

SUZANNE FRANCIS

Ketha's
Daughter

Song of the Arkafina
Book Two

KETHA'S DAUGHTER

SUZANNE FRANCIS

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For my parents —
Bob and Christine,
with a world of love.



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Suzanne Francis



Prologue

Geya sits before her silver mirror, outside of time and space.

One sister appears before her beautiful, moonlit eyes are troubled. I joined with my vessel and healed her husband, as you said to, Geya. You were right. He is not the son of Shiqaba.

Geya sighs. Is he one of us?

No.

Then who is he?

Dai! He is Dai, Geya. After everything he said to us about leaving the humans alone, he goes and becomes one!

Geya is angry. He has betrayed us for the last time! Carry a message to Raven. She will deal with this.

Moonlight shakes her lovely head in horror. You would give Dai over to Keth Dirane? Geya, you know what she will do to him. His end will not be a pleasant one. Even if he is a traitor, he is still our brother Amaranthine.

He was Amaranthine, you mean. Now he is only a man. But when he is reborn he will truly be one of us, Moonlight. He will be a traitor no longer.

But my vessel loves him. You would take her husband from her?

Now Dai has become human he could die at any time, and Death would feel no remorse, so why should I?

I wonder though...

What, Moonlight?

Why he decided to become human. Perhaps he has some plan to stop the Angellus. Perhaps we should not interfere.

He is the one who has meddled. She was meant to marry the son of Shiqaba. Only Moera knows what difference it may make to this turn of the Gyre.

The Numen might know.

You are right, Moonlight. I will go to her.

Chapter One

Lutyond's Leviathan

An old woman sits by a fireplace, and rattles a skin pouch filled with round stones, worn smooth by the action of the waves on the beach. She closes her eyes and places her hand inside, then stares at the stone she retrieves. It has been carefully incised with a stylized iceberg symbol.

Turning to her companion, who also sits close to the warmth of the fire, she says— Look, Hieronymus, it is Lutyond's Leviathan.[\[1\]](#) That means Raven is on the move at last.

* * * *

“No! I am not going and that is final. You cannot make me, Mother, and you know it. So why do you continue to argue?” Gwenn Benet angrily stamped her booted foot and glared at her mother.

Katkin sighed. The girl was right — she could not force Gwenn to do anything she did not want to do. She

tried to reason with her stubborn daughter. “Listen, Gwenn. I have been Queen for sixteen years, far longer than I originally thought I would have to keep the position. Beaumarais does not need me anymore. The country is at peace with all her neighbors and trade is more profitable than ever. What is more, your father...”

Gwenn interrupted sarcastically, “My what? Call him Jacq. He means nothing to me.”

The Queen gave her an angry glance. “Jacq, then. I promised him many years ago I would not stay in the City any longer than I had to. I know he is weary of being the Queen’s consort, Gwenn. He does not complain, but I see the unhappiness in his eyes. It is time for us to move to the country and go back to the life he loves best. He has been more than patient.”

“And you expect me to give up being a Princess, and go and live in some disgusting... hovelin the back of beyond just so you can make him happy? Why should I? I like it here in the Citadel, with Jessamine and the rest of my friends.” Gwenn’s stormy expression left Katkin little doubt her carefully rehearsed arguments had fallen on deaf ears.

“Acorn is not a hovel. You saw that for yourself when we rode out there last week. When I instructed my men to rebuild the house your father... I mean, Jacq, and I used to live in, I told them to expand and refurbish it. They even added indoor plumbing.”

Gwenn gave her mother a withering look. “Indoor plumbing? My Gods, Mother, get a grip on yourself. Why

did you not have Tintaren Manor rebuilt instead? That might be a decent place to live.”

“Tintaren Manor burned down long ago, and I don’t have any desire to live in my family’s old mansion anyway. My father made his fortune by exploiting the cottars who worked for us. How would it look if I retired and took up residence there? It is out of the question. Anyway, I have already had Acorn rebuilt as a surprise for Jacq, and I intend to tell him tomorrow at your birthday banquet. I know he will be pleased.”

“Are you planning to tell him any other secrets?” Gwenn said poisonously. “I know one which would not please him at all.”

Katkin took a deep breath, determined to keep her temper in check now Gwenn had begun her favorite game. She said, firmly, “That is in the past and it needs to stay there.”

“Oh yes, my Mother, and it will, as long as I get what I want. And what I want is to stay here in St. Valery.” Gwenn looked at her mother and Katkin felt a sudden urge to slap the sneer from her face. Still, she did nothing.

“If you could stay here and go to school, as I did in my younger days, then I would not mind. Since you have managed to get yourself thrown out of every educational institution in St. Valery that is not possible. What happened at the last one? Beating up the headmaster, was it not?”

Gwenn’s sneer turned into a pout. “Because I threatened to slice up that awful François Besson after he tried

to kiss me, the headmaster took my sword away and told me to go to my room. Faugh! I challenged him to a duel and he laughed at me. I had to crush him; my honor was at stake.”

“You have been listening to too many of Jacq’s tales. Young ladies are not supposed to behave like warriors. What am I going to do with you?”

“You are not going to do anything with me. I don’t have to listen to you. Ketha says...”

Katkin felt her grip on her temper slipping. “Leave that venomous snake out of this conversation. None of this would have happened if not for her.”

“What do you mean, Mother? Ketha is my best friend in the whole world. She has given me powers you can only dream of.”

“She has made you quarrelsome and unkind and I rue the day I ever let you near her. But that, too, is in the past and I cannot change it. Now listen to me, and listen well. You are going to leave St. Valery and move to the country with me and Jacq, and that is final.” Katkin held her daughter’s intense blue eyes in a challenging stare.

“No! Stop ordering me about or I will tell him the truth.” Gwenn gave a satisfied smile, sure this threat, which had served her so well in the past, would come to her defense again. This time her mother surprised her.

“Go ahead and tell him,” Katkin said bitterly. I have lived with that secret for sixteen years. I am too tired to fight any more.”

She thought back to the day long ago when Gwenn had come to her, full of questions, carrying a braid of

blond and chestnut hair carefully twined together and tied with a ribbon. Katkin had hidden it away in the bottom of a locked chest in her personal dressing room, and she had no doubt the troublemaking Keth Dirane had sent the girl to find it. The blond hair woven into the braid belonged to Captain Tomas de Vigny — Gwenn’s true father. Katkin had once allowed him to make love to her, in return for a visit with her incarcerated husband, Jacq Benet. Unbeknownst to her, Tomas later made the braid — using a lock of her hair wound together with his — as a memento of the assignation that created Gwenn. Jacq knew nothing of Gwenn’s true parentage, of course. Katkin had sworn on the heart of the Goddess Lalluna she would never tell him, on the day Tomas de Vigny died.

“Fine, maybe I will!” Gwenn snapped back. “Then you will be sorry.”

“So will you, one day,” Katkin spoke quietly now, with regret. “Jacq loves you so much. I only wish he felt as proud of Tristan as he does of you.”

“Of course he is proud of me. Even if he is not my real father, I am still the true heir of the Dinrhydan[2], the greatest swordsman in the history of Beaumarais. That baby Tristan cannot come close. Ketha made me strong, and Jacq taught me the ways of the warrior. There is no man who could vanquish me now.”

Katkin wearily shook her head. “Such skills belong to a different time. Now the world is at peace. When will you understand that?”

“Ketha speaks of a place where the accomplishments of the warrior are still valued, and someday soon I am going there. I will have such power, no-one will tell me what to do, ever again.” She gave her mother a meaningful glance. “I will make you pay dearly for all your lies.” With this, she turned and ran from the room. Katkin watched her go. After brushing the tears from her eyes, she called for her equerry to ready her pony, Alys.

* * * *

As Gwenn strode through the Citadel passages on her way to the blacksmith’s shop, Ketha’s voice echoed hollowly in her mind. “Are you going to tell him our secret? You said you would.” She sounded hopeful. As Gwenn stepped on to the grassy parade fields, she paused to admire a detachment of Queen’s Guard practicing close order drilling. She spoke out loud, though there was no-one near her.

“No, of course not. I love Jacq, even if he is not my real father. He is the only one who understands me. Not like her. I hate my mother!”

“You told your mother he meant nothing to you.” Ketha’s disappointment sounded plainly in her voice.

“I just said that to make her angry.” Gwenn sighed. “I suppose I will actually have to do as she says this time.”

“When are you going to learn, my dear? You must not allow your mother to dictate to you. That is not the way to freedom, child. Make her pay, Gwenn, as you threatened. Let us leave tonight, and make our way north. You can make new friends there, friends with real

power. Later we can come back and crush her, as you have always wanted. Then we can have Jacq all to ourselves.”

Gwenn listened to this in surprise. Had she always wanted to crush her mother? If Ketha said so, she supposed it had to be true.

She came in to the blacksmith shop and greeted her stepfather cheerfully. Jacq grinned at her as he hammered a red-hot horseshoe. Gwenn had been helping in the smithy since she was just a little thing, barely big enough to lift the heavy metal implements. Now she watched with interest, ready with the tongs to plunge the finished shoe into the cold water. Jacq nodded to her when it was ready and the shoe joined the others in the bucket with a brief hiss of boiling water and steam.

Jacq labored at the Citadel ironworks several days a week, making horseshoes or other handcrafted metal implements as needed. Of course, as the Queen’s consort, he did not really have to work at all, but it made him feel useful to be making things with his hands. He felt very proud of his famous wife, who had saved the City from certain annihilation when she became the Avatar of Lalluna. Though she had been terribly maimed in her efforts to heal Hythea, the volcano Goddess, and now had only one arm, Jacq still thought her as beautiful as the day they met. Then she had been six years old and he ten. He had never loved another woman, could not even imagine it, until his little girl had been born and stolen his heart. Of course, he loved his son Tristan as well, but the boy could not

compete with Gwenn, who shared Jacq's fascination with sword fighting.

They toiled together in companionable silence for a few moments and then she asked, "Do you have any swords to work on today, Jacq?"

He shook his head and she sighed regretfully. This use of his first name no longer troubled him, for she had been calling him that a few years now, for some reason he could not fathom. Katkin had assured him their daughter was just going through a phase and would grow out of it — but she had not.

"Are you almost finished?" she asked him eagerly. "Let's go practice for a while. I think I almost had you yesterday, you know. If only I had done a half turn to the left instead of the right, you would have been at my mercy."

"Of course we can. And you may turn whichever way takes your fancy today," he added drily. Jacq smiled and placed his sledgehammer with the other tools on the rack above the workbench. Though he had more work to do, he always made time for Gwenn and her sword fighting lessons. He began teaching her the day she showed an interest in his long, two-handed sword, d'angwir,^[3] when she was six years old. Over her mother's strenuous objections, he had forged a tiny blunt-tipped metal blade for her. She had taken to swordplay with such determination and skill he continued to make her weapons as she grew and they spent many hours a week practicing. Other than tumbling, it was her only interest. Certainly, school had

not held her attention, but that did not bother Jacq at all.

“But wait a moment. I have something to give you first.”

He walked back to a dark corner of the smithy, behind the big forge, and returned with a long, bulky object wrapped in a dirty cloth. This present had taken him six months to make, and in it he had placed all the love and pride he felt in his heart for his warrior daughter.

Gwenn looked baffled as he handed over the bundle. He said, “I know your birthday isn’t until tomorrow, but I want you to open this now, in private.” Jacq smiled and shrugged sheepishly. “Your mother wouldn’t understand, and I did not want there to be an argument at the banquet.”

She unwrapped his present eagerly and gasped at the contents. There, in her hands, lay the most beautifully worked sword she had ever seen. Her stepfather had executed every detail impeccably, from the finely shaped damascened steel blade, to the wrist guard made of twisted gold and silver wire with inset jewels. Gwenn held it up to the light, a look of wonder on her face as she admired the detailed engraving that flashed with glints of fire from the forge.

“Oh, Papa, it is a most magnificent sword! Did you truly make it just for me?”

Jacq smiled happily and nodded — pleased he had shocked his daughter back into calling him by his title again. She held it before her and executed some rapid

slashes. The perfectly balanced weapon performed just like a living extension of her arm.

Gwenn gave a whoop of sheer delight. “Come on, let’s go and practice, right now! You had better watch out. Now you have given me this, I think I might be able to vanquish you at last, my Papa.”

He handed her a matching scabbard and baldric, crafted with equally loving attention, and said, “First we must consecrate your new blade and give it a name. It might take you some time to think of the right one, and you should not use it until then. Today you should use your old sword.”

She shook her head decisively. “I already know what name I want. My sword shall be called keth’fell.”

“Keth’fell? Are you sure?” Jacq thought the name, which meant “death crow” in the old tongue, seemed a strange one for her to choose.

“I am sure. What do I have to do to consecrate my sword?” She waited impatiently as Jacq explained she must draw her own blood with the sword and smear it onto the blade.

“Then you must repeat the name of the sword three times and call upon the Goddess to protect you from harm. Will you do the bloodletting yourself, or do you want me to do it for you?”

Gwenn seemed unsure, so he took her hand in his huge rough one. “Ready?” he asked, and gave her a worried look.

She nodded confidently and said, “Do it, Papa.” He drew the edge of the blade across her palm, making a

shallow cut that bled freely. Gwenn blinked once or twice but did not make a sound. Jacq looked on proudly as she dabbed the puddle of blood in her left hand with her fingertips and anointed the blade.

“Now say keth’fell three times and call on Lalluna,” he instructed her.

Gwenn did as he said, but instead of petitioning her mother’s Goddess, the peaceful Lalluna, for protection, she silently prayed to Keth Dirane. Ketha’s voice came to her in her mind, saying, “Of course I will always protect you Gwenn.”

Once they finished the ceremony, Gwenn followed Jacq out of the smithy into the bright spring sunshine. She chattered exuberantly about her new sword as they made their way across the parade field towards the special fighting apparatus Jacq had built for them. It consisted of many individual platforms on several levels, with connecting stairs, ramps, and swinging bridges. Jacq spent a few moments rearranging the platforms into an unfamiliar configuration as Gwenn happily did back flips, cartwheels and somersaults on the grass. Her bright blond hair flashed in the sun.

Jacq placed his own sword with the blade pointing diagonally towards the ground. Gwenn joined him on the platform and crossed his sword with her own. She felt a shiver of pure delight when she saw that keth’fell was the equal of her father’s mighty weapon, d’angwir. He locked eyes with her, grey into blue, and forgot he looked upon his daughter. Now she was only his opponent, and he focused completely on her. He held up

his hand, and barked, “En garde!” Gwenn nodded and the fight began.

Their lessons almost always drew a crowd. Passing Guardsmen stopped to watch the Dinrhydan’s magnificent skill with d’angwir, as he fought off charge after tireless charge from Gwenn. Though Jacq had seen his fortieth birthday this year, he still moved with the easy grace of a dancer as he ran backwards up a flight of steps and then jumped down to the lower platform. Gwenn executed a front somersault and landed before him. She swung in a vicious arc and Jacq ducked quickly to avoid losing his head. He thrust forward and she did a one handed back flip, the landing perfectly balanced. The crowd before them cheered, but neither heard the cries. Only the flashing of swords and the movement of the opponent’s body occupied the fighter’s attention. Neither gave or asked the other for quarter.

The contest continued for thirty minutes, until Jacq’s face dripped with sweat and his breathing became ragged. Gwenn watched him carefully, waiting for the moment when he would tire and drop his guard for a split second. Never had she felt so invincible. Keth’fell made her into the warrior she had always dreamt she would be. Whirling sideways, she sent Jacq staggering with a swift kick, and watched triumphantly as he fell backwards. In a split second, she had hooked his wrist guard with the point of keth’fell and disarmed him. He gazed up at her in surprise. Her eyes hardened, and she touched the wickedly sharp tip of her sword to the hollow of his throat below the Adam’s apple. Seeing the

pulse beating in his neck gave her a curious thrill of power. The crowd below her murmured in consternation. Jacq lay very still, resting on his elbows, and his heart hammered as he waited for Gwenn to release him.

“Why don’t you finish him?” Ketha hissed to her. “Now is your chance to prove you are mightier than the Dinrhydan.”

Gwenn backed away, shaking her head, and dropped her sword. She cried out, “No! Not him. I won’t do it.”

Jacq stared at his daughter. “Who are you talking to?” he asked her.

She hung her head in embarrassment. “No-one, Papa. I just got confused for a moment.” Gwenn held out her hand and helped him to rise.

He picked up keth’fell and handed it to her carefully, saying with a smile, “Well, I guess the time had to come, my daughter. You are the victor today, and I could not be more proud of you. Happy birthday, sweetheart.” He gathered her up into his arms for an embrace, and Gwenn put her head on his broad shoulder, and managed to wipe her eyes surreptitiously on his already soaked shirt. As a true shield maiden, she did not want to be seen crying like a little girl.

After a moment, she said, “If I am a warrior truly worthy of respect, it is because of you, my Papa. Thank you for keth’fell and all your patient lessons. I will never forget this day. I love you, Papa Bear.”

Jacq smiled and unashamedly wiped the tears from his own eyes. She had not called him that since she was a little girl. “I love you, too, Goldilocks.”

The crowd around the platform broke up now that the show had ended. Father and daughter walked back towards the Citadel tower, arm in arm, animatedly discussing the finer points of the battle.

Fourteen-year-old Tristan Dinrhydan Benet watched them approach from his bedroom window. As it always did at these moments, his mind festered with jealousy and rage. His father and Gwenn had something special that Tristan knew in his heart he could never share. He had practiced and practiced with his sword, but it was clear he would never be his sister's equal in that department. Papa would always love her more. Turning away from the window in disgust, Tristan went to find his mother to tell her Gwenn had been fighting again. If he could get his sister into trouble, it might make him feel a little better.

Gwenn met him coming down the stairs. "Hello, little Shrimp. Where are you going with such a stormy face?" she taunted him.

"None of your business, Longshanks. Get out of my way." Gwenn towered over Tristan, and could easily best him in any physical contest, from racing to wrestling. He took some comfort in the fact he excelled at school. But though his father pretended to take pride in this, Tristan could tell it did not impress him nearly as much as his sister's dazzling swordsmanship.

Gwenn stepped aside saying, "Go on, Brat. Run to Mummy and tell her I have been practicing with Jacq." She smirked at Tristan when she saw by his expression that her guess had hit the mark.

He gave her a black look, and then noticed the sword she wore strapped to her back with the baldric Jacq had made for her. "Holy Goddess! Where did that come from? Did you steal it?"

She gave him a haughty look. "Of course I did not steal keth'fell. Papa made her for me, as a present for my sixteenth birthday." Gwenn produced the weapon with a ringing flourish and showed it off to her brother.

Though Tristan tried hard not to look impressed, his jealousy showed plainly on his face. He said, "Mother will not be pleased. You know she hates it when you and Father fight. The last time the surgeon had to stitch him up, she shouted at him for ages afterwards. Both of you are going to be in trouble now."

Gwenn laughed in his face. "I don't give a damn what she thinks. Soon, I will bring her to her knees and make her beg me for her very life. She will be the one in trouble, not me."

He looked at his sister with wide, shocked eyes. "You should not talk that way! Our mother is the Queen, remember? Such threats are treason. It is my duty as a citizen of the realm to tell her what you said. They will send the Guard for you."

"Tell her. I don't care. No-one can catch me where I am going," Gwenn said smugly.

"Are you leaving?" This unexpected news made him feel happier than he had for some time.

"Yes I am, and don't go running to Mummy with that piece of news. If you do, I'll cut your heart out and feed it to the cat for dinner." She glared at her brother.

Tristan smiled cunningly at her. "Don't worry, big sister, your secret is safe with me. Where are you going?"

"I am not telling you, little boy. But when I come back, you had better watch out. All of you." She said nothing else, just brushed past him up the stairs. Tristan watched her go, and he could not hide his hopeful expression.

Gwenn went into her bedroom and lay down on the ornately worked metal canopy bed her stepfather had made for her long ago. "A bed fit for a princess," he had laughingly said to her, on her eighth birthday.

Back then, she had been happy, for she had not known about her mother's lies. Reaching under her pillow, she removed a pearl-handled dagger and studied it closely. It had once belonged to her real father, Tomas de Vigny. Gwenn had kept it at her mother for ages until she gave her the knife, saying it was the only thing of Tomas' she owned. Besides the hair, of course, but Katkin had refused to give her that. Tomas had been Jacq's sworn enemy. Gwenn still did not understand how her mother could have done such a terrible thing to her beloved Papa, and she hated her for lying to them both.

Ketha's voice rang in her head. "The sooner you leave here, the sooner you can make her pay."

"He is supposed to be coming back here to St. Valery," Gwenn said earnestly. "I want to see him before we depart. Jessamine told me he sent a letter."

“We cannot wait forever. He is months late already. We need to go NOW so we can make our way north in good weather. Perhaps we will meet him on the way.”

“Do you think so? Could you find him, in all this wide Yrth?”

Ketha cackled. “Of course I can find him. Am I not a Goddess? But you must not tell him your real name or your destination. He might try to stop you, or come back here to warn the others.”

“But Ketha, I...”

“No! Heed me, or I will punish you. Do you understand?” Ketha’s voice was harsh, and Gwenn knew this was no idle threat. Her hand instinctively strayed to a long ragged scar on her upper thigh.

“Very well. I will do as you say.” Gwenn heaved a sigh and stood up.

“That is better. Now start packing. We leave tonight, after the moon sets.”

Gwenn moved slowly around her bedroom. Though she had been saying for months she could not wait for the day she could leave home, now the moment was at hand she felt curiously reluctant. She examined her collection of stuffed animals on the shelf, next to the books optimistically given to her by her mother that she had never even opened. There were prizes for tumbling pinned to the walls, and pictures she had painted as a child. Her first little sword, that Jacq had made her all those years ago, had pride of place over the mantle piece. She ran her fingers along the dulled edge

regretfully. Her eyes filled with tears as she recalled his proud expression today after she had defeated him.

Ketha said, "What is this? I thought you were a shield maiden. You cannot afford to be sentimental. You want power, do you not? And freedom? Jacq has taught you everything he knows. He can be of no more use to us. Now we must move forward and find a race of warriors for you to command. That has always been your dream, has it not?"

Gwenn wiped her eyes and nodded. Ketha was right, as usual. She began stuffing some old clothes into a leather shoulder bag while looking with distaste at the beautiful dresses her mother had bought for her. She left them untouched on their hangers in the armoire, along with the dainty slippers and luxurious stockings. At least her mother would never force her to wear such things again. She pulled on her over-the-knee leather boots, and placed the dagger into the top of the right one. Suddenly, she remembered she could not slip away until it was dark, and that meant dressing for dinner. Gwenn felt sure another meeting with her stepfather would make her change her mind about leaving all together.

With a look of grim determination, she placed the scabbard and baldric belonging to keth'fell over her head, and shouldered her bag. After creeping along the deserted hallway, she went to her mother's dressing room, reached into the back of her wardrobe, and pulled out a small wooden coffer. Deftly, she picked the lock with a hairpin and removed the keepsake that had once

belonged to her real father. Underneath it, she saw a curious amulet. With a sly smile, she placed it around her neck. She snapped the chest shut again, placed it back in the wardrobe and went back to her own room. After hastily rolling up one of the woolen blankets from her bed, she tied it with some rarely used hair ribbons.

Although her room stood on the third floor of the Citadel tower, Gwenn often exited through the window to avoid whatever tedious duty her mother wanted to impose on her. She scanned the parade field below. The mess hall bell had just rung, and all the Guardsmen were inside having dinner. Gwenn stepped over the sill and found a good handhold on the ivy clinging to the brickwork. After one long last look at her bedroom, she swiftly climbed down the wall and left her old life behind.

Chapter Two

Orlinir Flow

The Numen sits quietly by her fireplace, in an old rocking chair. Hieronymus stays with her, as he always does.

As he makes a little sound, she looks towards the door. Someone coming eh, Hieronymus? Who might it be?

Hieronymus blinks his golden eyes at the Numen.

* * * *

Arkady Svalbarad rode south, down a rutted and little used track. He urged his horse forward at the best speed the tired beast could manage. Ajax lifted her proud head and neighed, her chestnut flanks glossy with sweat in the late afternoon sun. The sand dunes on either side of the track sent up wobbling waves of heated air and blocked the cooling breeze from the ocean. Arkady retrieved a water skin from his saddle and took a long drink, and poured a little of the water over his head in a vain effort to keep cool. The heat of the southern

summer bothered him now, though as a boy he had labored outside for hours on hotter days than this. But it was many years since his wanderings had taken him this close to the land of his birth.

Arkady had been traveling for many months — still he rode easily in the saddle. Once he had learned everything he could at the university in St. Ekaterina, he had taken the road as his companion and teacher. For four years he had been an itinerant scholar, and had seen much. Now, he felt called by his homeland, Beaumarais, and the desire to see his family again. He had written, ages ago, to say he was coming, but spring storms in the Gulf of Angar'et made it impossible to get passage down the coast on a trading vessel. But Arkady was nothing if not patient, and he bided his time on the coast working as a fisherman's jack, hauling in nets and checking lobster pots. Such hard physical labor contented him, for his mind could roam freely where it desired, while at the end of the day his body was pleasantly ready for food and sleep.

Ajax stopped, having spied a patch of tempting looking grass off to the side of the track. "All right, girl," he said, lightheartedly. "I am ready for a break too. How about if we set up camp, here, in this shady spot?" He dismounted in the lee of a high dune and stroked Ajax's ears fondly. "Tomorrow we will rise before the sun, and make up the lost time in the cool hours of the early morning."

In the distance he heard the whistling cries of sea birds, a familiar sound after so many days aboard ship.

Arkady smiled ruefully, remembering how long it had taken him to get his sea legs. The blond sailors of the Dalvolk had laughed at him as he spent unhappy hours those first few days at sea with his head over the side of their wooden, two-masted Knar^[4]ship, his face pale and sweaty. Nevertheless, they quickly befriended him once they found he could speak their tongue. Arkady helped them make trades as they made their way down the coast, for he spoke five different languages well, and had a smattering of others. In the end they had been sorry to see him go, but he politely refused their offer of a full time position on the boat, wanting only to feel the steady land under his feet as he made his way home on Ajax.

He still had some distance to cover, another two weeks at least, before he would see the familiar high purple hills marking the boundary of Beaumarais. Then he would truly be home. The thought pleased him. His four brothers, all older than he, had wives and children, some born since he left on his travels. His younger sister would be a teenager now. Arkady liked children, and doted on his nieces and nephews. But he had no wife or child of his own, for the road had become his mistress, and he was satisfied with that.

His last teacher, Dawa Tinley, of the mountainous country of T'Shang, had taught him much about satisfaction and illusory yearnings. He had learned more from that wizened little man in a single year than all of his illustrious professors in St. Ekaterina taught him in his four years as a student there. All the hours spent

sitting completely still, trying to silence the incessant chatter in his mind, had eventually paid off. Dawa had sent him on his way, saying laughingly he could teach him no more, and why did he not find a student of his own?

Arkady sat now on the warm sand, with his legs crossed and his hands resting lightly on his knees. Hunger fretted away inside him, but he ignored it, intent on having an hour's meditation before giving way to his desire for food. Now, in the shade of the dune, he could feel a cool breeze, and he removed his sodden shirt, throwing it over the oat grass nodding in front of him. It would be dry by the time he finished his meditation. The sunlight, still bright in the late afternoon, made a red haze in front of his closed eyes. Arkady focused on the redness and began to repeat his mantra. Soon he slipped into a deep state of relaxation, and there were no more thoughts of hunger or home. Just the endless rushing sound of the blood in his ears, like the pounding waves of time in the universe. Arkady did not notice when a small sea bird passed almost right in front of him on the sand, hunting for tiny insects. The bird paused, completely unaware of the motionless figure before it. A second later, it flew away, frightened by the girl that had appeared from behind the nearest dune.

She stood and watched Arkady for a long time. His stillness confused her and she wondered if he slept, though she had never heard of anyone sleeping sitting up like that. Stepping softly back, she found a pebble and tossed it carefully. It hit him on the thigh. The girl

ducked quickly out of sight behind a low hummock of sand and grass. Nothing happened. The man before her remained as unmoving and silent as a rock. Frustrated, she threw a larger pebble a little bit harder and was rewarded.

Arkady felt the pebble hit his leg, and unhurriedly brought himself back into the present moment. He felt no distress at this sudden interruption of his meditation. It seemed obvious someone was trying hard to gain his attention. He did not rise, just sat quietly, thinking perhaps some child was playing a game with him. A few seconds later, he heard a hastily smothered giggle from behind the dune. He saw blond hair mixed in with the strands of oat grass, just on the other side of the mound in front of him. A little girl then, perhaps belonging to one of the Dalvolk. But what was she doing here, five miles from the coast?

He spoke to her in their language, "Don't be afraid, little one. Come out and say hello to me."

She did not answer right away and Arkady wondered if she could be lost or frightened. Moving cautiously, he rose, and walked over to where he thought she was hiding in the grass. He saw only a depression in the sand and a trail of blurry footprints leading off between two larger dunes to his right. Arkady scratched his head, wondering if he should pursue the girl, or go back to his meditation. He called out once more, and received no reply. Hunger finally persuaded him to give up on both and he turned away.

Presently, a song drifted over the oat grass towards him. Arkady listened with growing interest, for the tune was a familiar one, and the words were in the patois of Beaumarais, his homeland.

Intrigued, he followed the girl's singing along a winding path between the dunes. He had no doubt she meant the song as an invitation, for the words were too apropos to be a coincidence:

Where do you travel, where do you go?
Clever little bird, take me along.
Fly up high, fly down low,
Clever little bird, sing me a song.
I would travel too — I would like to go,
If I had wings to fly like you,
Fly up high, fly down low,
Clever little bird, up to the blue.

The path rounded a corner and he came upon the yellow-haired girl. She sang as she knelt before a small fire tending two skinned and gutted rabbits on a spit. Arkady stopped, not wishing to alarm her. He said reassuringly, "Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you."

She laughed merrily. "Why would I be afraid of you, pretty man?"

Her unexpectedly confident reply confused him. Obviously this was no young girl, wandering the dunes. Arkady studied her face. He thought her sixteen or perhaps seventeen years old. She had the bluest eyes he had ever seen, fringed with very dark lashes, despite her blond hair. They were set wide apart above her high

cheekbones. Her nose was straight and fine, though not overly small, and nicely balanced by a generous mouth and strong jaw line.

He asked her, “Are you lost? Where are your companions?”

“I am not lost, nor do I have companions. But I have these rabbits and I would share them with you in return for a tale or two. Will you stay and sup with me?” He looked down at her in surprise. She acted as though she had been waiting for him to arrive.

Her eyes studied him with shameless curiosity as she asked, “How old are you? Your chest looks like a black bear but you have hair like a grandfather.” Arkady had inherited prematurely grey hair from his father. He had begun to go grey in his late teens and now his hair was almost completely silver. After his year in T’Shang, he had taken to wearing it in braids, woven with colored yarn and bits of turquoise. With his high cheekbones and light hazel eyes, it made him look quite exotic.

He said, smiling, “I am twenty-seven, and not yet a grandfather.” Then, prompted by her brazenness, he asked, “How old are you?”

“Eighteen,” she lied.

Arkady looked at her skeptically. “You should not be out here alone. The Fynära raiders use these dunes to stage attacks on the coastal villages. I would hate to think what would happen if they caught you. Have you not heard of them?”

She shrugged non-committally, so he told her what he knew of the Fynära[5].

The young woman, who had remained squatting by the fire during his talk, abruptly rose to her feet. She moved with agile grace. Arkady stepped back in surprise. He was tall, just over six feet, but this girl stood taller still, and her shoulders were broad and obviously well muscled. She was dressed in a linen tunic, leggings tied with thongs of leather, and boots. Across her back she carried a long sword on a baldric. He suddenly found the tip at his throat.

But if she meant to frighten him, she was disappointed. Death held no sway over Arkady, for Dawa Tinley had taught him of the endless wheel of existence. He stood still, waiting to see what unexpected thing she might do next.

“I am not afraid of the Fynära,” she said harshly. “When we meet it is they who will fear.” Slowly she lowered the sword and put it back in the scabbard. Her blue eyes gazed at him fearlessly, and he could see the flicker of interest there. Immediately embarrassed, he remembered he had left his shirt drying by his meditation spot and excused himself to retrieve it. Her merry laughter followed him back down the track.

Arkady returned a moment later, dressed, and leading Ajax by her halter. He said, “I would be pleased to share your food, Miss, and I have many tales I can tell in return.” He paused, looking a little discomfited. “But I still don’t know your name.”

“Do you not? Then I will tell you. But first you must tell me your name, and where you are bound,” she replied.

“My name is Arkady Svalbarad and I am going home to the City of Isle St. Valery in Beaumarais. Is that where you are from?”

She glanced away over the dunes before speaking and Arkady felt sure that whatever she answered him would not be the truth. “My name is Krikka, and I go now to my father’s homeland, Danica.”

Now he knew she was lying. Still, he smiled at her, determined to play along with her game. “Krikka is an unusual name for a girl, is it not?” In the language of the Dalvolk, her name meant “crow.”

She smiled back. Her very white teeth and sharp canines made the grin look feral, like an animal baring its fangs. Krikka said softly, “Oh, but I am a most unusual girl, Kadya.”

“I can see that.” Then he gaped at her, taken aback by the realization she had just spoken his childhood nickname. No-one, except his family, ever addressed him as Kadya. “Why did you call me that?” he asked her suspiciously. “Have we met somewhere before?” Her face did look vaguely familiar, but Arkady was positive he would have remembered seeing her, because of her height.

She shook her head. “Krikka knew another Arkady, long ago, and Kadya was his name too. I just got confused. But you don’t mind, do you, if I call you that? It seems to fit.” Arkady smiled and said he did not mind at all. She turned away from him and produced a long pearl-handled dagger from the top of her boot. The sun picked out the gold highlights in her hair as she

squatted before the fire and tested the meat. “The rabbits are cooked. Are you ready to eat?”

Nodding, he turned to his pack, and retrieved his tin plate and a small knife. He was hungry, and the rabbit smelled good, though it had been a year since he had last eaten any flesh. That was another thing he learned from his teacher in T’Shang — respect for all living creatures. But Dawa had also impressed upon him the importance of kindness to others, and that meant accepting any gift without complaint or reservation. So he ate the rabbit with pleasure and shared what food he had in return. There was a little blue-veined cheese left over from the last port the Dalvolk ship had visited, and he offered it to her along with some ship’s biscuit. She sniffed it suspiciously and tried a small bite. Her eyes went wide and she quickly consumed what he gave her and asked for more. Arkady looked at her in amusement. He had never met anyone who appeared to be such a curious mixture of innocence and menace.

“Who caught the rabbits? Was it you?”

She seemed offended at this. “Of course it was me. I told you I have no companions, did I not? I set a snare by their burrow and waited patiently. Later, when I saw you sleeping in the dunes I thought to share them with you. Why do you ask so many questions?”

He laughed. “You ask plenty yourself. But why should I not want to know about you? You must admit it is a little unusual to meet a girl in the middle of nowhere who looks like a shield maiden out of one of the old tales. I am just curious about you. And I was not

sleeping, not at all. I was meditating, and that is a very different thing.”

She sniffed derisively. “It looked like sleeping to me. But now, what of the tale you promised me in return for dinner? Tell me of the places you have seen.”

Arkady smiled and settled back on his blanket. The long light of the late summer evening gave the oat grass a quality of sharp relief against the darkening sky. Everything, including the girl who sat next to him on the blanket, seemed bathed in a golden aura. He began his tale this way: “I left my home in Beaumarais when I was eighteen years old, and headed north. My father’s family lives in St. Ekaterina, in the principality of Ruboralis, and I wanted very much to meet them. I also wanted to study languages at the University there.”

She interrupted him, asking, “You wanted to go to school? No-one made you go?” This struck her as funny and Arkady had to wait until her fit of giggling had passed before he continued.

“Yes, I liked going to school, as strange as it sounds, and I was pleased to have the opportunity. The University in St. Ekaterina is very famous. I studied there for four years, and I lived with my grandparents. They have a big house on Karador Prospekt.”

“How big?”

“Thirty or forty rooms. I don’t think I ever went into all of them.”

“My house is much bigger than that!” she boasted.

Arkady peered at her with sudden interest. “And where is this house, girl who calls herself Krikka?”

She smiled and shrugged, embarrassed at almost being caught out. “You are telling me the tale. Please continue.”

“St. Ekaterina has many beautiful palaces and churches. On winter days, when I did not have to go to school, I used to walk all over the city. I talked to as many people as I could, to practice the language and learn about the culture. It is very different than my home. St. Ekaterina is much bigger, for one thing. Almost seventy-five thousand people live there. There were so many interesting things to do. Sometimes, my grandmother, Irina, and I used to go to the symphony at the Victory Palace.”

Krikka wanted to know what a symphony was and he patiently explained. She listened with rapt concentration. Everything he told her about St. Ekaterina seemed to interest her and she asked many questions.

He continued, “One day, my grandfather Nicolai took me to the open market in Gueroi Square. I saw things from all over Yr for sale in the stalls. We were passing by a quiet corner of the market and an amazing painting caught my eye — of a beautiful woman, with green skin. Many other bright colors filled in the background. I went to have a closer look and asked the stall keeper where he had gotten it from. He was a small dark-skinned man with curious almond-shaped eyes. He told me it came from his home, T’Shang.”

Her eyes went wide. “Where is that?”

“A country full of the biggest mountains and the bluest skies you have ever seen, far to the east of here.

All at once I was struck with a desire to go there. Over the next few weeks I found out everything I could about it. There was not much to discover, for T'Shang has been closed to foreigners for many years."

"What about the green woman?"

"I found out about her too, after I bought the painting. Her name is Hana, and she is a Goddess of the East. Would you like to see?"

She nodded her head enthusiastically. Arkady rose and went to his saddlebag. He retrieved a rolled-up length of heavy silk and spread it out on the ground in front of the fire. Though the sun had sunk almost completely below the horizon and shadows crept over the dunes, the colors still shone luminously. The girl stared at the picture for a long time without speaking. She said softly, "Your Goddess has a very kind face. I would like to know her. But some Goddesses are not so nice."

Arkady gave her a curious glance but she said no more. He carefully rolled up the painting and replaced it in the bag. Then, in the gathering darkness, he went on with his tale. Krikka rose and threw more wood on the fire so that it blazed up in a rising ribbon of sparks.

He said, "I finished my studies at the University and started on my journey to find the lost country of T'Shang. My grandparents did not want me to go because I did not even have a proper map, only a book I had stolen from the library. It took me many weeks and months of riding to the east to reach the mountains. When I arrived there, I found that I had to wait for

summer so I could cross the high passes. I spent my time learning to speak the language of the people I found myself with. They were yak herders and lived in tents of skin they could take down and move with them as they followed the animals from winter pasture to summer meadow. At first, they were shy with me, but once I could speak their tongue, I found them to be kind and very warm-hearted. When I could, I went up into the mountains and came down into T'Shang. It is the most beautiful place I have ever seen. I stayed there a year, in a village called Khalama, and I learned many things."

"What sort of things?"

"Like meditation. What you saw me doing this afternoon."

"Sleeping?"

He laughed. "Not sleeping. I told you already. I was awake."

"Why did you not move when I threw the stone at you?" She looked at him in confusion and he smiled.

"It is hard to explain. I close my mind to the things outside in the world and listen to what is inside."

She nodded her head as if she understood perfectly. "I do that too, sometimes." Then, thinking perhaps she had given too much away, she rapidly changed the subject. "Where is your weapon? I would like to see it."

He smiled and shook his head. "I have none, only the little clasp knife you saw me eat with."

“How did you travel so far without a sword? Did you not fear to meet bandits on your way?” she asked, clearly amazed at his admission.

“I learned a few things about fighting without weapons in T’Shang. Only in self-defense, of course.”

This caused her to howl with laughter. “You could not defend yourself against me without a weapon! I would make short work of you.”

“Let us put that to the test, if you are willing?”

She shrugged and said carelessly, “All right, but don’t blame me if you get hurt.” Standing abruptly, she drew the dagger from her boot and assumed a fighting stance.

He stood more slowly and brushed the sand off his breeches, saying, “We should move further away from the fire. Otherwise you might get burned when you fall.” She raised an eyebrow at this and took a couple of steps backwards, toward the darkened dunes. Then she lunged towards him, as swiftly as a snake. The dagger flashed in the firelight.

Arkady sidestepped rapidly, caught her behind the thigh with his knee and pushed her down into the sand. She looked very surprised, and scrambled to her feet immediately. Another quick lunge brought the same result. This time she stood up more slowly and thoughtfully circled him, the dagger held loosely in her hand. She feinted several times and watched his reaction carefully. Arkady knew he would not be able to use the same move on her again. When she thrust the dagger at him he caught her by the wrist and twisted hard. With a cry of pain, she dropped the weapon and Arkady kicked

it away across the sand. Now she furiously threw herself forward and tackled him. He let her momentum carry him backwards and flipped her neatly over his body so that she landed hard on her back. She lay there, panting, as he rose and brushed the sand off his clothes.

Arkady stood above her and offered his hand. "Have you seen enough?" he asked.

She reached for his outstretched hand and then quickly kicked out, catching him on the shin with her boot. Arkady felt his legs go out from under him and he landed awkwardly on the sand next to her. Krikka dropped on his midsection and drove the air from his lungs in an explosive rush. He rolled over and tried to extricate himself from her grasp, but she had her legs around him in a scissor lock. Arkady could not believe how strong she was. Obviously, she did not intend to give up without a prolonged battle.

After trying once more to gain the upper hand, he suddenly found himself on top of her. She stopped struggling immediately and looked up at him, her eyes glinting with fire in the dim light. Her hair spread out on the sand like a golden halo around her face. Abruptly, desire raced through him, setting fire to every nerve before settling like a blazing inferno in his belly. A second later she fastened her mouth to his with such abandon he could hardly breathe.

The disciplined part of his mind told him in no uncertain terms to stop at once. He barely knew her, or anything about her — not even her real name. Those

thoughts were obliterated by the drumbeat of wanting that pounded in his temples and groin.

He was half-disappointed and half-relieved when, a moment later, she tore her lips from his and rolled out from under his body. She stood and walked back over to the fire without speaking. Slowly she turned back to face him and pulled her tunic off over her head. The firelight gilded her smooth skin and flickered on the shapely curve of her breasts.

“Krikka, what do you...?” Arkady began, uncertainly, but she was already bending to unlace her breeches.

When she had finished undressing, she stood before him silently — waiting... breathing. Her form was breathtaking, taut and finely muscled, like a long-distance runner. Arkady knew then he had long passed the point of no return. He stood and shed his own clothes as quickly as he could and fell with her onto the blanket next to the fire.

The prolonged and intense lovemaking that followed made all of his other sexual experiences seem arid and clumsy. They coupled almost immediately in a torrent of passion that spent itself quickly, and hardly diminished the hunger they felt for each other. Twice more he took her, as her nails raked his back and she sank her teeth into his shoulder like a wild animal, before he felt he had satisfied her desire and his own.

Later, resting on the blanket, the night breeze cooled the sweat on her skin and she shivered in his arms. The fire had died down to glowing red ash and he could barely see the outline of her face in the darkness.

Arkady whispered, "Who are you? Will you not tell me your real name, my beautiful crow girl?"

She turned to face him and her voice sounded bleak. "I cannot, dear Kadya. She would be angry with me."

"Who would be angry?"

"Ketha. I must do as she says." She sighed deeply. "Sometimes I wish I did not have to."

Arkady rolled onto his side and rested his head on his hand so he could see her face more closely. He said, "I don't know much about you, but I can see you are in some kind of trouble. You don't have to tell me anything else if you don't want to. Let me help you. We can both ride from here right now on Ajax, and by tomorrow we can be far away from this place. Trust me, I will make sure, whoever this Ketha is, she cannot find you."

She shook her head miserably. "Ketha will always find me. There is nothing you can do to stop her."

He begged her, "Please, I want you to stay with me. What hold does Ketha have on you? Will you not say?"

"Don't ask any more questions!" she cried in frustration. "We have so little time to be together before she returns. There is only one thing you can do for me this night." He could not see the tears clinging to her lashes but he tasted them as she turned her face to his and sought his mouth once again.

Afterwards, utterly spent, Arkady fought a losing battle to try and stay awake. But as her fingers lightly stroked the hair on his belly, he felt his eyes closing, and forced them open again. He knew instinctively she would be gone when he awoke, so he whispered, "Don't

go, Krikka. Please don't leave me." She said nothing in return, just waited patiently for him to fall asleep. Then she rose very cautiously and dressed herself. She located the pearl-handled dagger in the sand and shoved it back down into her boot.

Ajax rested quietly in the lee of a dune and made no sound as Krikka saddled her. The girl carefully unpacked the rest of Arkady's food and the water skin and left it by the fire. She placed the rolled silk painting of Hana next to it. Krikka wore a periapt tied with a leather thong around her neck — a withered crow's foot clutching a green crystal. Thoughtfully, she slipped it over her head and dropped it on top of the painting. She walked slowly back to where Arkady slept on the blanket and said, very quietly, "Farewell, Uncle."

A large black crow flew down and landed on her back. For a few seconds it looked as though the girl had sprouted a pair of black wings, and then the crow disappeared. Krikka bit her lip so the pain would not make her cry out. Then she led Ajax away through the dunes and headed north towards the coast and the Fynära.

"What took you so long?" Ketha croaked angrily. "I told you we should have just killed him and taken the horse. We could have been miles away by now."

"I am sorry, Ketha. You promised me I could see him before we left. I don't want him to die because I care about him. Do you understand?"

The battle crow laughed harshly. "He will die soon enough, when the Fynära pay a visit to Beaumarais, my

pretty girl. Ketha will have plenty of carrion to feast on then.”

When Arkady woke the next day, the sun was already high in the sky. As soon as he saw the pile of things she had left, he did not bother to look further for Krikka or Ajax. Spying the crow’s foot, he picked it up and gazed at it for a long moment. Krikka’s face came back to him, and her eyes. As blue as the skies of T’Shang. He shivered slightly, thinking of their feverish encounter of the night before. If she hadn’t stolen his horse, he might have thought it all some wild, fey dream. As he placed the charm around his neck, Arkady wondered if he would ever see her again. He shouldered the satchel that held the food and his water skin and turned away from the ashes of last night’s fire, sighing deeply. It would be a long, slow walk to Beaumarais.

Chapter Three

The Wild Horses of Grandfather Ods

She listens and makes a face. Geya it is. I don't like her much, do you?

Hieronymus blinks and stretches. Exactly. She is not to be trusted, that one. Too wrapped up in the human sphere. Wants their worship, always wants more power. But what does she want with me, eh Hieronymus?

* * * *

Gwenn Benet pushed the horse she had stolen from Arkady as hard as she dared, but Ajax continued to be skittish and hard to handle. All animals behaved this way when they sensed the presence of Keth Dirane inside her. She had found it easy enough to hide the existence of the Goddess from most of her friends and family, but animals possessed far more intuition. Her mother knew the truth, of course, for she had been able to ask Lalluna why her daughter talked to herself constantly.

She spoke to Ketha now as they rode along the coast, searching for the abandoned village the battle crow insisted her aerial surveys had shown lay somewhere close by. The Fynära used the empty houses to store supplies for their frequent raids on the coast, and Ketha planned for them to wait there until the raiders visited again. The weather had been good for several weeks, just right for a quick boat journey from the island of Starruthe to the coast of Secuny. Ketha knew the movements of the raiders well, for she had followed them for years in her crow form, always assured of a good meal when they finished their work.

“How much further do we have to ride? I am getting tired of trying to make this stupid horse go in a straight line,” Gwenn complained.

Ajax shied again at the sound of her voice, and Gwenn kicked her viciously. The horse was hungry and thirsty too, for they had found no fresh water in days, and Ketha would not let her have any of the meager amount left in the water skin. Gwenn had stolen three other horses on her journey north with Ketha and all had died of neglect or run away. It seemed likely this one would not last much longer either.

“Stop being such a baby. Look there, the path to the village is just through the dunes,” Ketha chided her.

Gwenn turned her balky horse down the track winding off to her left, away from the ceaseless sound of the ocean. They made their way inland for a mile and came upon the ruins of a settlement. The raiders had burned most of the houses and kidnapped or killed all the

occupants long ago, but a few structures remained undamaged. Gwenn kicked open one of the doors and found a cache of food and water, and some hay for Ajax.

“Now you have something to eat, child, I must go and find something for myself. I always take care of you, remember? No-one else loves you as much as Ketha, not even your so-called father.” Gwenn nodded in agreement, her eyes vacant.

When Ketha spoke from inside her, Gwenn found almost everything she said to be perfectly reasonable. Only when she took her bird form and left to seek some carrion, did the girl entertain any doubts about the Goddess who had been her constant companion since birth. She stiffened in pain as Ketha withdrew from her body, and sighed in relief as the big, black crow flew off in search of some dead thing to eat.

She unsaddled Ajax and gave her some water from a stone cistern just inside the door. The horse drank deeply and then attacked the pile of hay in the corner of the stone cottage. Her new mistress watched her thoughtfully, while she chewed on some stale ship’s biscuit taken from one of the barrels stacked in the room, after soaking it in a cup of water to make it palatable.

She recalled the conversation in which Arkady had proudly told her about Ajax.

“That is a beautiful horse you have, Kadya.”

“Thank you. She came from Ruboralis. Did you know the finest horses in Yr are foaled there? Expensive, too.

worked very hard to pay for her. Truly, she is my most prized possession.”

Gwenn was surprised by this. “Even more so than the pretty picture of the green lady?”

“Of course,” he replied laughing. “That painting can’t save the soles of my boots the way Ajax does. And I can talk to her, as well. She is good company, Krikka.”

Now that Gwenn had taken Ajax away, she wondered if he would ever forgive her for it.

She wrapped her arms around herself to ward off the chill evening breeze and thought again of their meeting. Normally, Ketha’s presence in her mind chased such thoughts away immediately, but now she was gone, Gwenn could allow herself to remember the ecstasy of their frantic sexual encounter.

His gallant offer came back to her...

We can both ride away from here right now on Ajax and by tomorrow we can be far away from this place. Trust me, I will make sure, whoever this Ketha is, she cannot find you.

Gwenn fervently wished this was true, but she knew otherwise. No doubt the Goddess would have made her kill Kadya, just as she had killed his father. She only hoped he would be gone from Beaumarais before she returned with the Fynära.

After Ajax finished eating, Gwenn led her outside and removed her saddle and bridle. Sighing deeply, she slapped the horse’s rump and sent her galloping into the dunes.

When the battle crow returned and had entered Gwenn's body, she asked her sharply about the horse. Gwenn said carefully, "She ran away, like the other ones. What an ungrateful beast!"

But she could not fool Ketha so easily. "You let her run, you wicked girl! I will punish you right now for your deceitfulness." Gwenn looked on in horror as her right hand moved down towards the boot that held the dagger. As hard as she tried, she could not control her arm. Her uncooperative fingers grasped the hilt and raised the weapon high over her trembling thigh.

Gwenn's eyes filled with tears, "I am so sorry. Please, don't make me do it. I swear I will behave from now on."

Ketha cackled madly, "That is right, little girl, beg for mercy. Not that it will do you any good, my dear. Now feel the wrath of Keth Dirane, and remember, next time, to be obedient to me!"

Gwenn cried out as the blade flashed downwards and pierced the skin of her thigh, and drove deep into the muscle. She dropped the dagger and fell to the dusty floor, writhing in pain, as Ketha's laughter echoed inside her mind.

"Be thankful I did not punish you any worse for your lying ways. Now get up and stop whining. The raiders are on their way. I saw their long boat from the air, less than a day's sailing from here. You must be fit and ready to fight their leader when they arrive."

Gwenn sat up and stanching the flow of blood from her thigh with her palm. She knew from long experience that such cuts mended quickly, for the force of the

Goddess gave her body healing ability far beyond an ordinary mortal. By tomorrow there would be nothing left but a jagged, red scar to join the collection of many others.

The next morning, as Gwenn stared into the rising sun, Ketha's voice droned in her head, telling her of the Fynära and their customs. "A long boat christened Fire Drake, rowed by thirty men, is on her way here. Gunnar Strong Arm is her Captain. He fights with an axe as well as a sword. You must challenge him to a contest of strength and will in front of the rest of his crew, and humiliate him utterly. Otherwise they will not accept you as their leader. Do you understand?"

"What sort of contest? Why can I not just kill him?"

"His men will not follow you unless you can show cunning as well as skill with a sword, Gwenn. These men do not respect women. To them they are only good for two things — sport or childbearing. You must teach them otherwise."

Gwenn nodded, and said confidently, "I have a plan."

"The Fynära come. We should go down to the beach and meet the boat when they bring it in," the battle crow urged her. Gwenn walked down to the shore, her pace unhurried. Though she was about to face her first real combat, she felt no fear. Ketha had promised her protection, and she had keth'fell and all the skill her father had given her.

The waves lapped quietly in the stillness of early morning, disturbed only by the occasional raucous calls of the gulls. Gwenn stood on the sand, like a figure

carved from stone, and keth'fell shone in the rising sun. She watched the Fire Drake approach, the oars on each side moving in perfect unison. The dragon figurehead, painted the color of blood, skimmed towards the beach, until the shallow keel scraped on the shingle and the oars came to rest. Cries issued from aboard the boat, for the men had seen the maid waiting on shore. They piled out, wading through the breaking waves until they stood before her. She did not move or speak.

Gunnar Strong Arm stepped forward. He was tall and flaxen-haired, like all of the Fynära, and wore a black tunic and breeches. An iron helmet with a nose guard protected his head, and he carried a sword in his hand and an axe hanging from his wide leather belt. He had forked and braided his long, red-blond beard. Gwenn judged him to be about twenty-five years old. He wore no chain mail, for the raiders did not expect to meet enemies at this landing place. They had killed or taken all the local residents long ago.

He addressed his men, saying only, "Touch her not. She is mine."

Gwenn laughed at him and said, "Am I, indeed? You will have to catch me first, man of the North. I am Sif, of the Golden Hair, and if you would take me, you must prove yourself faster than a jackrabbit and have the courage to run alone. Do you accept my challenge?"

The leader of the Fynära hesitated, and narrowed his bright blue eyes. If this golden-haired maid belonged to the Skyrene[6], as she claimed to, he did not want any part of her. When the Gods paid a visit to Yrth, it meant

nothing but peril for the mortals whom they encountered. Nevertheless, since she had issued the challenge in front of his men, he had no choice. He would have to chase her or lose face. If she were a Goddess, he would no doubt come to regret his decision, but if only a maid, well then... he would enjoy himself very much after he caught her.

Gunnar grinned wickedly at the girl, and boasted, "Run, little Sif, if that is who you really be, for when Gunnar catches you, he will split you wide open with his sword and cut off all your pretty golden hair to sell at the market in Thalheim."

Gwenn stuck out her tongue at him, then turned and ran for the nearest dune. She scaled straight up the side and stopped at the top to look down on the leader of the Fynära, still standing on the beach below. Lifting her shirt, she exposed her breasts to him and laughed jubilantly when he broke into a furious run, as his men cheered him on. In an instant she had cart-wheeled down the back side of the dune, and began running down a winding path between the clumps of sea grass. She could hear Gunnar's footsteps behind her, and his heavy breathing. Gwenn ran for fifteen minutes, keeping just far enough ahead of her pursuer to be tantalizing, before she judged him to be winded enough to be easy prey. Her own breathing remained effortless and she barely broke a sweat.

On the far side of a dune that screened her from Gunnar, Gwenn stopped and drew keth'fell from the scabbard strapped to her back. She stood loose-limbed

and relaxed as her pursuer rounded the sand hill and drew up short, panting heavily. He stared at her silently, and fingered his own sword.

Gwenn said softly, "Would you fight me now, Man of the North? Know I will slay you. Yet your death could be avoided."

Gunnar growled sullenly, "What other choice do I have, Sif? A warrior of the Fynära lives and dies by his deeds of valor. My men expect me to return with your golden hair in my fist. I would rather die at your hand than go back without it. Prepare to perish, unless you be one of the Immortals."

After these words he charged towards her, and Gwenn watched him come. When he was almost upon her, she sidestepped adroitly. His intended slash with the sword went wide. As his momentum carried him past, she kicked him roundly on the rump and sent him sprawling face down on to the sand. As he started to rise, she put her sword tip to his throat. Gunnar dropped his own sword and lay back heavily, pretending to capitulate. His left hand had already unfastened the axe from his belt. With a fierce cry, he swept it in an arc and tried to cut Gwenn's legs out from under her. She jumped straight up in the air and came down directly on his groin. He screamed in pain and rolled onto his side, cursing her roundly. Gwenn picked up the axe and his sword and threw them into the long grass.

"Go ahead, girl, kill him. Then you can carry his head back to the beach. That should impress the rest of his men," Ketha urged.

Gwenn disagreed. “He can be more use to us alive. I plan to use him to convince the crew to follow me.”

The Fynäran leader rose stiffly to his knees and stayed there. He said harshly, “Why don’t you finish me off, Sif? Now that a female has defeated me, my life is over. I have no heavenly reward to look forward to.”

She knelt so she could peer into his eyes. “Gunnar Strong Arm, I do not wish to kill you.”

He looked at her disdainfully. “You would show me mercy? I do not want it.”

She smiled, and her pale beauty pierced his anger. “Yes, Gunnar. I would have you as my right hand, and together we can lead the Fynära to greater glory than they have ever seen. There are rich fields of blood and fire, ours for the taking, where a man can earn his place in Skyre^[7] a hundred times over. Would you rather go to your death?”

Gunnar stared thoughtfully at her for many moments before bowing his head. “No, Lady Goddess. If I die now, I would be among the women in Hel, instead of in the glorious hall of Skyre drinking and feasting with the other warriors. I will serve you instead, for as long as you have need.”

Gwenn reached out and touched the silver talisman he wore around his neck. “Very well. Now you must swear fealty to me, on Lutyond’s anchor. But before you do, you must know the truth. I am no Goddess, just a woman, mortal like you, but a warrior all the same. My name is Gwenn, and I am called the Faircrow.”

He stared at her in surprise and she wondered if he was now reconsidering his decision to help her. She stood and walked over to where his sword and axe lay in the grass and picked them up. With a smile, she offered the weapons to him, saying, "Do you wish to try and defeat me again? I promise you, the result will be the same."

The raider shook his head. "I still believe you are a Goddess, whatever you say your name is. No mortal could have defeated the mighty Gunnar Strong Arm with such ease. If you wish to hide in the form of a human woman, so be it. I pledge my oath on the Mariner's anchor to serve you."

She gave him her hand and he stood. They gazed at each other without speaking for a good minute. His filthy blond hair hung in lank, greasy locks around his face. Uncomfortably aware of the powerful odor of his unwashed body, Gwenn stepped back a pace and asked, "Who amongst the crew can we trust?"

Gunnar removed his helmet and scratched idly at a flea in his hair. "Most of the men are true warriors, but there are a few whose loyalty I question. Jürn is their leader. I have seen them whispering in the bows when they think I am busy at the steering oar."

"Do you believe this Jürn wishes to usurp you?"

He grunted in agreement.

Gwenn gave him her most feral smile. "Then he shall die. Wait here for me and hide yourself in the long grass when I return. You shall watch as the Faircrow does her work." She turned and ran swiftly back towards the

beach. Gunnar watched her go, shaking his head in astonishment. The ways of the Skyrene were puzzling, but not to be questioned.

Gunnar's men restlessly milled about on the sand, waiting for the return of their leader. Gwenn approached them fearlessly, but she kept keth'fell ready in her hand. The sun had climbed well above the horizon now and a stiff wind came off the ocean. When the remaining raiders saw her returning without Gunnar, they murmured in consternation. Several men made to approach her, and she raised keth'fell defensively, saying, "Hold, raiders, or I shall slay you all, as I have slain Gunnar Strong Arm."

One of the Fynära, an older man with a jaggedly scarred face, said dismissively, "She lies. There is no blood on her sword. It is a trick. Let's get her."

Gwenn cursed herself inwardly for forgetting this most obvious of details. She quickly tried to distract their attention. "I said hold, Men of the North. Is there one among you with the name of Jürn?"

A very unsavory-looking raider stepped forward and said, "I am he."

She grinned at him. "Before Gunnar died he spoke your name. I think he meant you were to replace him as leader. So now I shall issue my challenge to you. Do you accept? Or does the death of your Captain strike fear in your puny heart?"

Jürn clenched his fists in anger. "Be silent, impudent woman. I am no coward. Just because you have slain that fool Gunnar Strong Arm does not mean you will do

the same to me. You would be no harder to catch than the rabbit I had for dinner last week.” Most of the others shook their heads in disgust and walked away from him. It showed no wisdom to mock the Skyrene.

“Come then, Jürn. Would you like to bring a few friends along? Perhaps you will catch this little bunny for your supper tonight.” Her taunting had the desired effect. Jürn issued a quick command and three other raiders — Axel, Stig and Dagfinn, smartly stepped forward. Gwenn turned and ran into the dunes, and the four men followed, cursing noisily as she quickly outdistanced the swiftest of them. After slowing her pace so that they could keep up, she led them on a merry dance through the dunes, and called back insults when she thought they might be flagging. Eventually, by a roundabout route, they arrived back at the place where Gunnar Strong Arm lay hidden in the long grass.

Gwenn stopped and faced the four men. She bent and placed her hands on her knees, pretending the chase had winded her. Jürn stepped forward triumphantly, and gloated, “Now you are mine, little rabbit.” The others crowded around him and he said harshly, “Get back, you lot. I’ll take her alone.”

She said softly, “I can see why Gunnar was frightened of you. You caught me ever so easily.”

He snorted derisively. “You saved me the trouble of killing the old fool myself. My men and I had already planned to take over the ship. Though the rest are loyal to Strong Arm, they will have no choice but to follow me, especially when I return bearing that pretty scalp of

yours.” He laughed and moved towards her, flexing his fingers wide.

From his position in the long grass behind the dune, Gunnar mouthed a curse. He admired Gwenn’s cunning in getting Jürn to admit the truth, but he wondered if the girl had bitten off a little too much by bringing all four of the rebels at once. His muscles tensed, and he put his hand on his axe ready to leap to her aid, if necessary. He saw Jürn attack, and then the Faircrow executed a piece of sword work so dazzlingly expert Gunnar had to smother a gasp. Within seconds, Jürn lay dead on the ground, neatly filleted.

His three companions decided to rush her all at once, and Gunnar once again made ready to offer his aid. She did not need it. Gwenn did a neat front flip and landed squarely in their midst, catching all three off guard. With a sweeping turn, she beheaded one of the attackers, and gutted another.

With a frightened cry, the last man, Stig, turned and ran blindly back towards the beach, shouting, “Help! Help! She is a fiend. Don’t let her get me.”

Gwenn took off after him. Within a minute, a strangled scream indicated she had caught up with her prey. Gunnar watched her approach, whistling cheerfully and dragging the unlucky fourth member of the conspiracy by his hair across the sand. She dumped his body with the rest and wiped her bloody hands on the grass.

“Now, you have no more enemies among the crew, Gunnar. The rest will follow you?” Gwenn gave him a questioning glance.

He nodded, and asked with admiration, "How did you get that lot to come after you?"

She laughed. "I told them you were dead. Now you must go and show them otherwise."

"Will you come with me, Gwenn Faircrow? You are our leader now." He stood before her and bowed his head.

"You still command the Fire Drake and her crew. I only wish to join them, for the present. I have much to learn of your ways. But you have pledged your loyalty to me and I will not forget that, Strong Arm. Someday soon, it will be required."

She pulled the dagger from her boot and held it out to him. "There is a task you must complete before we leave."

"Why do you offer me your knife?" he asked nervously.

"You said you could not return to your men without my hair in your fist. So cut it."

He quickly backed away, waving his hands in panic. "I do not want your golden hair, Sif. You may keep it." Her blue eyes stared directly into his and he licked his lips nervously.

"You have sworn to be loyal to me," she said earnestly. "I give you my golden hair as a remembrance of your pledge. In that way we become as one warrior, and we will be invincible. Do you understand?"

He nodded respectfully. "You are wise and merciful, beyond your young years. I know not how you gained such wisdom, or the ability to fight like Nung the

demon, but I am glad I have become your ally and not your enemy. Otherwise I know I would lie gutted, as they do, like dead fish on the sand.” He watched silently as she knelt before him and held up her hair. With trembling hands, he cut it carefully, and in a moment held a large handful of spun gold curls.

Gwenn laughed and flipped her shorn locks back. “Much cooler this way, anyhow. Now, let’s go.” She chatted casually about planned raids to Gunnar as they made their way back to the beach. He walked beside her, and wondered if he dreamed, for he still could not quite believe such a maid existed in the living world.

Ketha, who had remained silent during all the chasing and fighting, now spoke in Gwenn’s mind, “You have done well, my dear. I am proud of you. Remember though, you cannot trust these Northmen. They would sell their own grandmothers as slaves for the right price. We will need to remain vigilant, until we weed out all the troublemakers. But do not fear, child, for Ketha will keep watch over you. She never sleeps.”

Gwenn said nothing in return. She did not want her companion to wonder who she talked to.

When they reached the last dune before the strand, Gwenn said, “I will wait here, Gunnar. Go and speak to the men and tell them I will be joining the crew.” She flopped down on the sand and began carefully cleaning her sword with a rag from her pack. With a curt nod, he left her to it.

When the remaining Fynära caught sight of Gunnar approaching on the path from the dunes, they immedi-

ately formed a close group and drew weapons. Arvid Scar Brow, the older raider who had questioned Gwenn, stepped forward. He raised his sword threateningly and said, "Stop right there, and say whether you be spirit or flesh, Gunnar Strong Arm. Has the girl bewitched you?"

Gunnar regarded him seriously. "I am as I have ever been, Arvid. You and I have been shipmates for nigh on ten years. Why do you now raise your sword against me?"

Arvid glared at him suspiciously. "The Goddess, Sif, told us she killed you."

He grinned back at his first mate and said, "She lied. We wanted to find out who among the crew was disloyal. Now Jürn and his friends are dead by her hand. I have seen her fight, Arvid. She is amazing — even faster than Keld Thunder Blade."

The raider called Keld snorted in disbelief.

Arvid fingered the ornately worked silver dragon brooch holding his shirt closed at the neck. After stepping back so he could look the Captain over carefully, he decided he did not look bewitched. He caught sight of the golden hair Gunnar still clutched in his fist. The first mate's eyes lit up. He said admiringly, "You took a prize from the maid? That was a mighty deed if she is as great a warrior as you say."

"I took it with her permission. As a guild piece between us. Now she wishes to join the crew of the Fire Drake and I have agreed."

The others gasped in shock. Had their Captain gone mad? The other men of the crew clustered around Arvid and Keld and held a whispered discussion.

Keld, a shorter, stocky man with a very muscular frame, stepped forward. "You say she wields a sword better than I? I say you lie, Gunnar Strong Arm. No man has ever bested Keld Thunder Blade in a fight and no woman has ever even tried. Let her come forward. I challenge the maid to combat, right now. If she wins, we will allow her to join us. If not, I will slay her before your very eyes and Arvid will lead us henceforth, for we will follow you no longer."

His Captain spoke quietly. "You don't want to challenge her. Believe me, she will slaughter you where you stand. I cannot afford to lose any more men."

"What are you afraid of?" Keld said scornfully. "That I'll slice open that pretty face of hers? What were you two doing in the dunes, anyway? Having a poke?" He laughed crudely and Gunnar balled his fists. He charged at Keld, and the two men fell down on the sand in a furious wrestling match.

Gwenn came running and stopped the fight with a cry. She drew keth'fell and said, "Let him come to me. I will soon show Keld the error of his ways."

The men formed a circle in the sand and Keld brandished both his sword and his long-hafted axe. His fierce expression left no doubt he meant to kill her if he could. Gwenn looked at him and laughed blithely, saying to Gunnar, "Do you want him alive or dead?"

As Keld scoffed in derision, Gunnar said, "Alive, for he is a good man, and I would be sorry to lose him, even if he is acting the fool right now."

She shrugged and said, "As you wish, Strong Arm." Then to Keld, very coolly, "Shall we begin?"

Keld glared at her as she stood relaxed and fearless before him. She held keth'fell diagonally across her body, and waited for him to approach. He feinted with his sword, to get her to move left, and hurled his axe directly at her head, hoping in this way to bring the fight to an immediate end. Gwenn's reflexive somersault took him completely by surprise and the axe whistled harmlessly over her, scattering the watching raiders behind them. She came up immediately in front of him and stabbed his shoulder lightly with the point of keth'fell. The men in the circle murmured in surprise, for they saw she could have ended the battle right then had she so desired. This minor wound enraged Keld and he slashed across her body with a lightning movement, but not quick enough to touch Gwenn, for she had already flipped backwards and away.

He ran after her, crying, "Stand still and fight me, wench!"

She did as he requested, lest any of the others might think she was cheating. They engaged in a ten-minute exchange of heavy blows, their swords ringing with each clash. The men cheered both combatants, for they appreciated a good fight. The blistering attack continued and Gwenn began to tire a little. Keld's blows remained viciously punishing, and she wondered how

much longer he could keep up the pace. She crossed swords with him again and they strove against one other, pushing as hard as they could. Gwenn tried to hook her leg around his, to pull him over, but he knew this trick and kicked her foot away. Her strength evenly matched his, a fact not lost on the watching raiders, and it seemed as though the contest might go on for some time.

“Submit,” he growled at her, through gritted teeth. “Submit and I will let you live.”

Gwenn only laughed, but as he lunged at her again, she wondered seriously if her rash promise to take him alive might lead to her defeat by this relentless Northman. Following a sudden inspiration, she threw herself down on the ground and rolled forward. It had the desired effect. As she bowled into his legs, Keld went down hard and she twisted his wrist as he fell. He dropped his weapon with a cry and lay back in the sand. Gwenn picked up his sword and stood over him triumphantly. The other raiders crowded around her, and offered their congratulations on a magnificent battle.

Keld, still on the ground, boiled with anger at his defeat and resulting loss of face. Moving his hand slowly downwards, he managed to retrieve his dagger from the holder on his belt without attracting any attention. He sank the knife deep into Gwenn’s thigh before she had a chance to react.

“Take that, bitch!” he crowed triumphantly.

Gwenn screamed in pain. Before any of the others could react she kicked Keld solidly in the face with her boot. He fell back again, knocked out cold. Rage overtook Gwenn. She lifted Keld up bodily and threw him into the ocean, and he landed with a resounding splash, before sinking out of sight under the waves. None of the other men dared go to his aid.

She turned back towards the assembled raiders and cried harshly, "Do any of you others wish to challenge the Faircrow? I am ready to fight you all, one at a time or all at once. Come on!" She stood before them, panting wildly, keth'fell ready in her hand. The blood poured from the stab wound in her thigh, and she scrunched up the material of her breeches with her left hand to try and stem the flow.

Gunnar moved towards her, his hands spread wide, saying softly, "Easy, Gwenn. No-one else wants to fight you. Now you must rest, and let me treat your leg wound. You have proved yourself worthy of the Fynära this day."

She lowered her sword and allowed him to lead her towards the storehouse. On the way she could not help wondering if her Papa Bear would be proud if he could see her now. The sound of Ketha's raucous laughter inside her head drowned out any other thoughts.

**That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it.
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About the author

Suzanne Francis believes the genesis for her inventive Song of the Arkafina series lies in her chronic travel sickness as a child and young adult. While growing up in England and on the Continent, she happily participated in many family and school trips, though riding in the back seat of a car often left her suffering from nausea for hours on end. To help pass the time, she began telling herself stories, serialized over many days and weeks, often featuring the landscapes through which she was traveling. These imaginary adventures, along with a life-long love of reading good books (but only when sitting still) sparked her interest in writing. Since then she has penned many fantasy short stories and sonnets, as well as two novels.

After earning her BA in Geography, Suzanne worked for several years as an urban planner in the USA, before retiring to have children. A series of part-time jobs followed, everything from migrant farm worker to dishwasher, retail manager to massage therapist. Her appetite for voyaging has taken her to such far-flung places as the Cook Islands, Mexico, across the deserts

and Deep South of America and on many adventures through the capitals of Europe. She has drawn on these life experiences to amplify and embellish the unique characters and settings of her novels.

In addition to writing, her passions include neopaganism and playing a perversely difficult musical instrument called the hurdy-gurdy.

She is a member of the Troth, and the Otago Writer's Guild.

Presently, Suzanne lives in rural Dunedin, New Zealand with her husband Michael and four children.

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Song of the Arkafina
Book One

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