer the summons of the High Council.

He turned to Tiirmirise and said "Apparently Ninyas is feeling vulnerable because you have an army of 50,000 at your beck and call and he has only a council of old men and women. He will urge the grand council to take your command."

Tiirmirise gave Saronne, Bierae and Candace's letters to read out. They confirmed that Ninyas had indeed concluded another diabolical scheme. Bierae's report stated that Ninyas had managed to convince the High Council of Viziers that the Dominion would not invade at all and that Tiirmirise was simply using this opportunity to grab power for herself. Vayanes , the wily old fox now held a substantial minority in the council. If he voted with Ninyas, they would carry the day.

But if he voted with Tiirmirise's faction Tiirmirise would win the vote. However as more and more people start to perceive him as a power broker his political influence would increase and he would soon become a major force to be reckoned with and a possible threat to the throne which needed to be eliminated unless of course Tiirmirise could secure the throne.

The next day Osanes saw Saronne, this time with a formal petition. He worried for his Dominion wife and he introduced her and his children to Saronne knowing full well Saronne had a compassionate nature and hoping the sight of the two beautiful little boys would move her.

Osanes came from the Trigantae tribe and they looked more like the Parthians or the Beri Beri. Their hair was usually black, though and they were fairly pale skinned.

Certainly she could see why Tiirmirise chose him for the mission he would easily fit in as a Dominion citizen. Well except for his height. He was tall like all Sarmatians and at least 6 foot tall.

Their children were beautiful and very well behaved. Certainly nothing like her unruly brood. Hermione looked more like someone from the land of the Angles. The Dominion women she had

seen in the slave markets were tall, large strapping women with flaxen or red hair yet gracefully built.

Hermione was a good deal shorter than even Osanes. Her hair like Saronne's was extremely thick but where Saronne kept hers at a manageable length, halfway down her back, Hermione's fell past her waist and was thin brown and straight. Her eyes more grey than blue. Otherwise she looked very much like a Dominion woman.

The bones of her skull were well defined, her nose was a short straight blade, fine and thin and she had a wide mouth which was virtually lipless. She eyed Saronne suspiciously and the younger woman put her at ease with a gracious smile.

"This is Queen Tiirmirise's betrothed, she has promised to speak to the Queen on our behalf."

Saronne spoke haltingly in her own language curious to see if her theory was correct.

"I am Aeslynn, Votigernsdottir, I am pleased to offer you welcome."

"Princess Aeslynn it is well that we find you. Your brother Leif Redbeard has journeyed widely throughout our lands searching for you. Your father has offered a great reward for your return."

Osanes whirled round aghast "You are Votigern's daughter does Tiirmirise know?"

Saronne nodded. "Yes she knows I am his daughter but she does not know who Votigern is or if she does she pretends he is of no importance." Saronne said Wryly.

"My lady," Osanes said excitedly, "The Dominion have asked King Votigern to give them land to settle. His people are few and his lands are wide and plentiful. If Votigern agrees we may yet avoid a war with the Dominion."

"You will have to discuss this with Tiirmirise."

"Besides my people will only return to Votigern's lands if they cannot take Sarmatia. I am afraid there will have to be war before there is peace. Unless you can persuade King Votigern to make an offer before it comes to war."

"Tiirmirise would never let me go." Aeslynn said sadly

"You have to try." Osanes said desperately "It would be suicidal to war with both the Dominion and the Persians at the same time.

"The Persians?"

"Haven't you heard? Candace says that Cyrus imperialistic policies are looking increasingly ominous for us."

Saronne shook her head "Well I can't do anything about that. But what did you come to see me

about?"

Osanes motioned for Hermione and the children to leave. He did not want her to get her hopes up only to be refused.

"As you can see Hermione is not a young woman. When I first met her she was barren. Her first husband an autocratic Thane refused to cast her off. She is not beautiful, but she is all that I have ever required in a woman."

Osanes spoke so passionately about Hermione that Saronne began to wonder if the once bloodthirsty general had not fallen in love. She listened patiently as he earnestly continued pleading his case.

"I chose her because although she had no children she reminded me of one who was nobly borne. Aloof, yet powerfully sexy much like you Saronne, although she is not as beautiful as you."

"You don't need to compliment me you rogue." Saronne smiled. She could not quite believe that this same young man who had wanted to kill her, who looked down on her was now paying her compliments and asking for a favour. If she was a vindictive person which she was not, she could well imagine how she would have enjoyed the situation.

Osanes eyebrows knotted. He was a very earnest young man. "I only speak the truth my lady. I offered many heads of cattle, much gold and even a plot of our ancestral land for you after I first saw you in Numer and I was not the only one. The Queen refused of course and threatened to kill me."

"But you all wanted to kill me and..."

"Nothing more than a ruse. The entire high command had a major crush on you especially Makeda and Osumares. "

"Makeda, I can understand, she was ever kind to me but Osumares? But he just used to spend the whole time glaring at me." Saronne finished incredulously.

Osanes laughed and Saronne shook her head. " We digress please continue with your story.

"As I was saying Hermione and I, we got on quite well, very well. She is intelligent sensible, passionate, articulate, hardworking.."

Saronne hid her smile as he continued praising Hermione. Osanes was indeed smitten by the Dominion woman.

"...she bathed twice a day, kept her wagon and utensils clean, she is everything my wife is not except Tigrantae."

Saronne's eyes widened. "You are married Osanes?"

"Yes I was married at fifteen an arranged marriage for political reasons. She turned out to be a drunken abusive woman whom I have never touched. She prefers her slaves."

"Female slaves?" Saronne queried hesitantly.

"If she preferred her female slaves I would be happy for then I could have spoken to her father and arranged an annulment so she could contract a marriage with another woman. No she prefers her male slaves and has whelped several bastards none of whom will ever bear my name." Osanes said bitterly.

"I am sorry to hear that." Saronne sympathised.

Osanes shrugged. "Well I originally chose Hermione because like me she was an outsider. I noticed her because like I said earlier she had no children. If her husband had not been a powerful noble the women in the Dominion army would not have tolerated her presence especially as she was a half breed.

She is half Dominion half Angle. Her husband's body was barely cold in the ground when the women were already making arrangements to club her to death and cast lots for her wagon which she kept in excellent condition and was thus the envy of every warrior there.

I chose her because in my estimation she needed me more than any Dominion woman there and after the treatment of the other Dominion women towards her I thought she would be less likely to betray me if she knew I was a spy.

So when she got pregnant and gave birth to twin boys not only was she vindicated but my position was elevated. Twins are rare amongst the Dominion. They have an obscure prophecy about twins.

Once Candace summoned me back to Sarmatia I knew I could not leave her behind nor could I take her to my people. I am Trigantae and my people would never let me marry a slave, at least not unless she was a Sarmatian citizen. It is the reason I have used to avoid giving any of my wife's whelps my name."

"Is that why you believe Tiirmirise might not grant Hermione citizenship?"

"Yes. Tiirmirise believes in the sanctity of marriage. Whether it is between a man and a woman, two women or two men. I mean look at Spargapises, he has many concubines but only one wife. Qastursh was allowed more than one wife because he needed a male heir.

My wife is Sarmatian and a Samartian takes their citizenship from their mother unless of course he is the King. Hermione must have citizenship otherwise my children will be treated as little other than slaves."

"I will speak to Tiirmirise and let you know what she decides. Osanes."

When Tiirmirise returned she was in a bad mood. Candace had just been debriefing her on the situation in the Persian court. Cyrus was planning on sending a deputation for her hand in marriage.

Naturally she would refuse but she had wanted a bit longer to convince Saronne that a marriage between them would be a good idea. If she did not marry Saronne before the deputation arrived Ninyas would pressure the Council of Viziers.

They would attempt to pressure her into a marriage she did not want and she would either lose Saronne and her crown because she refused to marry anyone else but her betrothed.

She had lost a lot of ground in the Chamber it was Ninyas arena and she dared not risk a confrontation with him in the Chamber of Viziers. She had already brought the issue up with Nnandi whose advice was that she should simply announce their wedding before hand and then deal with Saronne's indignation and anger later. However such high-handed action did not sit well with the Queen.

Tiirmirise was strangely quiet over dinner and Saronne recognising her mood did not bring it up until after dinner.

"Why don't you come here and let me rub your shoulders? You look tense."

"You don't have to do it I can always get one of the slaves to do it for me." Tiirmirise said curtly.

"I want to do it." Saronne said softly.

The Queen exhaled and wandered over wearily. In truth she had missed Saronne's hands on her but had not wanted to burden her with sexual demands especially with the birth of Chryseis so she had engaged a couple bathers.

Now she sat between Saronne's creamy white thighs, tension apparent in every muscle in her body. Saronne reached out for some Eucalyptus oil. She started stroking and kneading Tiirmirise's shoulders then her neck and back till she was rewarded with what sounded like a soft purring noise.

"Osanes was here today." Saronne began matter of factly.

"Indeed and what did he want?"

"He wanted me to meet Hermione the mother of his children." Saronne explained the situation to Tiirmirise.

"I would categorically deny such a request."

"Why?"

"Well first I have to grant a divorce, a divorce which Ninyas has to agree to then I would have to persuade the censors to enrol Hermione's name on the list of citizens again with the co-operation of Ninyas and that is as likely as the sun rising in the west and setting in the east besides as Queen of Sarmatia. Apart from anything else the Chief Censor Scholastes is a Grand Vizier and Osanes' father-in-law.

There is absolutely no way he is going to lie down and allow his daughter to be divorced. Ninyas will simply use the situation as another weapon against me and who knows where that will lead. Finally as Queen of Sarmatia, I must protect the sanctity of marriage." Tiirmirise said piously.

Saronne was extremely irritated "And having sex in with your bathers is that protecting the sanctity of marriage?"

Tiirmirise got up and turned around. "I have sex with my bathers because I do not think it wise to overly burden you with my sexual needs. You insist on breast feeding and caring for Chryseis personally and you are therefore constantly tired."

"Because I love her, did you not care for Spargapises personally?"

"No! he had nurses. Besides I am Queen I can have as many lovers as I wish."

"So can I have as many lovers as I wish? Can I sleep with my bathers?"

Tiirmirise's eyes narrowed and she got up to glare at Saronne "Do you sleep with your bathers?"

"No, but If I wanted to wouldn't you be upset if I did?"

"I would be absolutely furious." Tiirmirise said without hesitation.

"So what makes you think I am not angry." Saronne placed her hands on her hips.

"Saronne the fact that you have not already points to one thing. You only have sex with people you care for. If you did not you would have had several sexual partners by now.

So if you were to have sex play with another it would mean you cared for them. I am not prepared to tolerate that." Tiirmirise continued arrogantly "I on the other hand can separate love from sex. So whilst I may fuck my bathers, I make love to you."

"I can't even get angry with you because you have absolutely no idea that what you are doing is wrong!"

"How is it wrong?" Tiirmirise asked genuinely confused.

Saronne closed her eyes and counted to ten. "Tiirmirise, I never want to share you with another woman or man (for that matter) again otherwise I will not marry you."

The Queen froze. She could hear the sound of her heart pounded in her head. It was fear. She was afraid. "If that is your wish?" Tiirmirise said quietly.

"Yes that is my wish!" Saronne stamped her foot angrily.

"Whilst we are on the subject of marriage I would like to have it arranged within the next three months." Tiirmirise said silkily.

"Fine!"

Tiirmirise relaxed now that she knew Saronne was going through with the wedding and allowed a smile to play on her lips.

"Would my Afereni require anything else?"

"I am still angry with you Tiirmirise." Saronne glared back at her.

"What can I do to make it right?"

"You can start with sending away your bathers, Osanes request for Hermione's citizenship, and I will think of other things."

"Shall we kiss and make up now?" Tiirmirise was perfectly ready accede to any request Saronne made so long as they got married and soon. By the time the Persian delegation arrived Saronne would be her wife and Queen.

Saronne was suspicious this had been easy way too easy. She didn't fight as Tiirmirise gathered her up in her arms and surrendered herself to their gentle lovemaking.

As Tiirmirise predicted the granting of Hermione's citizenship rights became a political issue but not in the way anyone could have foreseen.

Osanes father, Shaluga was a consummate politician and elder statesman who had managed to maintain good relations with Magba Massinassa, Ninyas and Vayanes as well as the Queen.

So that there was no debate in the Chamber of Viziers about the granting of citizenship papers to Hermione and her sons since they were duly signed by Ninyas and Tiirmirise.

Theoretically therefore there should have been no opposition to registering her papers. The censors, who enrolled the name of every Sarmatian on the citizenship lists all agreed except for one. The Chief Censor who was also Osanes father-in-law. He stood with his iron grey hair and his face was a picture of abject defiance.

"I will not enrol your whore as a citizen!"

"But I have papers from both the Co-Regents of Sarmatia. Lord Ninyas and Queen Tiirmirise, signed and sealed as ordered by the Council of Viziers."

"I don't care how many bits of paper you produce and I don't care who you bring forward to nominate her, you vulgar adulterous little toad, may the fleas of a thousand camels infest your arsehole before I enrol that Dominion slut as a citizen!"

Osanes tried to reason with him "But Lord Ninyas and Queen Tiirmirise..."

The Chief's censor's cultured aristocratic tones echoed in resoundingly in the Bazaar.

"Didn't you hear me you spawn of a jackal. As censor I have the ultimate word here. The law says so. I can refuse them all. I piss on Tiirmirise, I piss on Ninyas and I Piss! Piss! Piss! on the High Council of Viziers and as for you, you can just Fuck right off if you think I am going to stand by and let you disgrace my daughter." He spat.

His face red with anger veins bursting from his neck the old man threw a right fist which connected with Osanes jaw flooring the younger man.

"I piss on the lot of you now get that slut and her little bastards out of here!" He spat.

In an example of unity and utter ruthlessness that no one had ever seen before nor likely ever expected to see again Tiirmirise and Ninyas ordered the palace guard to relieve him of his appointment and beat the living daylights out of the old man and.

It was a light punishment under Sarmatian law since Ninyas had in fact insisted on bringing the full weight of the law down on his reckless head and having him executed and it was only Vayanes and Tiirmirise's intervention that saved his life. The junior censors immediately enrolled Hermione and her sons as citizens.

It cause a lot of furore in the Council of Viziers and also in the High Council. The Chief Censor had indeed been right, Scholastes was the only one by law allowed to register their names on the roll of citizens.

However by insulting the two regents and the Council of Viziers so publicly he had sealed his fate. The viziers would have let it go but neither of the regents could have tolerated such a challenge to their rule.

Scholastes the Chief Censor was now relegated to the political wilderness of the backbenches and was in no position to protest to the quiet divorce of his daughter from Shaluga's son Osanes. As he smouldered on the back benches he plotted to get his own back on Shaluga.

In council the viziers desperate to keep a lid on the animosity between the Queen, Spargapises and Ninyas decided to divide power once more. This was once more due to political manoeuvring.

Spargapises was given command of 50,000 to go and deal with the largest Dominion army that had been sighted. The army consisting of 300,000 men led by Marcellus Cornelius and Marius Lepidus. Tiirmirise had ensured that Makeda was to go with him as his senior legate.

Tiirmirise would be given the job of training and recruiting another army of 50,000 within six months. Candace had managed to buy them the time. The Trigantae and the Urhobae tribes working together had managed to slow down the advance of the other armies led by Gaius Formica and Sextus Livianus.

Tiirmirise's strategy was to prevent the three armies from converging at once. If she could fight three battles then they stood a chance. A hundred thousand strong army fighting three separate battles whilst outnumbered 3-1 gave them better odds than allowing Marcellus Cornelius army to congregate as a solid mass of eight hundred thousand fighting one battle against their much smaller army of one hundred thousand.

She called Makeda to her chambers and after explaining her battle plans made her instructions clear in no uncertain words.

"Your job is to save the army of 50,000 at all costs. Under no circumstances are you to engage enemy unless you absolutely have to."

"Even at the cost of the Crown Prince?"

"You do what you have to do even at the cost of my son."

Chapter 12

The Jewel of the Araxes

Tiirmirise reclined on her couch with Chryseis curled up fast asleep on her chest. She wore her black silken draw string trousers and a long vest tunic belted at the waist with her dress sword hanging on her right.

Saronne was being fitted for her wedding gown which would consist of sheer tulle lace, satin silks and chiffon. She had regained her figure and was watching Tiirmirise's lusty glittering eyes as they fairly caressed her from across the room. Although they discussed politics the atmosphere in the room was replete with sexual tension.

"I think that if I negotiate with King Votigern he would be more than willing to allow the Dominion to settle and we could avert this war."

"I disagree. We have to beat the Dominion into submission before they will agree to settle on Votigern's lands. Besides Lady you need to be here for your wedding. Travelling to the land of the Angles now would delay it and I am disinclined to accept that." In this Tiirmirise remained uncompromising.

Ever since the Princess Olayrae, and the other seven High Priestesses had formerly announced their betrothal before the Grand Council of Grand Viziers, Saronne's status had changed.

She had been bestowed with her own coat of arms which depicted a silver falcon perching on a hand and all on a sky blue back ground. She was also given an official honour Massagetae honour guard with its Sarmatian equivalent. She had not just a room but her own apartments and her own household and income from the civil lists.

After the wedding and the coronation she could take her place in the chamber if she wished as a vizier.

Once decided on the wedding Tiirmirise had moved with breath taking speed. Tiirmirise was actually extremely easy to handle. Feed her water her and pet her and she purred.

There were few things which annoyed Tiirmirise recently, one of them was any talk of Saronne going to negotiate with Votigern or any delay to their wedding. The other was Ninyas and his infernal scheming.

"In my country a groom is not allowed to see his wife in her wedding dress before they get married."

"I am not going to be a groom Afereni. Secondly you have already had my child. If you think I am going to let you out of my sight for even a moment you are mistaken. I believe the Massagetae custom that requires I spend a night in armour in an overnight vigil in the temple before we wed is sufficient proof of my commitment to you."

"And I what am I supposed to be doing?"

"Well ordinarily you would be getting your piercings but since you already have those I guess you would be getting your beauty sleep and you will need it for I intend to wear you out."

The royal wedding was attended by all their allies. The Simian, King and his wife Queen Minae, The Gyptian Kings and their wife Queen Nefer and of course emperor Eugertes's Gross belly and his son with him the Crown princess Pradae and the King Votigern from the land of the Angles.

It was a lovely day too. The sun shone in the blue sky and the crowds lined the streets the air was full with the petals of lilies and roses imported from far flung lands. As well as arranging a banquet for the country's population held in the various civic centres for the citizens at Ninyas expense, another show of one upmanship that infuriated the Queen, there was also games, plays and theatres on a large scale.

The Race Course was not yet finished but Ninyas in an effort to impress threw chariot games anyway, held in honour of the Co-Regent's wedding. Tiirmirise had been extremely apprehensive when she met her father-in-law. He it was who would be giving Saronne away.

The meeting had not gone well. Votigern would have returned with his daughter had not his minister of protocol advised him against it. This made Tiirmirise extremely wary and exceedingly possessive though neither ruler let Saronne know something was wrong.

The wedding went well. Tiirmirise said her vows loud and clear in a ringing voice. Saronne's was spoken haltingly. When Tiirmirise smiled at her and held her hand she took courage from her warm hand and it was as though something wonderful flooded her being.

On the balcony of the Palace of light the newly married co-regent presented her queen to the nation and kissed her lustily to the roar of the appreciative crowd.

By the time the Dominion descended down from the mountains Tiirmirise had an army of 50,000. However she knew the area well and she also had Simian, Gyptian and Sirahn allies to help her out. Minae sent her news of the allied position as well as her love and a portrait of her son Tiirmyseion.

When she received a missive from Candace to the effect that the Urhobae and Trigantae tribes had effectively slowed down the attack from Gaius Formica. However once they felt they could no longer hold them they would retreat to the mountain fortresses with as many supplies as they could carry and burn everything else so the Dominion would not be able to forage from the land.

Eager to remove the stigma of the loss at Masene, Spargapises did everything by the book. He set up camp, marched in formation ready to attack, Makeda could not really fault him yet Makeda managed to irritate Spargapises exceedingly.

Makeda was the most helpful second in command a general could have. She took on all the boring day to day chores of army administration and supervision that it was almost as though she was always lurking like a stalking Panther. You could always sight her in your periphery vision but always at the corner of your eyes but when you turned to confront her she had disappeared.

Spargapises suspected something was wrong. His mother was extremely devious and especially cunning and she must have had good reason to send Makeda who was for all intents and purposes her second in command when it came to military matters. Makeda for her part wanted to unsettle the prince and so achieve a mental edge over him.

Makeda made it her business to know every military officer and a great deal of the many ranker soldiers too. As they were kept at a distance by the arrogant and snobby Spargapises Makeda became the senior officer that the army respected and trusted.

It was necessary that this be accomplished because Tiirmirise had given her explicit instructions to neutralise Spargapises if it became necessary. This did not mean she was to kill him, Tiirmirise loved her son but she had the Queen's permission to arrest and incarcerate him if necessary.

Marcellus's army arrived first in late June and though She thought she had prepared for every eventuality she had never dreamed of the situation that was now unfolding before her very eyes.

"So long as I live, no Dominion soldier will set foot on Sarmatian soil." Roared Spargapises when the matter was discussed in the command tent. Then arising majestically from his ivory general's chair he pointed upwards dramatically with his left hand and said "We march!!!"

"Eh We march? We march where?" Makeda's words dripped sarcasm.

"Up the river." Spargapises said arrogantly giving Makeda a condescending smile. "I shall turn the Dominion back from the mountains before an early snow makes that impossible.

"So how far up the river are we marching?"

"Until we meet them in a narrow valley like say the valley of Olokun. We will be in a better situation than the Dominion. We are much better organised than them."

Makeda disagreed shaking her head " Our best chance is to fight in an area where we have enough room to deploy our troops."

"There's more than enough room along the river to deploy our troops." And that was that. Spargapises would hear no further arguments.

Makeda was absolutely furious. All the plans she had made to deal with the Dominion were now useless. Nor would the maddening idiot change his mind so up the river they went with Spargapises riding ahead of his officers.

"Don't worry Makeda, it will be just like the Spartans at Thermopylae. This is the ideal place to hold the Dominion and turn them back to their lands." Almeyedes, Ninyas son and heir recently elevated to the position of general said airily.

"The Spartans holding Thermopylae all died." Makeda said flatly.

"So long as we push them back what does it matter. We will be covered with glory and our deeds will ring out through the ages."

"Push them back? They will not turn back. Their provisions are low from the scorched earth policy of our Simian and Gypitian allies and with only the snow to look forward to why turn back when they can have all the wine, supplies and women they can fuck that they need in Ekiti." Makeda shook her head sadly "No we will not stop them here."

The other officers shifted nervously.

"We fight here." Spargapises said confidently

In the command tent where all the other officers were gathered sitting morosely in a circle

Makeda was saying "Well gentlemen Its been a pleasure knowing you all."

"Aye Makeda." One of the lower ranker officers agreed and they all drank a deep toast.

"What's that supposed to mean? Why are you all so negative?" Almeyedes, Ninyas eldest son asked

"Well young prince Almeyedes we are all going to die here."

"Die? Why?" The young man asked in puzzlement.

"We have been led into an impossible military situation by another high born incompetent." General Gnaes one of Vayanes supporters sneered.

Qadar was the father of Qastursh and Ninyas. Spargapises and Almeyedes were cousins so he would not take such a slur on his honour even though Spargapises and his father were mortal enemies.

"No you are quite mistaken. You don't understand Spargapises strategy."

"What strategy is that, pray enlighten us Young Prince." Makeda drawled.

"Well there are 300,000 Dominion troops and only fifty thousand of us so we cannot possibly face them on an open battlefield. The best way to beat them is to squeeze up into a narrow area where they cannot use their greater number of troops against us then go at them hammer and tongs till they retreat." He puffed out his chest proudly.

"Oh is that how you see it asked Petrides one of the Massagetae commanders."

"That's how it is." replied Almeyedes impatiently.

"Is that how it is Makeda?" asked the cavalry commander Gnaes

"That's how it is!" said Makeda laughing as the rest of the command tent burst into hysterical laughter stopping only to wipe tears of laughter from their eyes. Eventually Makeda stopped laughing long enough to point up at the entrance to the command tent.

"Look up there what do you see?"

"Mountains." Said Almeyedes.

"I see footpaths." said Petrides

"Footpaths? I see bridle tracks and cattle tracks" said Gnaes.

"Haven't you noticed all the little trails? All the Dominion have to do is take any one of those

many tracks and they will out flank us. We'll be caught between hammer and anvil." Makeda flat palmed a little spider in her hand.

"They will crush us like this."

She slapped her palm on to her hand splattering the poor spider with a loud clap for dramatic effect and making the young prince jump.

Almeyedes left the command tent to throw up to the sound of male and female officers laughter ringing in his ears.

When next Spargapises called his meeting to discuss tactics, strategy and deployment of troops, Makeda walked in dressed in full battle armour.

"You're late." snapped the young prince.

"I was busy." smiled Makeda baring all her teeth in an almost frightening smile.

"If you have more important things to do then go."

Makeda hopped onto Spargapises desk lazily swinging her foot. It was an incongruous action for the big boned muscular woman. "Oh I am not going anywhere." She drawled in her perfect aristocratic Sarmatian. "I'm here to inform you that we are not fighting the Dominion tomorrow are we ladies and gentlemen."

"Did Ninyas put you up to this? I heard he has been buying support. No matter I'll have your head for this you treacherous traitor!"

"We shall see your highness but when I tell the Council of Viziers that our general is a military imbecile whose only concern is for his own personal glory and not protecting its citizens," Makeda turned around to address the other officers "which is essentially the reason we are here."

"This situation is untenable Makeda."

"Oh I completely agree. In fact our very presence in this location is untenable. Tomorrow the Dominion are going to swarm down all the little footpaths and descend on us like a swarm of locusts.

You are a Sarmatian, a Massagetae the son of one of possibly the greatest military genius of our time not a bloody Hellene. I am surprised your memories of Thermopylae are Greek rather than Sarmatian.

You forget how Queen Tiirmirise used a foot path to out flank Jurugun's troops in the Numerian campaigns so many times it is hardly worth mentioning or perhaps you feel that because she is a woman and your mother she does not serve as an adequate example beyond your foolish pride."

Makeda took a deep breath now she was absolutely incensed and intent on giving the stuck up

Prince the dressing down he needed. " It is your mother Queen Tiirmirise I admire not Leonidas and his royal guard dying to the last man. The Spartans were willing to die because the Ephors had been bribed.

Leonidas needed to expunge the shame of Sparta so they gambled on trying to delay the Persian advance for the Greek fleet to ready itself but it didn't work. The Greek fleet perished and Leonidas died for nothing except perhaps sparing the blushes of Sparta. Thermopylae did not influence that war in any way."

"You are mistaken!" Spargapises said stubbornly.

"No you," Makeda pointed to him with her finger. It had been broken during a wrestling match with Candace so it was a little crooked never the less it made her point.

"You are mistaken. Your army is now my army. Queen Tiirmirise sent me here to care for this army until she can take direct command and she cannot do so till she has defeated the army of Gaius Formica or Sextus Livianus whichever breaks through first. Therefore these are your new orders. This army will retreat and the retreat will begin tonight. That shall be the end of it."

The prince got up and stared hard at Makeda who stared back hard at him. They stood face to face. Nose to Nose. Eye ball to Eye ball and Spargapises blinked. He dismissed the other officers.

"There was no need to..."

"There was every need your highness. If I had not done what I had done you would have sent me away with a flea in my ear."

"You, Massagetae are all the same, from the lowest 5yr old in training to Queen Tiirmirise, bloody arrogant."

"Oh please, spare me your tedium. Queen Tiirmirise is the best general I have ever had the privilege to fight with and you still have not learnt your lesson from Masene.

The Queen is a brilliant general. All I know I know because of her. If you would stop seeing her as your mother and see her as a Queen which is the way a Sarmatian would see her you would not be so confused about your role."

"Hah!" Spat Spargapises.

The Sarmatian army started retreating as Makeda planned over the bridge to the other side of the river. Although what had happened in the command tent to cause the change of tactics was to all intents and purposes a mutiny that word was never mentioned. By the time the Dominion realised the Sarmatians were retreating most of the Sarmatians were across the bridge which was slightly wobbly.

There was one unit of Sarmatian cavalry on the other side watching under cover in the trees. Makeda could not recross because the bridge was filled with the last of her army and she did not want the last of her men to realise the bridge was being weakened.

In re-organising she had forgotten that young Almeyedes would be in charge of the last unit of horse. She cursed under her breath. It was a careless oversight and she could not afford to lose even a unit of cavalry.

"Lead a charge young Almeyedes lead a charge." shouted Makeda till she was hoarse but the young prince could not hear her.

Finally the charge came. The Sarmatian horse dashed sideways into the Dominion troops decimating their front ranks before they had a chance to reach the bridge.

Makeda swore as her eyes searched frantically for Almeyedes and then wondered why Rael a Massagetae soldier, and second in command was leading the charge. Surely the young prince had not been cut down.

Makeda feared the worst. His father Ninyas would be furious and would probably claim it was all part of a plot by Tiirmirise. The cavalry unit galloped across the bridge safely back to the Sarmatian side. The Dominion swarmed after them on foot and the bridge wobbled dangerously.

The cavalry armed with composite bows especially adapted for the saddle that came with stirrups and bridles as well as spurs were able to fire on the Dominion as they retreated.

Yet more Dominion continued to pour over the bridge charging over the bodies of their fallen comrades. As the horse finally reached safety, Makeda arranged a welcome party for the Dominion warriors.

A hail of Javelins struck down more Dominion soldiers as the Sarmatian engineers worked frantically to pull the bridge down. The fighting was ferocious.

Shields locked as the Dominion warriors clashed with the Sarmatian soldiers on the bridge. The Sarmatians retreated slowly till finally a few hundred Dominion soldiers found themselves on the Sarmatian side.

Thousands were on the bridge when it finally crashed under their weight into the river below. The 100 Dominion stranded on the Sarmatian side were massacred.

It would take time for the Dominion to build another bridge and the Dominion were not known as a nation of bridge builders. Makeda had no doubt they would get across but it would take them time to find out how to do so.

Rael was injured but she was alright. "We did it eh General Makeda, we got them all across."

"What happened to Almeyedes?"

"He panicked, shat himself and fainted. We had to carry him over the bridge." She winced as a slave bound up her wounds.

"Well what do we do now?"

"We retreat. When they get tired of the pastures and the peace they'll lose focus and hopefully take up Votigern's offer to settle in his territories. Heaven knows he needs men to take and farm the land from the beasts who now swarm it."

Spargapises like all the members of Qastursh's family possessed an exquisitely refined sense of cruelty. He sent a report of the military situation. The unvarnished truth complete with the cowardice of young Almeyedes.

He took great delight in writing personally to Ninyas with the horrible details of his son's failure and then gave the letters to Almeyedes to deliver together with a contingent of soldiers to ensure he personally delivered the letter.

By the time Ninyas finished reading the letters he could barely tolerate the sight of his son.

"Father how can I tell you of the pain and sheer terror I experienced when I saw those savages with their awful shrieking running at me. I couldn't move, I couldn't even control my bowels, let alone my heart.

I fainted thinking I had died and when I awoke full of terror, my bowels still loose, to see the male and female soldiers who carried me to safety washing themselves free of my shit in the river under my very eyes. I could barely stand their contempt and loathing."

Almeyedes continued to weep as Ninyas replied in a cold flat voice his heart breaking with every word. "I disown you. I never ever want to see you again."

Ninyas went to the council and told them what had happened including his son's treachery. He bore the looks of sympathy with stoicism as he stood waiting outside the council chamber for Vayanes.

"I am so sorry to hear of your loss. Still I am sure you will understand my friend that my niece cannot marry your son."

"I understand." sighed Ninyas. "No one would want a coward for a son."

Vayanes clapped him on the back "No reason why she shouldn't marry you though. I mean she is a pretty little thing. Yes I think she'll be just the ticket. She's poor, you have loads of money and more importantly you have no heir. Yes I think it could work."

Ninyas shook his head morosely. "People would call me a randy old goat."

"But my dear Ninyas, you are a randy old goat. Don't you have sex with your bathers?"

"Well yes but everyone has sex with their bathers."

"Well there you go then."

"Absolutely not I forbid it. You cannot come to war with me. You will stay here and continue your very successful role in council Saronne." Tiirmirise shook her head.

"You are a born politician and your place is here. Your offer to Marius Lepidus is being considered as is the corresponding one to Votigern and the largest of the Dominion troops might yet return to Votigern's lands and save me the prospect of fighting three battles."

Saronne hated to admit it but she was enjoying her role in the council. She was able to hold her own in the chamber of viziers. She was more patient, more polite and possessed an excellent political savvy. She had after all been trained as a princess whereas Tiirmirise had been trained as a general and a warrior.

She had actually managed to check Ninyas schemes and Magba Massinassa was at present languishing in jail after he had been goaded by Saronne into confessing the role he played in assassinating Helle, Augur and the murder of two of Ninyas children.

Whilst Ninyas hated Tiirmirise he appeared to have a soft spot for Saronne and had even approached and promised her a truce if he ascended the throne before Spargapises.

She no longer supervised Tiirmirise's personal household it would have been too much work for her on top of her work load as a vizier and looking after Chryseis. However that job had gone to a nubile young Sarmatian female from the Gaetulae tribe in Sarmatia called Isasha.

Tiirmirise hated having Eunuchs in charge of her household due to her experiences in Qastursh's harem and preferred to have a woman in charge of her personal household. This in itself was not a problem except that many ambitious young women, saw it as a chance to seduce their way to power.

Isasha was beautiful with long black waving hair and dark swarthy skin. She was endowed with a lush body which she displayed at every opportunity. She always managed to be in some state of undress when Tiirmirise was around and now she would probably be going on campaign with Tiirmirise and Saronne was unashamedly jealous.

"Isasha is going on campaign with you?"

"Isasha? What is she going to do fuck the Dominion to death? Isasha will be staying here. The Massagetae daughter of the speaker of the house Scaures, will be accompanying me.

She is also an in-law of Epiphany and related to Nnandi. I believe her name is Raiden. She will be organising my household. She knows how to wield a whip you on the other hand spoiled my slaves rotten Afereni."

Tiirmirise came to stand before her wife brushing her lips, temples, cheekbones, eyelids and throat with gentle kisses before claiming her mouth. Saronne's jealousy evaporated in a pool of desire.

In truth Tiirmirise had never given her any cause to doubt she was anything other than faithful since she had put her foot down about having sex with her bathers.

Saronne could not resist touching her. "You promise to be careful Tiirmirise." She stroked the scar on the Queen's face and touched her lips with her fingertips.

Saronne gave Tiirmirise one of the hot kisses that made her toes curl and her centre tingle. Her tongue played with Tiirmirise's, deliciously endlessly, they kissed till they were both panting and their need for each other was ravenous.

It wasn't long before the blonde queen was swept off her feet and carried to bed. Her arms slid around Tiirmirise's neck and she clung possessively to the black Queen's. Saronne's smallness excited her, as did her passionate kisses. Tonight they would hold nothing back because tomorrow Tiirmirise would be fighting the Dominion and might never return.

Saronne moaned as The Queen's powerful callused hands roamed her body as though committing every detail of her to memory, remembering her scent, her softness, her taste.

"You are so lovely." Tiirmirise whispered against her throat as they clung naked together on the bed in Saronne's chambers, her fingers threaded into her golden mass of hair that crackled at her touch. She wanted to wrap herself in the golden silken tendrils and just sink into her.

They made love passionately all night as though it was their last time and in the morning Tiirmirise left for the battle front before dawn. Before Saronne awoke. She had kissed the children the night before and told them she was leaving. She did not like long emotional good byes.

She knew they would all expect to see her in the morning before she awoke but she changed her plans at the last. She had to go and keep her loved ones safe from a marauding horde of Dominion warriors.

When Saronne awoke the next morning she reached out expecting to find Tiirmirise and was heartbroken to find she had already left. She couldn't help it she cried. The children came in expecting to see the Queen and when she saw the disappointment on their faces she wanted to start crying again but she didn't.

Derastes tried to put a brave face but his bottom lip trembled dangerously and when Nitocris started crying as well she forgot her own tears as she tried to comfort the children. It was in this

state that Epiphany found them.

"Saronne you can't do this to yourself." Epiphany hugged her and stroked her hair.

"Why did she do that?"

"I don't know. I used to be upset with Nnandi, until she explained to me that long partings were very hard on her emotionally because she did not wish to see me cry. They are brave in many things but not so in others. Now come dry your tears. Bierae tells me the council is not sitting today. Lets take the children out."

So it was that Isasha arranged made arrangements for a picnic for the royal children, Epiphany and her brood of children. Epiphany had a large family. One child a girl was a gift from the God to herself and Nnandi, two were her nephews, her brother died at Masene in Spargapis army and his wife in childbirth, Two other girl children she adopted, both their Massagetae Parents died also at Masene and the sixth child was Nnandi's niece whose parents were also a casualty of Masene.

It was a large party that set out for the day. They went to the chariot races first and then on to the gardens dedicated to memory of King Qastursh for a picnic. The gardens were located just outside the city of Ado in the ancestral lands of the Fantae.

The royal party was well guarded and the children played together whilst Epiphany tried to cheer Saronne out of her sombre mood. She was succeeding too.

"Well we had to go to one of those deadly dull political dinners last week and Osumares invited Fieries, the new Primate of the Southern Temple. He is probably one of the most pompous hypocritical men I have ever had the opportunity to meet." Epiphany was saying as she tucked into an apple.

"He spent the whole evening preaching about how people no longer made donations to the temples and how rich nobles were all corrupt and bringing the country to ruin with our wicked behaviour and then he tried touch me up.

I was so upset, I couldn't tell Nnandi, you know how jealous she can get, luckily Candace noticed and sat between us shielding me from his roaming hands. One of the slaves asked Candace what she would like to drink and Candace asked for some Numerian wine.

When the slave asked if Fieries if he would like some Numerian wine also, he wrinkled up his face and his bushy eyebrows pushed up into his receding hairline "I'd rather commit adultery." He spluttered self righteously to which Candace replied "Cancel the Numerian Wine, I didn't know there was a choice."

Saronne giggled as Epiphany continued "Well he was absolutely outraged and..."

A loud shrill scream brought the two of them to their feet and they hurried over to see what had

happened. A child had fallen into the pond and the two women hurried over. Three of the Massagetae bodyguard dived in after the child but by the time they found him and laid him down on the bank he was still and not breathing.

A long thick spear protruded from his little stomach, this was no accident he had been purposely impaled.

"Oh the poor child it's an assassination." Epiphany covered her mouth in horror.

"He's still alive. Epiphany," She motioned to the captain of her personal bodyguard. "Nkiru! help me."

They put the little boy on the bank of the pond, meanwhile the rest of the Massagetae rounded up the royal family, Epiphany's children and their tutors and nurses for safety. It was whilst Nkiru was pulling out the spear from the little boy's belly that a muscular warrior approached them.

He was not from any of the tribes that Saronne was familiar with. His eyes were grey, his hair was black, he looked more like a BeriBeri than a Sarmatian. However his height and the smooth dark swarthy skin left her in no doubt he was Sarmatian.

The people of the plains might resemble many other races but one thing they all had in common they did not have a preponderance of body hair like the Beriberi or the Angles.

"My son! My son!" the warrior howled.

He tried to get to the boy and the Massagetae barred his way as Epiphany tried to explain what happened. Saronne tried to stem the bleeding. Eventually she knew that there was not a lot she could for him but to try using the amulet Olayrae gave her but she was afraid. It was erratic at best and if the wound was fatal then he would die.

She closed her eyes and started to channel till she felt the heat build up in her finger tips. Then she touched the wound and felt energy leave her. When the wound was finally closed she was exhausted and fell down in a faint.

When she came around her head felt like she had overly indulged in a bottle of Numerian Wine.

"Saronne are you alright?" She recognised Epiphany's voice, the other woman peered down at her anxiously.

"I'm fine. And the boy."

"I'm right here Your Highness." The little boy looked at her uncertainly.

Another voice spoke to her a deeper, manly voice. Its tone was humble even contrite. "Your Highness, My name is Lord Zeries, of the Fantae tribe of the people of the plains and I am yours to command Lady."

The Dominion which finally crossed into Sarmatian lands first was the army lead by Sextus Livianus and they were confronted by a huge Sarmatian Stone fortress manned by the Urhobae, a small but fierce tribe of Sarmatians and into which Tiirmirise shamelessly retreated.

The Dominion attacked it fruitlessly. The Sarmatians from their battlements let loose a hail of arrows, javelins and rocks and the Dominion impatient and unsuccessful retreated deciding it was not worth taking. Instead they turned their attentions towards the city of Quaresh. Quaresh was the third largest city in the kingdom of Sarmatia after Ado and Ekiti that the Dominion had heard of.

They looked forward to a nice booty of women, slaves, food and other luxuries. They had defeated the Sarmatians before only the death of their King Tarquin had forced them to return. Now they fully expected to pick up where they left off and conquer Sarmatia. The last of the Dominion had barely left the Urhobae fortress when Tiirmirise shipped out her army.

They were quiet, disciplined and overjoyed at the prospect of battle. Guided by Candace's information network and the Urhobae guards they were able to march around the Dominion and take up a perfect position ahead of them in front of the city of Quaresh at the top of a hill with a shallow stream at the bottom.

The Dominion now found themselves facing a Sarmatian army which impeded their advance to Quaresh and which further was ensconced behind a wooden fortress. Frustrated and without waiting for orders or reinforcements 150,000 Dominion warriors stormed the Sarmatian position across the shallow stream and up the hill.

Arrows came flying at them then the javelins and spears and then the two armies clashed. The odds evened to three to one and the wooden palisades Tiirmirise had built to fortify their position reduced that even further. The Dominion came away with huge losses. Midday saw 30,000 fallen Dominion soldiers and their casualties continued to rise.

Tiirmirise piled up the dead as an obstacle the Dominion would have to climb to reach the Sarmatian camp and it was just the beginning. Tiirmirise took several thousand cavalry troops under cover of darkness and directed them to cross the river and wait in ambush. She had to, horses were not much good going downhill and the bulk of her infantry was under the command of Nnandi at the top of the hill safely behind the wooden forte.

The next day they set fire to the Dominion troops in a gesture intended to rile them. The Dominion believed fire was sacred and to feed a body to fire well that was a desecration of the corpse. The enraged Dominion charged up hill and their ranks were decimated by archers and Javelins and when they clashed with the Sarmatian infantry metal tore into unprotected bone and tissue.

It was the first time in a long time since Tiirmirise fought without Makeda and Pasiphae at her

side and she had to lead from the front. She went straight for Sextus Livianus and killed him in single combat. A great groan was heard to go through the Dominion host as he fell headless to the ground.

The Massagetae horse committed to a frontal charge fell on the rest of the Dominion army from the rear and by sun down the 250,000 Dominion army was no more. 50,000 Dominion Women, children who had travelled with the Dominion warriors were taken as slaves as well as 20,000 Dominion warriors.

They would be sold in foreign slave markets and the money from their sale used to augment the salaries and expenses of maintaining the army in the field.

Saronne read the news of the victory to the Sarmatian High Council and the city of Ado and Ekiti rang with bells for nigh on 14 days. The ugly spectre of the Dominion had been lifted.

They were no longer undefeatable. Sarmatia had a fighting chance. Saronne returned to her letter and in it she informed her that the embassy from the emperor Cyrus of Persia had finally arrived. He offered for the hand of Tiirmirise the Queen of the Massagetae.

Makeda was right the Dominion were not really bridge builders and decided to find another way to cross the river than build a bridge so they never actually crossed the River at the place Almeyedes had disgraced himself so badly.

Instead they hesitated. Tiirmirise's victory had given them pause for thought. Marcellus despaired of ever persuading his army to attack instead they spent a comfortable summer on the pastures. They were a Dominion army made up of citizens not landless serfs and therefore not bound to obey every command. Marius Lepidus lost discipline of his army.

Each soldier brought four cows to see to their needs. Their long stay on the pastures meant their cattle had, feasted on the lush green pastures and thus multiplied their herd. They were also inundated with camp followers during their march up and down the river and it was a while before they decided to head towards Ekiti.

By the time they reached the river Araxes, the last river before crossing into Sarmatian lands proper, lands not belonging to the Simian, the Gypitian or the Sirahn allies, Tiirmirise had combined her two armies which now numbered a 100,000 strong.

Spargapises, Makeda, Candace, Osanes, Nnandi, Xango were all reunited and they were joined by Osumares and Osamaye. This time there would be no hiding behind a wooden palisade because they were under strength. This time Tiirmirise was determined to crush the Dominion. The two leaders met at a conference and fixed the day of battle.

Once more Tiirmirise deployed her troops. Archers and cavalry on the wings to protect the

infantry from any flanking movements. Javelins, Catapults, and Ballistas (long range artillery that fired, rocks, bolts long enough to bring down horses and napalm an incendiary device) were also placed strategically.

The Dominion cavalry charged them terrifyingly across the plains. Huge stallions with long pointy things attached to their foreheads. Unlike the Dominion lead by Sextus Livianus this army wore armour. Heavy plate mail, They were equipped with long swords and carried a heavy spear the Dominion called lances.

The Dominion horse massed in rows of 4 deep along four miles with the Dominion infantry behind them charged and wheeled right causing the Sarmatian line to move left and create an opening for the Dominion foot soldiers to outflank Makeda, who was in command on the right and thus take the Sarmatians from behind.

The plan almost worked too. Tiirmirise barely managed to pull the Sarmatian troops to a halt and the Units she was commanding took the brunt of the cavalry charge in an almighty clash of steel, horse and human flesh.

The Queen's personal standard bearer, her Falconier was killed and Tiirmirise herself went down when Mordents was charged from the side. A wave of despair fairly rippled across the Sarmatian army. Her Massagetae bodyguard surrounded her determined to give their life for their Queen and they fought bravely fighting the Dominion soldiers to a stand still.

The fighting was ferocious and brutal. It was the first time the arrogant Queen had ever doubted she would see the end of the day. Her bodyguard was cut down around her. Their numbers decimated.

She was gravely injured in the clash, leaving Makeda her second in command to deal with the first wave of Dominion infantry. When the Massagetae were eventually able to carry her to safety and patch up her wounds Tiirmirise ordered them to strap her to her horse and went back into battle knowing that if her horse was ham strung she would be exceedingly vulnerable because the Queen could barely stand on her own two legs.

Sarmatian fitness and training and Tiirmirise's sheer cunning, guile and determination won the field. Marcellus Cornelius a gargantuan 7ft giant with arms and legs like tree trunks seeing which way the battle was going tried to rally his troops by charging straight into the conflict. He led his bodyguard straight at Tiirmirise intending force her into a duel and kill her in single combat.

His horse ploughed into her already bruised horse who collapsed under the strength of his larger steed flinging her off. His battle axe shattered her sword and she slipped on the bloody ground as she raised her shield to protect her from the force from the blows that reigned unrelentingly down on her. He kept moving striking on her blind side. Tiirmirise threw off her helmet which was impeding her breathing and limiting her periphery vision.

She groaned as another blow from Marcellus' huge battle axe dislocated her left shoulder arm on which she carried her shield and she slipped in the bloody gore on the ground. She grunted as the

wound in her side opened undoing all the good work of Raiden's stitching. Raiden herself unable to come to her Queen's aid was in a desperate battle for her life, barely fending off three Dominion warriors.

She gasped as Marcellus stabbed her abdomen with his dagger. His eyes rolled with frustrated fury when he realised her armour prevented any damage to her body.

"I will make you barren. I will rip out your womb. She-devil!"

He raised his sword and Tiirmirise said a quick prayer and waited for the death blow.

Chapter 13

Return of The Queen

As the sword came down its blade slid off another and sparks flew at them. It was Spargapises sword.

In the moment of her greatest peril when she was about to be slaughtered everything had suddenly become clear to him. He saw her standard go down felt the army's confidence deplete palpably around him and for the first time in his life he was truly afraid.

He charged at the giant with the last of his own Massagetae honour guard behind him, fear in every beat of his heart for every blow that Tiirmirise fended off with her shield. He could see the other generals fighting to get to her side but there were so many of them. He almost despaired of reaching her on time.

The flashing scimitars of the Massagetae women taught personally by Tiirmirise to fight against odds of upwards of three even five to one was like an extra injection of 150 not just fifty and when Marcellus' blade came down aimed at chopping the vulnerable Queen in half it crashed down on Spargapises sword.

The prince trained by his mother did not bother to cross swords with the giant. His mother's words rang in his ears, "War is war, duelling is for impressing the ladies. If you need to kill be quick and efficient." He dropped to one knee pulled out his dagger and plunged it into the giants groin. He fell backwards like a great oak tree. His bodyguard surrounded him as Xango's Massagetae reached them and started fighting over his body. Thus covering Tiirmirise's retreat.

Slowly but surely the battle began to go the way of the Sarmatians. Around them, the morning sun now the evening sun was in their eyes. As Osanes had reported the Dominion did everything to excess. They had consumed large amounts of meat and drink the night before and were sluggish. The heat which was a mild inconvenience to the Sarmatians used to living there all their lives became like a furnace for the Dominion in their heavy armour.

Spargapises leaned over the fallen warrior, afraid to hope. "Mother?"

"My son! Am I glad to see you!" Tiirmirise said fervently and he hugged tightly then cradling her gently he carried her off the battle field himself. It was the second time Tiirmirise returned to the command tent.

"You will stay here!" Spargapises roared at her. "You are in no condition to return to the field."

Tiirmirise scowled at him as he continued speaking. "Nnandi will carry your commands to us. You will stay here and direct the rest of the battle."

The Queen was about to protest until Makeda said "I agree with him Tiirmirise and I am quite prepared to sit on you to keep you here if I have to. If you go out there now you will be a target for every single Dominion soldier if they kill you they will rally. Right now they all know you are alive they saw Spargapises carry you off the field."

The Queen subsided and directed the rest of the battle successfully from her sick bed.

They returned to Ado stopping first at Ekiti where they honoured the crown prince and Tiirmirise was extremely proud of her son. Her pride was so evident that they made peace between each other and were inseparable for the journey back.

At every city and town they passed there were displays of horsemanship banquets, gifts and at Ekiti the city presented the prince with a solid silver crown which was too heavy to be actually worn but would be carried before him.

In Ado the people loathed to be outdone by the city of Ekiti despite Ninyas protests in council held a triumph displaying the captured banners, booty slaves and treasures of the campaign. The feasting lasted three days and was interspersed with plays, recitals, and of course chariot racing.

By the time Tiirmirise arrived at the palace her wounds had begun to heal. She was no longer completely bed ridden but she was still unable to walk or stand for long periods of time without a crutch.

Although by the time Saronne saw her she'd been bathed and fed she still wept with relief that she was safe. Raiden had sent regular dispatches back to the Council of viziers, a job she once used to do.

"You look terrible!" Saronne said through her tears. Her hands touched Tiirmirise's face. There was another scar there, one that went from her temple to her jaw in a straight line. "This is new." She finished softly.

"I thought you liked my battle scars. I thought they showed my bravery in battle."

"They show Tiirmirise, that you are not heedful of your face!"

"But you didn't marry me for my pretty face."

"Didn't I?" Saronne teased

Tiirmirise pulled the hand at her face so that Saronne fell against her. "You married me for my..." Tiirmirise wriggled her eyebrows suggestively "other talents."
Saronne chuckled "You are incorrigible!"

"And you my love are irresistible." Tiirmirise kissed her capturing her lips and enjoying her taste, her scent her softness. The black Queen moaned. She was finally home.

When Tiirmirise was well enough to take her place in the Council of Viziers it was to a deafening applause even Ninyas stood up to congratulate her.

"You have received a lot of gifts and money from Cyrus asking for your hand in marriage."

"I hope you refused and desisted on my behalf." Tiirmirise said soaping Saronne's back.

They were sitting in the large wooden bath tub. Their only bathers were Nitocris and Chryseis who splashed happily away.

"Yes I did. Everyone agreed with me that Cyrus wanted Sarmatia and not you. Everyone that is except Ninyas who argued that a marriage alliance would not tie down Sarmatia since he would be ruling in your stead."

"What did you reply to that argument?"

"Well after defeating almost a million dominion warriors with barely a hundred thousand troops I asked the council if you were the kind of general we should gift to Cyrus? What if he decided to come after us?"

I must commend you Tiirmirise it was a brilliant political move to take Raiden, I didn't know she was a favourite niece of Scaures, the speaker is now firmly on our side and so is Vayanes, his daughter is married to Osumares, and with Magba Massinassa still in exile we appear to have a majority for now. I think now that Bierae and I have a plan to rid ourselves of Ninyas now is the time to make our move."

"That sounds ominous!"

"Oh don't worry your pretty little head about it, I will take care of everything." Saronne said lightly turning around to face the amused Queen and plant a kiss on her hard lips.

Tiirmirise held a child in each arm and received many sloppy kisses from the giggling children and a more passionate one from their mother. Saronne cupped her face and her hand traced the new scar that ran from her temple to her jaw.

"Why are you looking at me like that Tiirmirise?"

"Because I love you and I realised I don't say it often enough Afereni."

Saronne smiled "I love you too Tiirmirise, with every breadth in my body, and every beat of my heart, yes even my soul is yours."

In the council Bierae and Saronne were a formidable team as they tackled Ninyas headlong in a political debate that raged over several months and would decide the economic fate of the country sooner rather than later.

"Would the Queen of the Massagetae tell us what we are to do with the Dominion problem she has foisted on us?"

The Dominion captives should have been slaughtered but because of Saronne's influence on the Queen they had not.

"We were not aware there was a problem." Tiirmirise pretended to look confused.

"We cannot dump such a huge amount of slaves especially male warriors into our community they are a threat." Ninyas slammed his hand down.

"Indeed only consider your majesty, The Dominion inter breeding with our people, soon we will have a nation of half-breeds, a mongrel nation!" Vayanes stormed at the council chamber.

Tiirmirise and Candace rolled their eyes. This was nothing less than racism and bigotry. Although everyone knew Vayanes was extremely racist and tolerated it not because he was a powerful man but because they all used it to manipulate him. However no one had tried to tell him his thinking was wrong, No one except Saronne. It was inconvenient to do so.

"What is your suggestion Lord Vayanes?" The Queen drawled.

"That every Dominion barbarian slave be slaughtered." Vayanes suggested and Ninyas seconded him.

"I thought you said he was on our side." Tiirmirise hissed to Saronne.

"He was, but I didn't know he was such a racist, I may have badly miscalculated." Saronne replied back to Tiirmirise

Saronne took permission from the speaker and joined the debate. "If I may honoured founders, We have a need of these slaves." Saronne did not think it was politic at this point to start discussing the evils of slavery. She needed to save their lives first before even thinking of freeing them.

"They can be put to good use" She continued "building roads, repairing sewers, the water cisterns and aqueducts, completing the Race Course, maintaining the temples and theatres, the Lighthouse at Maros , we also need more public baths, Parks and Latrines and The Queen Tiirmirise would like to build a great big leisure bath complex for the people of Sarmatia in Ekiti."

Saronne continued to speak persuasively listing an impressive list of public works which if completed would make the viziers and the Regency look like the golden age.

They would pass into immortality and it would boost the economy. The slaves would do the grunt work with the option of buying their freedom" Saronne argued passionately.

She turned around opening her hands appealingly, using every trick she had been taught in Rhetoric and Elocution lessons as a child in the Land of the Angles to try and persuade the council of viziers."Even the Sarmatian artisans and the landless poor would benefit from such projects."

The slaves would certainly ensure the work was completed quickly because even at a 100% employment there were not enough Sarmatians to complete the projects she had outlined.

"I commend your attempt to save your people, after all are not the Dominion said to be descended from the Angle Lands, and whilst, this is all very fantastic, it is not very realistic is it." Ninyas said after the applause had died down from Saronne's speech.

He drew himself up confidently as he continued his speech "Where would you get the money for such an ambitious building program. The booty collected from the last campaign will replenish the treasury but I do not think it would be enough for your vain glorious ambitions."

"Why Prince Ninyas you will pay for it."

"I will pay for it? Dear girl where would I get the money from?" He drawled patronisingly.

Saronne smiled innocently and put on her helpless little girl look. A look she had perfected on the Massagetae Queen to get her way many times.

She knew Tiirmirise was going to be furious with her next words so she did not glance at her but continued bravely speaking.

"Are you not curious why Gaius Formica's army never attacked? Well I will tell you why. The Princess Olayrae escorted me to meet him. He promised he would take his army and settle in Dominion lands once I obtained the permission of my father Votigern Redbeard.

I asked if he would be willing to pay Votigern some form of compensation for the land and he told me that the reason they had invaded the Simian lands was because of the legend of a hidden gold. They had planned to use this stash but the local people of Warbo reported that it had already been taken by a Sarmatian general a certain Lord Nincompoop."

The chamber erupted into laughter. "Nincompoop" in Sarmatian meant "Little Shit". Ninyas glared at Saronne who innocently returned his look and waited for the laughter to die down to a snicker. It was bad enough that Osumares referred to him as Lord Ninny, He could well imagine what the gossip mongers would be saying in the Bazaars.

Eventually the chamber settled down and Saronne continued with her account.

"I must protest!" Ninyas scowled at the Princess angrily.

"Prince Ninyas my wife is only lately learned in our language and does not understand the meaning of the words so I will explain it to her so she does not offend you in future." Tiirmirise said innocently determined to get her pound of flesh.

Ninyas eyes narrowed angrily "That will be quite unnecessary Your Majesty."

"Oh but I insist." Tiirmirise baited as the chamber erupted into more laughter.

"Please Your highness continue." Ninyas sat down and waved his hand negligently at Saronne. He was either in shock or utterly confounded because he would never have allowed Saronne to continue with her speech but should instead have shouted her down.

"His scouts had watched as 1000 Sarmatian soldiers from Lord Ninyas' mother's tribe the Fantae, and belonging to Ninyas personal honour guard changed their clothing to that of bandits, attack and ambush the gold meant for the Sarmatian vaults.

He very kindly provided me with eye witnesses from the Dominion and I also have several Fantae eye witnesses also who went into hiding after Ninyas unwilling to pay them all had some Fantae warriors executed to keep them quiet. When the nine year old son of Lord Zeries, of the Fantae was injured in an assassination attempt the Fantae elders approached me and spilled the whole sorry story."

Tiirmirise stared at Saronne and Ninyas in Shock. "Candace did you know about this?" Spargapises hissed to his cousin.

"Well the rumours are old and I've never been able to substantiate them but I just thought that perhaps Ninyas was spending the substantial inheritance he received from his father." Candace whispered back.

Saronne finished speaking and sat down waiting for the stunned chamber to react.

"I don't understand why did he bother himself with all that plotting when he could have simply recruited an army and taken over." Tiirmirise whispered to Candace and Saronne.

"Not everyone thinks like you dear." Saronne patted Tiirmirise's lap affectionately.

"How did you manage to find all this out?" Tiirmirise whispered angrily "Did you put yourself in

any danger?"

"The Fantae came to me Tiirmirise, and I went to Bierae and Olayrae. I think they just felt I was more approachable than you. You know you can be quite frightening on first acquaintance."

She wanted to say more but the atmosphere in the chamber was becoming increasingly hostile and she hoped the hostility was not directed at her but at Ninyas. She gambled that greed would be a factor in the days proceedings but she would just have to see which way the chamber voted.

There was silence, then the whispering and murmuring till finally the chamber erupted. Ninyas found himself on the receiving end of vicious glares from every man and woman in the room. He had used the money to bribe them and bribed them heavily in return for high interest rates and political favours.

Most of the Viziers in the chamber owed him money and as Saronne had rightly speculated most of the viziers would be more than happy to be rid of him. It meant their debts would be cancelled. They bayed for Ninyas blood.

"Lies! Lies!"

"Are they?" Princess Bierae got up "When Princess Saronne informed me, I informed the High Priestess and she had the gold picked up from your little hideaway by the temple guards."

The temple guards were inviolate in a way neither the Massagetae body guards and Sarmatian Palace guards were not.

"Your ancestral tribe the Fantae were so disgusted by your treachery and unable to carry the burden of guilt in this debacle they have washed their hands of you. They insisted on delivering the gold to the chamber."

At Bierae's command Lord Zeries, the Fantae titular chief and second in command to Ninyas, (Ninyas took his seat in the chamber of viziers by virtue of being the highest ranking Fantae in Sarmatia.) entered the chamber and the Fantae began to pile up the gold in the council chamber.

There were gasps of outraged anger and hissing as it formed a tower that fairly touched the high vaulted ceilings of the council chamber.

"Traitor!"

"Execute him!"

"Kill him!"

"Death is too good for him!"

Scaures banged his gavel for order and the chamber only subsided after Scaures had the

magistrates (the guards of the council chamber) eject one over enthusiastic vizier.

The chamber was silent and Tiirmirise got up from her bench. " As Regent We reserve the right of punishment. We agree with the viziers, Death is too good for you, therefore this shall be your sentence.

We banish you from the Plains forever. We will spare the Fantae for they have expurgated their guilt. But if you dare to set foot in Sarmatia any man woman or beast may take your life without fear of retribution and claim a reward.

Your wife is the niece of a very honourable man, the vizier Vayanes so the life of your wife and child shall not be forfeit but they shall return to Scaures house and her son shall take Scaures name with the requisite compensation. Your cowardly son Almeyedes shall inherit the rest of your estate. The gold of Sarmatia will be returned to Sarmatia."

Then to Ninyas abject fury Tiirmirise got up and went to the ivory chair that had for so long been unoccupied since the death of Qastursh and sat on it. She drew her sword and laid it across her lap.

"I Tiirmirise daughter of Danu and Jbenga, hereby claim the throne of Sarmatia as sole Queen and in my own right. First in line to the throne shall be Spargapises, then Derastes, then Chryseis then Nitocris. You all owe me fealty and by the God I will have your oaths this day."

The Regency was over. The order of succession determined. Her victory was complete.

The departure of Ninyas from Sarmatia did not put an end to the infernal man's plotting. Instead he crossed over to the side of Cyrus in an attempt to regain the throne. There he started whispering about the gold, about the people and their life style, how rich and beautiful Sarmatia was whispering, whispering, whispering till the rumours finally convinced Cyrus and he began his plans of invasion.

In Ado, Nnandi had risen to the position of Prime Vizier and was in charge of the building and restoration works. A job she loved. Tiirmirise had persuaded her to finish the race course first and since both were a lovers of chariot racing and horse racing it had been one of the first building projects completed.

Every seven days the population of Ado would troop to watch the games after their weekly sacrifices in the temple. Candace was busy monitoring the Persian court. It was important that she keep an eye on Ninyas plotting and schemes.

Makeda was bored and unlike Tiirmirise who threw herself wholeheartedly into trade treaties and economic policies the big woman still hankered after Epiphany and had yet to choose a wife.

Although she did quite like Isasha, the young lady in charge of Tiirmirise's house hold and

Isasha's parents anxious to advance their other children's political career had approached her with what would have been an interesting proposition, Isasha was very young only twenty three whilst Makeda was in her early forties. It felt like cradle snatching. She tried to pay attention to what they were saying in the cabinet meeting.

Votigern remained stubborn over the negotiations. He would not allow the Dominion to settle in his lands until he had seen his daughter and grand-daughters. He insisted they return to the land of the Angles and before he would agree to conclude the negotiations and Tiirmirise could not fight her father-in-law. She was extremely frustrated by the whole situation.

"We will not be gone long. Your majesty" At official meetings such as this they used their honorific titles unless they were alone.

"I do not trust Votigern. He hates me." The Queen paced the floor angrily. She was sitting in the cabinet chamber surrounded by her closest advisers.

Spargapises the Crown Prince and heir, Nnandi, the Prime Vizier, Makeda the Chief-of-Staff, Candace her spy master and Chief of Intelligence was in Persia so her second-in-command Osanes, took her place, Osumares head of the tribal council which represented the countryside, Osamaye head of the tribal council which represented the cities, Vayanes the Chief Censor, Scaures the Speaker in the Council of Viziers, Saronne now Queenette of Sarmatia, and finally the brilliant Raiden, a war veteran at only sixteen and her personal scribe.

Isasha came into the room and smiled at Makeda who studiously pretended a deep interest in the papers Raiden distributed amongst them. As the young girl served them with iced juices and water.

When she neared Makeda that young lady discreetly turned Makeda's papers the right way up and continued her work before disappearing with Makeda staring longingly after her.

Nnandi whose eyes did not miss a thing winked slowly and obviously at Makeda who glared back at her.

"I believe you have no option but to let the Queenette Saronne return to the land of the Angles." Vayanes shook his head knowing full well the Queen would not take his advice because she was aware of the distaste he had for foreigners. Although he did actually like Queenette Saronne.

"Cyrus is making plans to invade with nigh on one million troops. We cannot fight a war with Cyrus and have the Dominion troops lurking on our borders." Osanes said passionately.

"We have only an army of 100,000 and even if we decided to train more we cannot raise more than 50,000 in the time we have."

"I will think on it." Was all Tiirmirise was prepared to say.

It was early evening and the children were playing in the garden. Little Chryseis was able to walk now and run after big sister Nitocris and her nephew Derastes. They rolled in the freshly hewn grass with the Queen laughing and giggling as she picked them up and swung them about kissing their bruises she soothed away their fears till their nurses came and carried them away.

Saronne was busy with affairs of state. The issue of Cyrus pending attack was a hot topic and Saronne was battling the Council of Viziers to release funds to train not 50,000 troops but a 100,000 because of Cyrus' alarming troop movements.

Tiirmirise loathed the politicking and dinners they had to attend to garner support in the council, and the attention to detail required to study the laws and its loopholes to allow this but it was Saronne's forte and Tiirmirise had left her debating with Viziers and Lawyers over how she should approach the next political battle. As far as Tiirmirise was concerned Laws were like sausages it was better not to see them being made.

The Politics was now more sophisticated. Ninyas had his adherents still in council working to bring him back, obviously they had not recovered all the Simian gold, so it was hard to know who actually supported his policies and what they were since they moved underground.

She had seen the children playing in the gardens with their nurse from one of the council chambers and sneaked out to spend time with them. She had hardly spent time with Spargapises as a child and she did not want to miss Derastes growing up so she left the raging debate for the innocent play of the children.

She was therefore slightly irritated when Isasha came in to announce they had a guest.

"Send them away." Tiirmirise said irritably

"She can't do that Tiirmirise and you should know better than to ask."

"Olayrae?"

The Queen got up to embrace her and placed a kiss of greeting on her lips.

"I do enjoy these little changes Saronne has wrought in you."

"She is wonderful is she not."

"Well I am glad to hear that after all these years you are still in love with her."

"Four years is not so very long." Saronne pulled out a chair for her and the children came and hugged and kissed her as well.

"It seems like yesterday the harem was crawling with beautiful but depraved young men and

women hell bent on drowning in hedonistic pleasures but today it is filled with the happy sound of laughter and the patter of little feet."

"You are getting maudlin in your old age Your Grace. Come let me pour you some wine I am sure you are thirsty and I am dying to know why you have come here."

"Derastes will be reaching the age to choose his right of passage soon. I have come to tell you that..."

"He does not wish to become a warrior I know. It grieves me sorely but each to his own."

"He is marked for the God."

"I don't understand."

"It is the custom that the eldest child of the ruling King or Queen serve in the temple. I was the eldest child of Qastursh at the time he became King and Derastes is the eldest child of Spargapises."

"He won't like it." Tiirmirise shook her head "He will not like it one little bit."

"It matters not what Spargapises likes. All I want is your promise that when the time comes you will let him go willingly."

"I accede to your request Lady." Tiirmirise bowed.

"I am also to tell you that you should allow Saronne to see her father, she will return to you never fear."

"And the children? Nitocris and Chryseis?"

"Nitocris wishes to be a Massagetae like her aunty, I hardly think she will want to stay in a land that will not appreciate her military talents." Olayrae said wryly. "And Chryseis is much too young to be separated from her mother."

"I do not want them to go" The Queen said stubbornly and then sighed "I will miss them."

"You will be on campaign. Cyrus is coming to fight you and Mithradates of Pontus wishes for you to negotiate a truce that you will not attack him so he can seize Cappadocia from Cyrus whilst Cyrus is busy attacking you."

"But I wasn't going to attack him." Tiirmirise said exasperatedly

"He does not need to know that. If you wish to avoid heartbreak you will send someone else to negotiate and not go yourself."

Votigern was extremely happy to see his daughter and formally agreed to allow Gaius Formica to settle his people on the land. The negotiations complete Saronne was delayed in the land of the Angles. The weather was bad and no ships were leaving because of the thunderstorms that wracked the high seas and the coastline of Angle Land.

Winter came early and the snows were especially heavy. No ships were willing or sturdy enough to risk the weather and carry the Queenette her family and her 1000 strong Massagetae bodyguard. The Queenette would have to wait till spring or summer at the very least.

When Summer came Votigern refused to let his daughter and grandchildren leave. He gave no reason and began making noises about looking for a husband for Saronne.

Captain Nkiru assigned two of the Massagetae guards to inform Queen Tiirmirise of the situation. Her brother Leif was in total agreement Saronne was to stay they would not allow her to return to the land of the savages.

"Father you do not want to cross Tiirmirise, I have to return." Saronne had tried to reason with her stubborn father but King Votigern was having none of it.

"Cyrus has invaded the Plains with almost a million Persian troops in purple and saffron. It is said they have been drinking whole rivers dry. They have been slaughtering any person, beast or thing they encounter leaving the land in their wake a smoking ruin. I will not return you because you are safer here."

"Therefore here you shall remain. At least until I hear news of Tiirmirise. If she still lives then I may allow you to return. If she is dead then you will obviously remain here."

"Father that is not possible. Nitocris and Chryseis are third and fourth in line to the throne of Sarmatia."

"That is not what I heard. I heard that Derastes is to be removed from the line of succession from the High Priestess. It is the will of the Gods. The eldest child of the ruling King is always dedicated to the God. Spargapises is a young man he can always have other children."

"Yes he can but he has not which is why it is important for me to return to Sarmatia."

"Well perhaps he needs to have 300 wives and concubines before he can have other children either way Chryseis and Nitocris are now second and third in line to the throne respectively and you yourself have told me that Tiirmirise and Spargapises were victims of so many assassination plots it made them paranoid. Well I do not want my grandchildren to grow up in such an atmosphere. They will remain here till I deem it safe for them to return."

"At least let me write to her." Saronne pleaded earnestly.

"So Lord Ninyas and all those scheming viziers will send assassins to my country? I think not."

You will remain here till I feel it is safe for you to return."

Everyone kept well away from the Massagetae Women. They were a fiercesome bunch ferocious and single minded in the defence of their mistress.

They never left her alone for a moment and the children were extended the same protection. Everything from their clothing to their food was searched closely and examined in detail.

Saronne spent a year at home and she remembered how when she had been first captured she had wanted to return. Now she just wanted to leave. Home was in Tiirmirise's arms and that was where she wanted to be. She told the Massagetae that come spring they would be leaving for Sarmatia even if they had to build a boat and sail it themselves.

So when the first day of spring came and a ship sailed into port Saronne asked the captain of her Massagetae guard, Nkiru, to go and investigate. The ship was empty and came to buy goods to sell. On it was an old bard who claimed he brought news from Sarmatia which he was willing to swap for bed and board.

The old man sat in the long hall and regarded his audience with glittering eyes. His hair was white and his beard long. The Angles loved a good story. They spent many a long winter gathered around a wooden fire telling stories. The old bard took a sip of dark bitter ale and after grimacing began his tale to the accompaniment of the sitar he carried.

"After the death of her husband Queen Tomyris ascended the throne." He stroked his Sitar slowly, his eyes darting around the room. He had used the Anglo Saxon term for the name Tiirmirise because if he had called her by her Sarmatian name they would have been suspicious of his accent.

Osanes was fair enough to pass as Sarmatian but not dark skinned enough to be mistaken as Massagetae. Although he was actually descended from one of the ancient Massagetae families who married into the Gaetulae. It worked for him because he was able to slip in and out of Dominion lands and the lands of the Angles.

Saronne found the stranger suspicious indeed. His story had no tune and did not rhyme although it was compelling because she knew the people in the story personally."

"King Cyrus of Persia wooed her with gifts and ambassadors with offers of marriage however the Queen rejected all his advances for she knew he wanted her Queendom and not her.

Cyrus marched his army to the river Araxes and began building a bridge on which his army would cross the bridge. He did this by building Towers on boats. Queen Tomyris no doubt ascertaining that the king was a poor engineer sent him a mocking message by herald.

"King Cyrus of the Pasargadae, king of the Medes and the Persians desist in this futile undertaking, be content to rule your own people and endeavour to see us reign over those countries that are ours to govern.

However if you wish to act like a bone headed idiot, (here the herald swallowed and quaked for the anger of Princes has ended the life of many an unfortunate herald,) Cease your useless bridge building and let us retire from the pier and give you the chance to sail across with your soldiers. If you wish we can even meet you half way on your side of the stream and give battle."

Cyrus interested as to how the Queen would cross the Araxes, as were all his viziers voted for Tomyris to give battle on Persian ground. All except Croesus and Ninyas the traitor. The Queen's brother-in-law on account of whom Cyrus had used as an excuse to invade Sarmatia.

Croesus was a King of Lydia conquered by Cyrus. He had an oracle which said if he went to war with Cyrus a Kingdom would fall. So he went to war never imagining that it would be his own Kingdom that would fall. Cyrus valued his council and treated him with respect.

Whereupon Ninyas gave Cyrus wicked counsel saying " I have arranged for king Mithradates of Cappadocia to lure Queen Tomyris away with an offer of truce. He will claim to take Cappadocia whilst your majesty is otherwise engaged.

Queen Tomyris will not get back in time to fight and Spargapises will take command. He cannot help it. He will be eager to show he is a good fighter. I know my nephew Spargapises, He is a good general but he is prone to his father's vices that is the best way to defeat him. Once we defeat Tomyris we march on Ado and Ekiti and if we can take the city before she returns we have won the day."

Croesus too gave his own counsel. "Let us cross over to the other side and prepare a feast in the camp. Let the best cooks you have at your disposal prepare a feast for them in our camp. Let us make the best wine, strongest and headiest available. The distilled one and fortified wine. The Dominion are not noted for drinking such spirits and it will weaken them.

We shall also leave some beautiful slaves both male and female and we shall leave our worst troops behind to guard the tents.

When they attack we shall fall back leaving the worst troops to take the full brunt of the charge. When they are senselessly drunk and tired from celebrating we shall attack them and beat them easily. Cyrus seeing the wisdom in their counsel agreed to their plan and followed their advice.

Yet that night, whilst the Persian King slept he thought he saw one of the sons of his vizier Hystapes an Archemenadai, usurping the throne. So he called Hystapes the next morning and took him to task. Hyastapes was so afraid his son might indeed be plotting against the king and he took permission to go and investigate.

As Hyastapes hurried away they carried out their plan. When the Sarmatians were drunk, drugged and tired of raping the slaves left behind they fell into slumber and the Persian army fell on them and slaughtered them all. Prince Xango died defending the young Prince Spargapises who was captured.

Cyrus himself had prepared a tub of Water in which he wished to boil the unfortunate prince but his sister the blind seer Olayrae stayed his hand.

"If you kill him then your death will surely follow." He believed her for she was a high priestess of the God and though she was blind she described his appearance and walked without aid amongst his men sight unseen to his side.

He taxed her greatly and asked many questions indeed he even offered her marriage but she refused and when he threatened to imprison her she cursed him that he would never leave Massagetae lands alive and just as soon as she came she disappeared.

When Tomyris heard of the defeat she was furious for her own brother had fallen in the fighting. She sent a message to the Persian king.

"You bloodthirsty heathen! Pride not yourself on this cheap victory that you have won against a boy using trickery and the treachery of a traitor. Restore my son to me and get you gone from my lands for know that you have triumphed over only a third of my army and I will let you leave . If you fail to comply with my requests I will end your life and give you your fill of blood."

Certainly Cyrus should have heeded her words but he dismissed it as the rantings of a deluded mother. As for Spargapises when he realised that he had been captured he asked that Cyrus release him and when he was released he took a sword from a nearby soldier and killed himself.

When the news of his death reached the Queen there was wailing and lamentation in the Sarmatian camp and the Queen locked herself away and shaved her head. The following day the entire Sarmatian army and their allies wore black and it was a sinister sombre looking army that fought the brightly coloured saffron and purple host of the Persians.

The battle itself was said to be the most savage encounter ever fought."

Osanes had just arrived at his favourite part when he called for more ale and began a very gory description of the battle itself. The serving girl, a pretty girl with flaxen hair like everyone else in the Long Hall obliged.

Saronne noted that Nitocris like all the men and Massagetae in the long hall were enraptured by tales of battle. She had seen war herself. No one ever talked about the smell of death and the screams of dying men or the foul odour of decomposing flesh. No the talk was always about glory, feats of bravery and derring do by dashing heroes and gallant warriors.

She wasn't interested in that. All she wanted to know was that Tiirmirise was alright. She heard the bard say Cyrus was indeed killed and that the dream he'd had about Darius taking over his throne was a warning from the gods about his death and he died horribly from the account of the bard.

The bard continued his story with relish frantically strumming his sitar when describing the fight scenes and playing a melancholy note when describing the death of one of the protagonists in his

story.

"Some say the Queen had them tie his manhood and testicles so that he could not piss and then collecting the blood from dead Sarmatian men they forced him to drink it till he burst. Others say she made his skull into a goblet from which she drank his blood."

Everyone gasped and Saronne realised he was simply trying to draw emotion from the crowd.

"Yes but what is the truth?" Votigern asked quietly.

"They say, and I believe this version, that she decapitated his corpse and dipped the head in blood saying "Thus I make good my threat that you will have your fill of gore but you have the last laugh for you took my son and brother by guile and treachery."

"What happened to Ninyas?" Saronne asked

"He died a noble death on the battlefield, a traitor fighting for another country's king."

The Queen is on her way here to claim the Queenette Saronne and she comes with a navy and army determined to give battle until the Lady Aeslynn the fair, the jewel of Araxes, Hand Maiden of the Sarmatia and the Hidden Queen of the Massagetae is returned." The bard finished as though it was part of the story.

She knew him and his name came out in a gasp "Osanes!"

He threw off his disguise. "It is indeed I, Osanes. I am come to offer you terms King Votigern."

"Terms? What terms?"

"The Queen Tiirmirise requests that you return the Queenette and the princesses Nitocris and Chryseis to her care and protection."

"I will not allow my daughter to return to that barbaric woman!" spat Votigern "Didn't you just tell me she drinks blood from skulls! No way Absolutely not! Seize him!"

Saronne intervened "Father you cannot you have offered him hospitality!"

"Very well. Get you gone from these halls!" The king commanded in a booming voice.

Another war this time with Cappadocia and more fighting with the Persians till they were thrown out of the territories of Sarmatia and its allies for good. The Persians signed a treaty of peace and retreated never to return. It would be another year before Tomyris could see to recovering her family.

A month after the last of the treaties were signed a fleet of ships were sighted and they were flying the flag of the Massagetae Queen. A Silver falcon with outstretched wings on a black

background.

Saronne was scolding Nitocris who had an aversion to sums. The young girl at seven was a complete handful with dreams of becoming a Massagetae warrior. Chryseis on the other hand was a tranquil well behaved child with more peaceful leanings like playing with her dolls.

Tomyris stormed into Votigern's hall alone dressed in black with her purple cloak swirling behind her. She wore her helmet and the silver mask and Votigern's Thanes quivered in fear as her booted feet echoed ominously with every step she took. Her silver spurs glinted on the ankles of her thigh high black boots and she looked absolutely terrifying.

When she removed her helmet Saronne felt a wave of tenderness sweep over her for she looked like she had aged ten years with the death of her beloved Father, brother and son. A grey lock of hair a shocking, testament to her hard fought life, fell across her forehead. The rest of the hair on her head was jet black close cut to the nape of her neck.

Her face was gaunt and hard, her high cheekbones stark and the lips that once caressed Saronne's skin so tenderly were hard and uncompromising. Yet in the black depths of the eye not covered by an eye patch glittered intelligence and a depth of love that Saronne's soul had missed during their separation. She was going home and her heart felt like singing.

"Our greetings King Votigern." She bowed ever so slightly to show respect yet enough to be vaguely insulting.

"Queen Tomyris to what do We owe this pleasure?"

"We are come," Tiirmirise gritted her teeth "On behalf of myself and the People of the plains to formally request the return of the Queenette Saronne and the Princesses Nitocris and Chryseis."

"What if We refuse?"

"We would be extremely pleased if you refused Votigern." Tiirmirise said dangerously. "We promised the council of viziers We would ask before taking them and burning down your long hall. We have fulfilled that promise. Now We would be more than happy to burn down your long hall and take my family back to Sarmatia where they belong knowing full well you would not be alive to spirit them away again."

Saronne gasped. She knew her lover very well. Tiirmirise felt threatened and would do all to secure her family.

"After all you were careless enough to lose her to slavers. We are surprised to find them still here."

"How dare you! We do not have slaves in my kingdom and..."

"We could not give a flying fuck what you do with your kingdom King Votigern. We will have

our wife and children."

"Or what? You will start a war?"

"I have 1000 armed Massagetae soldiers in your long hall and an army of ten thousand waiting outside the doors of your long hall."

"That is not enough to defeat us!"

"Indeed! You sound like a dead king We once knew, perhaps you have heard of him his name was Cyrus, he too underestimated us."

Votigern swallowed hard. He had only a thousand household thanes and he did not have the resources to fund a standing army. It would take him months to even get an army if his people ever even agreed to accede to his request.

"Very well you need heirs you can have the brats my daughter stays."

Tiirmirise lost her temper. "We will not leave here without ALL our family Votigern."

"Aunty Tomyris can I come with you?"

"Who said that?"

"I did I am Nitocris."

"You wish to come with me?" Tomyris asked quizzically "Without your mother?"

"Well I certainly don't want to stay here!! Err no offence Grandpa!"

"None taken." the old man drawled lazily.

Tomyris moved so fast she was a blur. She stood In front of Nitocris and struck, a hand going to the child's face. Nitocris ducked the first blow and avoided the second blow blocking it with her wrist.

Tomyris grinned "You will make an excellent Massagetae warrior." The Queen scooped her up into her arms and kissed her forehead "How I have missed you little one." She whispered the last words and chuckled as the young girl threw her arms around her neck.

"I missed you to! Aunty Ti."

"Oh no she will not!" Saronne stepped forward from where she had been waiting anxiously hidden by Votigern's household thanes.

Tiirmirise stood watching her for what seemed an eternity, her black-eyed gaze just drinking in

the sight of her and then they were in each others arms. Tiirmirise wrapped an arm around her waist and captured her lips in a kiss she had fantasised about for what seemed like eternity.

"What about me?" Wailed Chryseis plaintively and Tiirmirise laughed and picked up the little girl and gave her a gentle kiss.

Votigern sighed and Leif, Saronne's brother placed a hand on his father's shoulder.

"I guess that answers your question father. I believe Tomyris does indeed love Aeslynn and you might as well let her go with your blessing."

"But she just got here" Votigern wailed sounding exactly like his granddaughter Chryseis.

The rest of the Sarmatian delegation attended Votigern in his long hall and amongst them was Bierae. She had accompanied the Sarmatian Queen and she was gloriously pregnant.

"Why did you make such a journey in your condition?" Saronne asked curiously as she helped to make the princess more comfortable.

"Because Tiirmirise was insane with jealousy. She has missed you terribly and she is feeling particularly vulnerable and someone has to pound some sense into her until you two got together. This is an official Trade delegation.."

"Trade delegation?"

"Yes Tiirmirise told the Chamber she was coming here to trade." Bierae said wryly. "If she had told them she was coming to war on your father they would never have let us come."

After signing trade treaties and taking their leave on a favourable wind the Sarmatians returned to Sarmatia with Saronne and her children. All the way back Nitocris had pestered Tiirmirise about becoming a warrior. Saronne was vehemently opposed to it and Tiirmirise had given Nitocris lessons secretly on fighting and weapons and other basic weapons training. It was after all a long voyage.

She also learned literature history and diplomacy from Saronne although she preferred to read military treatise and books on engineering and military history when she thought her Saronne was not watching.

When Saronne found out about the secret lessons she was furious and called Tiirmirise out. "You are teaching her to become a war monger!"

"Saronne," Tiirmirise said reasonably "She will need to learn how to protect herself and look out for her little sister because Chryseis shows no inclination in swords or anything!" Tiirmirise looked exasperated "All she wants to do is play with dolls and even worse she thinks everyone loves her!"

"Everyone does love her!" Saronne replied

"That is not the point!"

Nitocris remained stubborn. "But I wish to be a Massagetae. I will be a Massagetae!"

"I want to be a pwincess." Chryseis smiled and gave Tiirmirise a wet kiss.

Tiirmirise kissed Chryseis back and ruffled Nitocris's hair "You are as stubborn as your mother Nito. Very well if you are able to take the right of passage you can be a Massagetae."

"Right of passage, I don't like the sound of that, I don't like the sound of that at all Tiirmirise. What exactly does it involve?" Saronne chewed her lip worriedly.

"They will tattoo your back with wings. You will not be able to lie on your back for three days and during that time you must fend for yourself in the wilderness with only a knife. If you succeed you become Massagetae and they will burn off your right breast.

All that you will be left with is a scar. If you fail well you will still be a Massagetae because your father is one but they will not burn off your right breast and you will never be able to bear arms as a warrior.

"That's barbaric!"

"It is the training!"

"I bet they don't burn the men's breasts off?"

"No they have their penis mutilated. I believe you call it circumcision but they too will be tattooed with wings and have to survive in the wilderness."

"Tiirmirise I am not entirely sure this conversation is appropriate for..."

"It is life. She will be Queen one day and she should not be overly pampered. Spargapis and Qastursh were overly pampered and look what happened to them."

Tiirmirise eased out of her armour with a sigh and flexed her muscles. Nitocris was fascinated by the wings tattooed on her back

"Can I touch them?"

"Off course!"

"Did they hurt?"

"At the time it was very painful but like all things the pain passes away and only the beauty and

pride of being a Massagetae remains."

"Wow!" Nitocris exhaled as Tiirmirise shrugged into her tunic. "I wish I could be a Massa..."

"Don't say it! Don't even think about it! I absolutely forbid it!" Saronne glared at her daughter.

When they finally arrived in Sarmatia they were welcomed back with fanfare. There was feasting and banqueting and games. Chariot races plays games. There was even a wine fountain which flowed for three days.

At the first sitting of the Council of Viziers Saronne sat beside Tiirmirise in her own ivory currule chair side by side on the same dais as equals.

Hail Tiirmirise Queen of the Massagetae, Dread Lady of the Plains, Falcon of Sarmatia and the Lady of Battles.

Hail Saronne Queenette of the Massagetae, The Hidden Queen of the Plains, Hand Maiden of Sarmatia and Jewel of the Araxes.

Hail! Hail! Hail!

...And they all lived happily ever after except for Princess Nitocris who wished to become a Massagetae warrior but that is a story for another day.

Fin

**Lucien St Clare's Scrolls
Index Page**
